

ON TIME-BINDING CONSCIOUSNESS

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I PROPOSE that the human behavior labeled “time-binding,” as described by Korzybski, involves “progress,” not just “passing information from one generation to another,” or simply “starting where the former generation left off,” or “accumulation of information across generations.” I suggest that careful readings of both *Manhood of Humanity* and *Science and Sanity* might help us expand on previous notions of time-binding. We are complex beings. So when I use the word “progress,” I mean “improvements or betterment in a particular area of human activity.” Korzybski writing in his times might not have used the word “accumulate” (increase in quantity or number) as we now do. He might have used “accumulate” in the sense of “building up by the addition of new material.” We have progressed impressively in the fields of science, mathematics, and technology. We can drive on the moon, photograph galaxies billions of light years away, shoot at each other from thousands of miles away, etc. But we have not applied a scientific approach, or a time-binding approach (the driving force in our scientific and technological progress), with a similar degree of intensity, to improve our everyday and our international human relationships.

Some suggest that time-binding does not necessarily involve progress. My interpretations follow from Korzybski’s statements on time-binding in his books, *Manhood of Humanity*, *Science and Sanity*, and in some of his formulations in the *Collected Writings*. In the passages quoted below, note how many times “progress” is mentioned. In reading *Manhood of Humanity*, note how often “progress,” “amelioration,” “advancements,” “improvement,” “refinement,” “higher ideals,” “idealization,” and similar terms are linked with “time-binding.” I find it difficult to imagine that Korzybski would spend many years of his life investigating, developing a system and a teachable discipline, formulating this in an 800-page book, giving courses, seminars, and presentations to share with others his theories related to the mechanism of human beings increasing the quantity of information across generations — unless he believed it was for the good of humanity, in other words, “progress.”

For example, see Korzybski’s statement on page xlii in *Manhood of Humanity*: “humans, with the most highly developed nervous system, are uniquely characterized by the capacity of an individual or generation to begin where the former left off. I call this capacity ‘time-binding.’”

From several readings of the above-mentioned books, I evaluate this statement on time-binding as suggesting that we humans do not just *begin* where others and ourselves left off, and simply carry on as usual. On page 111 of *Manhood of Humanity*, Korzybski wrote: “A beaver, for example, is a remarkable builder of dams, but he does not progress in the way of inventions or further development ...” We are not like beavers, who build their dams in the same way from one generation to another, and we do not set out to build worse dams. We *begin* where others left off, and *set out to build better dams*.

Consider these passages in works mentioned above.

It may be contended by some that animals have been making “progress” or some may say that animals also “bind-time.” ... The peculiar faculty belonging exclusively to humans which I designate as “time-binding” I have clearly defined as an *exponential function of time* in the following chapter. If people are pleased to talk about the progress of animals, they can hardly fail to see clearly that it differs both in function and in type or dimension from what is rightly meant by human progress; ... (Manhood of Humanity, p.63)

What is the natural law of human advancements in all great matters of human concern?

The question is of utmost importance both theoretically and practically, for the law — whatever it be — is a *natural law* — a law of human nature — a law of the time-binding energy of man we have seen that the natural law of human progress in each and every cardinal matter is a law like that of a rapidly increasing geometric progression. In other words, the natural law of human progress — the natural law of amelioration in human affairs — the fundamental law of human nature — the basic law of the time-binding energy peculiar to man — is a Logarithmic law — a law of logarithmic increase. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.89-90)

Note that just building more dams would qualify as an arithmetic progression, not a geometric progression.

Let us see how the formulation looks.

Suppose PR to denote the amount of progress made in some important field by a given generation — which we may call the “first” generation; where R denotes the common ratio — the ratio of improvement — that is, the number by which the progress of one generation must be multiplied to give the amount of progress made by the second generation; then the amount of progress made by the second generation will be PR²; that made by the third generation will be PR³; and so on; ... (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.90)

If we take R to be 2 (which is a very small ratio, requiring the progress of each generation to be merely double that of the preceding one) and if we take T to be (say) 10, then we see that the progress made by the single 10th generation is P x 2¹⁰, which is 1024 times the progress made in the “first” generation. Moreover, to gain a just sense of the impressiveness of this

law, the reader must reflect upon the fact that it operates, not merely on one field, but in all fields of human interest. “Operates in all fields,” I have just now said; as a matter of fact, as before pointed out, it does not so operate *now* in *all* fields nor has it ever done so. My point is that it *will* so operate when we once acquire sense enough to let it do so. That sense we shall have when and only when we discover that by nature we are time-binders and that the *effectiveness* of our time-binding capacity is not only a function of time but is, as I have explained, a logarithmic or exponential function of time — a function in which time (T) enters as an *exponent*, as in the expression PRT, so that we humans are, unlike animals, naturally qualified not only to progress, but to progress more and more rapidly, with an always *accelerating acceleration*, as the generations pass. (*Manhood of Humanity*, pp.91-92)

