

DEVELOPING A SELF: A GENERAL SEMANTICS WAY

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Over the years, philosophers, psychoanalysts, psychologists, psychiatrists, and others have asked: Is there such a thing as a self? Does the self exist? What is a self? In the following speculations and generalizations I avoid the controversy and instead suggest that one can deliberately develop a self. And I offer a general semantics way to develop a self—specifically, a general semantics self. By changing certain variables, this outline could be generalized and applied to the deliberate creation and development of any other kind of self. (To emphasize my notion of self—any self—as not being a thing, but *a mode of conscious being* or being conscious, I use the term “self” as a noun labeling a process, as a verb indicating a mode of being, and as an adverb stressing the “how” of being—a particular way of being.)

Let’s translate the notion of “self” to “a particular way of being; a consistent and habitual way of engaging with-in, interacting with-in, and experiencing the world.” If no two of us are identical (the same in all respects) it seems reasonable to me to generalize that the main difference between us has to do with our individual ways of being in the world. (I did and am doing it my way. You did and are doing it your way. But usually we do not explore what those particular ways of being might look like.) We will assume that an individual’s particular way of being is potentially recognizable to her/him but can only be guessed at by others through noticing overt behaviors. In this exploration, we will not think of a self (a habitual way of being) as being like an island, a planet, or an object, already there to be discovered. Let’s imagine, instead, that “rudiments” (not a whole self) come into being when an individual *starts being aware* that in her/his thinking, feelings, imaginings, speaking, doing, etc.,

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she or he is engaging with, interacting with, and experiencing the world in her or his particular way—whatever that way happens to be like. A self develops, becomes integrated, and recognizable to the degree that one becomes aware that she/he consistently experiences and interacts with-in the world in her or his particular ways.

Levels of Conscious Operation

Let's think of babies, animals, and birds as functioning at a non-introspecting, non-reflecting level of consciousness. At this level there is no consciousness of being conscious. Let's call this non-reflecting, automatic, reflex level of conscious operations "a first-order level of consciousness."

Thoughts come and go, often without any effort on our part. But there are times when a shift in consciousness emerges—a modulation of conscious operations from the non-reflecting automatic mode: Times when we become aware that we are talking, thinking, daydreaming, being impatient, worrying about something or someone, wondering if we said or did the right thing, turned off the stove, locked the door, about to light a cigarette, where we are putting down the keys, or parking the car, and so on. There are moments when we become aware that we had felt, thought, said, done things as "unreflectingly" and as automatically as the behavior of babies and animals. Let's call such moments when we are *being consciously aware* of our behavior "a second-order level of conscious operations."

"How" one responds in-to these moments of conscious awareness provides clues to one's particular way of being in and engaging with-in the world. For instance, there are times when someone or something does not meet our expectations; sometimes when we are dissatisfied, angry, or frustrated, and so on. "How" we consistently respond to our feelings in and about various situations "tells" us (if we are aware) a great deal about the way we are being in the world. We could get angry about being angry and stay angry. And we could also move beyond—consciously modify that mode of consciousness—and explore the source, or justification, etc., of our anger. When someone or something does not meet our expectations, we could hold a grudge, or transcendently we could file this experience away under "universe works that way, too," and in so doing include a general semantics principle of "general uncertainty" in our expectations.

General Semantics Promotes a Shift in Consciousness

General Semantics as a system and a discipline promotes a further shift in our conscious operations. In this mode of being and interacting, an individual, in

applying general semantics principles, becomes conscious of modifying her or his behavior in a particular way—a general semantics way. This consciousness (1), of being conscious (2), in a particular way (3), can be thought of as “consciousness functioning at a third-order level.” By the way: This third-order level includes the other two levels. I propose that an individual creates a general semantics self to the extent that she or he consistently and habitually engages and interacts with-in the world at this third-order level of conscious being. It is worth emphasizing: One does not develop a general semantics self through occasional or intermittent applications of general semantics principles.

If an individual does not consistently apply these principles to modify her/his thinking and other behaviors, she/he will by default automatically follow a way of being and interacting based on culturally conditioned “allnessing” and other unhealthy ways of being—ways of engaging with-in the world that the principles, as psychological tools, were created to help us mitigate. There are approximately thirty-one million seconds in a year. Let’s say we are awake twelve hours a day. By our twentieth year, we would have lived in and through cultural, parental, language, semantic, religious, and other influences and conditioning, for over three hundred million, million seconds. Counteracting our unhealthy ways of interacting requires a great deal of in-the-moment attention. Developing a general semantics self requires us to be consistently aware, alert, and attentive so that we can catch “ourselves” behaving in the ways we have been so well conditioned to express: Being attentive enables us to recognize, critically reflect, and decide the way we will be engaged—whatever we happen to be involved with. (Following this, it seems to me that general semantics principles could be more effectively practiced if individuals are introduced to these principles at earlier times. Communist regimes and many “belief systems” value and practice the “early exposure for effectiveness” principle.)