Tools are made by man but have not the autonomy of their maker — they have not man’s time-binding capacity for initiation, for self-direction, and self-improvement. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.133) Human nature, this time-binding power, not only has the peculiar capacity for perpetual progress, but it has, over and above all animal propensities, certain qualities constituting it as a distinctive dimension or type of life. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.143)

It must be emphasized that the development of higher ideals is due to the *natural* capacity of humanity; the impulse is simply time-binding impulse. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.145)

What else do we know of the earliest part of humanity’s childhood? ... we know, in other words, that they were progressive creatures, that they made advancement; we know that their progress was *natural* to them — as natural as swimming is to fishes or as flying is to birds — for both the impulse and the ability to progress — to make improvement — to do greater things by help of things already done — are of the very nature of the time-binding capacity which makes humans human. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.174) ... we know that progress in what we call civilization, ... has been possible and actual simply and solely because the products of time-binding work not only *survive*, but naturally propagate their kind — ideas begetting ideas, inventions leading to other inventions, knowledge breeding knowledge; *we* therefore know that the amount of progress which a single generation can make, if it has an adequate supply of raw material and is unhampered by hostile circumstances, depends, not only upon its native capacity for binding time, but also — and this is of the utmost importance — upon the total progress made by preceding generations ... (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.175)

Modern progress does not consist only of the discovery of new knowledge but in the clarification of the ideas involved and the elimination of fallacious or unjustified silent unconscious assumptions which have crept into these primitive systems, and vitiated them through the disregard of facts, facts unknown to the founders of these older systems. (*Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings*, p.132)

In *Manhood of Humanity*, the mathematician and philosopher Cassius Jackson Keyser gives support to the notion of “progress” in his “Lecture XX,” from *Mathematical Philosophy*:

It is the energy that invents — that produces instruments, ideas, institutions and doctrines; it is, moreover, the energy that, having invented, criticizes, then invents again and *better*, thus advancing in excellence from creation to creation endlessly. ... Compare some representative of the animal world, a bee, let us say, or a beaver, with a correspondingly representative man. Consider their achievements and the ways thereof. The beaver makes a dam; the man, a bridge or some discovery, — analytic geometry, for example, or the art of printing, or the Keplerian laws of planetary motion, or the atomic constitution of matter ... Both achievements *endure*, it may be for short while only, — as in the case of the dam or the bridge, — or one of them may endure endlessly, — as in that of a scientific discovery. What happens in the next generation? The new beaver begins where its predecessor began and ends where it ended — it makes a dam but the dam is like the old one. Yet the old dam is there for the new beaver to behold, to contemplate, and to improve upon... Now what of the new *man*? What does *he* do? What he does depends, of course, upon his predecessor's achievement; if this was a bridge, he makes a better bridge, or invents a ship; if it was a discovery of analytic geometry, he enlarges its scope, or invents the calculus; if it was the art of printing, he invents a printing press ... Such is the familiar record — *improvement* of old things, *invention* of new ones — *Progress*. (*Manhood of Humanity*, pp.296-299)

Time-Binding Consciousness

In my experience, not many students and 'teachers' of the discipline fully realize that general semantics represents Korzybski's exposition of the timebinding mechanism. His investigations culminated in the admonition "Be conscious of abstracting." Be aware that whatever we think, say, feel, do, expect, plan for, want, theorize about, etc., is incomplete, because we have not included all. I rank "consciousness of abstracting" as a formulation which in terms of elegance, simplicity, and 'far-reachingness,' is comparable to Einstein's $E=MC^2$. I see "consciousness of abstracting" as one of our species highest orders of abstraction. Korzybski wrote:

I believe that our approaches to the problems of humans have been vitiated by primitive methods of evaluation which still often dominate our attitudes and outlooks. With a time-binding consciousness, our criteria of values, and so behavior, are based on the study of human potentials ... (*Manhood of Humanity*, p.xliii)

The present enquiry originated in my attempt to build a science of man. The first task was to define man scientifically in non-elementalistic, functional terms. I accomplished that in my book *Manhood of Humanity*, and in it I called the special characteristic which sharply distinguishes man from animal the time-binding characteristic. In the present volume I undertake the investigation of the mechanism of time-binding. (*Science and Sanity*, p.7)

A Time-Binding Method

We are time-binders by nature. But without time-binding *consciousness*, our efforts towards improvement, except in the fields of science and technology, are more or less haphazard, trial and error, guess work, etc., without an

explicit method. General semantics provides us with a method. As *conscious* time-binders applying a method (time-binding general semantics principles), we are more effective, efficient, aware, and deliberate in our efforts to refine and improve ourselves and our achievements. In applying this method, we start where we and others left off. We are self-conscious with regards to what we want to achieve. We recognize that we don't know *all* — that *all* is not known by others; that *all* has not been thought of, planned, etc., (non-allness). We do *not* identify what we or others start out with as the *only* way something could be thought about, designed, represented, done, etc., (non-identity, non-allness). We do not think of two things being the same in all respects (non-identity, consciousness of abstracting). We do not verbally separate what in actuality is not separate (non-elementalism). We do not forget that we create our own verbal categories and we do not confuse the characteristics of a group with the members of that group (consciousness of abstracting). With these, and other general semantics techniques, we develop and put into practice our time-binding *consciousness*.

Bernard Lonergan, S.J., wrote:

A method is a set of directives that serve to guide a process towards a result. (*Insight ... A Study of Human Understanding*, p.396)

Using a method *we are aware of using* allows us to review, re-examine, and if necessary, update, improve, modify, or abandon this method when it no longer serves us well. In our daily living, we all have methods (particular ways of thinking about and doing things). But we are usually not aware of this. When we are not aware that we are doing things a particular way, we have no reason to review our approach when things do not work as expected. With awareness of using *a method*, we recognize that our approach is one of many possible approaches; and that there are other ways of going about things. We become more creative, less cocksure, more flexible, more open to other ideas and suggestions. With time-binding as our method, we tend to become better time-binders.

Human beings naturally time-bind. But we are not necessarily conscious of ourselves as “time-binders,” and without this awareness, we do not strive toward “time-binding excellence.” (Manhood of Humanity, pp.73, 241.) So in many areas we maintain ‘primitive’ standards of evaluations. For example: We start with throwing stones at each other. Then we discover catapults ... now we can throw bigger stones, throw them faster, and throw them further. Here we have improvement or progress in stone throwing — definitely not improvement in human relationship. ‘Stone throwing’ improvements continue with the discovery of explosives. We developed dynamite bombs; then we developed atomic bombs, and later hydrogen bombs — We can now throw bombs at each other

thousands of miles away. There is no doubt that over generations, we have definitely improved our ability to throw destructive things at each other.

When I explain time-binding, I sometimes get the question: “With regards to say, bomb-making, is time-binding going on here?” Perhaps I’ll hear the comment, “So what’s so special about time-binding?” If we accept Korzybski’s description, time-binding (in this case “improvement in throwing things”), is definitely going on. I think it important to keep in mind that *the achievement and its use are two different operations*. Some label better bomb-building and other such anti-human and anti-time-binder activities “negative time-binding.” I prefer the labels “non-conscious,” or “unconscious time-binding.” On page xliii of *Manhood of Humanity*, Korzybski wrote: “I believe that our approaches to the problems of humans have been vitiated by primitive methods of evaluation which still often dominate our attitudes and outlooks. *With a time-binding consciousness* (my emphasis), our criteria of values, and so behavior, are based on the study of human potentialities ...” In terms of the organism-as-a-whole principle, with time-binding consciousness, and its corresponding ethical values, we are more likely to behave differently. Instead of throwing destructive things at each other we might first seek to non-violent ways to resolve our differences.

Wendell Johnson wrote:

We can take the recorded abstracts of Aristotle or Newton or Washington and abstract them further. In this sense we can make progress. Each human generation can for this reason start where the last generation left off. An American boy in 1946 can aspire to be not *like* George Washington but better than George Washington; he can go on from where Washington stopped. Therein lies the key to human advance. But the fact that it can be done, that time-binding is humanly possible, does not serve to guarantee that it will be done. It is accomplished effectively only by those who are conscious of the process by means of which it may be accomplished. The fact that a relatively conscious use of the process is an integral part of scientific method accounts for the amazing time-binding, or progress, that has been achieved in the areas in which science has been vigorously applied during the three short centuries since Galileo pointed the way. (*People in Quandaries*, p.164)

Time-binding consciousness involves a non-aristotelian orientation involving awareness, study, understanding, and application of general semantics principles ... especially non-identity, non-allness, non-elementalism, and consciousness of abstracting. With time-binding consciousness we shift our notion of time-binding from a definition and classification, to a *verb* representing an action. We recognize time-binding as a psychological tool ... a tool we can use to improve ourselves in any area we choose. With time-binding consciousness, we move from simply repeating “each generation can start where the former left off,” to self-consciously appreciating ourselves as time-binders. As self-conscious time-binders we recognize our ability to not only start where others

have left off, but where we ourselves as individuals left off. In other words, we can start from any of our own (and others past and present) evaluations, ideas, opinions, theories, conclusions, beliefs, certainties, achievements, etc., and *refine and improve them*. With time-binding consciousness, we are able to do more time-binding; and in improving ourselves, contribute our little increment to the sanity of the race.

Time-Binding Ethics

For me, dropping a bomb on other mainly “unconscious time-binders” or on other time-binders (except in self-defense) I consider immoral (to say the least) in terms of time-binding ethics.

Korzybski wrote:

“Survival of the fittest” in the sense of the *strongest* is a space-binding standard, the ethical standard of beasts; in the ethics of humanity’s manhood survival of the fittest will mean survival of the *best* in competition for excellence, and excellence will mean time-binding excellence... (*Manhood of Humanity*, 194)

Human excellence is excellence in time-binding, and must be measured and rewarded by time-binding standards of worth. (*Manhood of Humanity*, pp.73-74) A functional analysis, free from mythological and zoological assumptions, showed that humans, with the most highly developed nervous system, are uniquely characterized by the capacity of an individual or generation to begin where the former left off. I call this essential capacity ‘time-binding.’ This can be accomplished only by a class of life which uses symbols as means for time-binding. Such a capacity depends on and necessitates ‘intelligence’, means of communication, etc. On this inherently human level of interdependence, time-binding leads inevitably to feelings of responsibility, duty towards others and the future, and therefore to some type of ethics, morals, and similar social and/or socio-cultural reactions. (*Manhood of Humanity*, p. xlii)

In the human class of life, we find a new factor, non-existent in any other form of life; namely, that we have the capacity to collect all known experience of different individuals. Such a capacity increases enormously the number of observations a single individual can handle, and so our acquaintance with the world around, and in, us becomes much more refined and exact. This capacity, which I call the time-binding capacity, is only possible because, in distinction from the animals, we have evolved, or perfected extra-neural means by which, without altering our nervous system, we can refine its operation and expand its scope. (*Science and Sanity*, p.376)

On page 7 of *Science and Sanity* Korzybski wrote, “In the present volume I undertake the investigation of the mechanism of time-binding.” From this I regard general semantics as an example of what Korzybski called “time-binding excellence.” Time-binding excellence, from my evaluation of *Science and Sanity*, comes through being conscious that we abstract and being conscious of our abstractions; being aware that our maps are not the

territories they are maps of; being conscious that our words are not the thing-processes we use them to represent, and from using other general semantics principle and tools. Without training and constant practice, most of us humans are not conscious of abstracting. Forgetting that we live in an interrelated interactive world, we look for quick, simple, easy solutions to complex problems. And we hang on to 'primitive' ways of thinking about things. Our culture-language conditioning, and other factors, make it difficult for us to work towards time-binding excellence or act in accordance with time-binding ethics.

My interpretations to date constitute aspects of my map of time-binding. I could be mistaken. So I invite others to enter the dialogue. I am particularly interested in reading your views on the term "progress" in the context of time-binding, as used by Korzybski, Johnson, and Keyser. When you use the word "progress," what do you mean? And when others use this word, what meanings do you give? Do you consider use of general semantics principles *non-allness*, *non-identity*, *non-elementalism*, *extensionalizing*, *dating*, *indexing*, *consciousness of abstracting* and others, *progress* in human evaluating? What factors make the practice of these principles progress in human evaluation for you?

If you do not consider use of these principles progress and/or improvement in human evaluating, are there other non-GS, non-scientific principles that you would consider as progress and/or improvement in evaluating? How so? Do you consider a scientific mathematical approach (questioning, hypothesizing, experimenting, theorizing, predicting, observing, revising and refining theories when not corroborated, predicting from new theory, and so on,) progress and/or improvement in evaluating compared with "guessing," "faith," "intuition," "gut feeling," "dream analysis," and so on? If you do, what makes scientific approach qualify as progress in evaluating for you, compared with "guessing," "faith," "intuition," "gut feeling," etc.? If you do not, how so? Korzybski said that "general semantics training helps us to use our nervous systems most efficiently." What do you make of this statement? Do you consider using your nervous system most efficiently as progress, or improvement? If not, how so?

Korzybski wrote in *Science and Sanity*, Fifth Edition, page lii, "A modern revision of the Aristotelian system or the building of a non-aristotelian system involves, or is based on, similar aims; namely, formulation of a *general method* not only for scientific work, but also life, as we know it (1941)." How do you interpret the term "revision" in this passage? What do you hope or expect to achieve, or for what reasons do you revise something you wrote, or an idea you had? I hope you will read *Manhood of Humanity* before answering these questions and share your abstractions with me and the readers of *ETC*.

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