Developing a General Semantics Self

Developing a general semantics self requires (among other variables) that as individuals we consistently:

- Practice “consciousness of abstracting” as a behavior modifier. Consciousness of abstracting involves (among other factors) remembering that in our abstractions—sensing, thinking, understanding, feelings, beliefs, plans, expectations, decisions, opinions, conversations, and so on—we are selecting and interacting only with some (not all) aspects of the world. We cannot know or tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. (principle of “non-allness”)

- Keep reminding “ourselves” that no two things are identical, that is, absolutely the same in all respects. We live in a world of change and changing relationships: A “thing” is not even the same from one moment to another. (principle of “non-identity”)
- Use general semantics principles as “attitudinal and behavioral standards and modifiers.”
- Think about our thinking and modify our evaluations (how we “map” situations) based on general semantics principles.
- Use general semantics principles as guidelines for critical reflection. For instance: distinguishing between what we assume, believe, imagine, expect, etc.—our generalizations and speculations—from what we see or hear.
- Adopt a theoretical, experimental, general uncertainty, “let’s see what happens” approach.
- Give more value, more importance, to how someone or something behaves and interacts, than we give to their names, titles, labels, and to what we think, or believe, she/he/it “is.”
- Remember that words, things, situations do not have meanings in themselves; that things do not mean what we might think, say, or believe they mean. We each give our own meanings based on our experiences, fears, training, values, etc. Forgetting that others give meanings different from our own often results in, and constitutes, a source of much disagreeableness, conflicts, and violence in our personal, professional, international, and other relationships.
- Modify our thinking, evaluations, and logic, from one valued (It must be so; it can only mean), two valued (It must be either this or that), three valued (It could be this, or that, or both, or neither), to an “infinite valued logic” involving degrees of probability. (You could think of “truth” as “infinite valued maximum probability.”)
- Apply a calculus approach to increase the frequency of our conscious awareness of what and how we are engaging and interacting with-in the world including “ourselves.”
- Study the methods and approach of science and mathematics and apply them within limits as ideal ways of interacting with-in the world. A science approach involves striving to create “maps” that most accurately represent territories mapped. This includes, among other factors, being ready and open to revise and update our “maps” and map-making ways in the light of more accurate and up-to-date information. A science approach includes remembering that we live in an interrelated and interactive world: As such we can expect that there will be reactions to our

actions. (“Maps” include what we sense, think, imagine, feel, say, believe, understand, etc., about ourselves, others, and the world. They include what we expect, plans we make, our decisions, expectations, and so on.) A mathematical approach involves, among other factors, striving to make more valid comparisons, more accurate relations, and more logically consistent evaluations. It involves modifying our observations, thinking, assumptions, etc., conclusions, etc., based on generalizations of mathematical notions such as variable, function, calculus, non-linearity, set theory, probability theory, asymmetric relations, index, logic, fractal, structural similarity, statistics, and others.

- Remember that the above represent starting points only.

The Calculus–Self-Development Approach

The calculus as “the study of a continuous function by following its development through indefinitely small steps” provides us with a very powerful psychological self-determining and self-development tool. A calculus approach could be considered an utmost necessity for the fullest development of a general semantics self. How so? The higher the frequency (how often) of our conscious awareness of how we are engaged, interacting with-in, and experiencing the world, the more often we can apply general semantics principles to modify our behavior in a general semantics way. The more often we modify our behavior the general semantics “non-allness, non-identifying” way, the more we develop, grow, and expand our general semantics self. I think it reasonable to believe that if a general semantics self—a way of engaging and interacting with-in the world—can be developed, so can other types of selves—other ways of interacting with-in and being in the world. And I would suggest this happens to-in “all” of us. With exceptions, we are mainly unaware of the kinds of selves (our ways of being, experiencing, and interacting) each of us have been nurturing, and so we are unable to intervene, recognize, name, develop, or review them.

Alfred Korzybski, outlining his system in his books *Manhood of Humanity* and *Science and Sanity*, described humankind as a “time-binding class of life.” As “time-binders” we pass information to ourselves, to others, and across generations. We generally do this instinctively and so are unable to recognize and appreciate the tremendous power of this human ability, so highly developed and more easily recognized (although not necessarily by scientists and mathematicians) in the fields of science and mathematics. Developing a general semantics self involves practicing “conscious time-binding.” In doing this, we consciously complement our basic time-binding, creative, and improvement

abilities—gut feelings, intuition, dreams, visions, guesswork, trial and error, etc., by consciously applying general semantics principles as heuristic tools toward higher levels of improvement and creativity to create more satisfying relationships. Developing a general self goes hand-in-hand with a goal to achieve “time-binding excellence” through behavior following a high frequency of consciousness of abstracting or “conscious abstracting” (awareness in the moment of how we are interacting).

You might catch yourself asking “So what is so good about developing a general semantics self? One response goes something like this: If the words we use are not identical with (are not the same as) the thing-processes they are about; if our verbal and other “maps” are not identical with (not the same as) the territories they are claimed to be “maps” of; and if we relate and interact with others, with “ourselves” (whatever the type of self) and with the world around us, based on our “maps,” we could save ourselves a great deal of stress, distress, anger, frustrations, conflicts, and violence in our personal, professional, international, and other relationships by being more actively engaged in striving to be more accurately representative in what we thought, felt, understood, knew, and so on.

Using general semantics principles as behavioral and attitudinal guidelines can take us way beyond our usual ways of thinking, understanding, and experiencing. Using general semantics as evaluation guidelines, we think-feel more clearly about our way of interacting; we think-feel more clearly about the way we think and feel; we refine and extend our understanding, become more creative, and we also achieve more. As Korzybski wrote in the Preface to the third edition of *Science and Sanity*: “When the methods of general semantics are *applied*, the results are usually beneficial.” This has been my experience.

For more about the system of general semantics and elaborations of its principles, read Korzybski’s *Manhood of Humanity*, and his *Science and Sanity*. Read Wendell Johnson’s *People in Quandaries*, and Bruce and Susan Kodish’s *Drive Yourself Sane*. Visit <http://www.miltondawes.com> or google Milton Dawes. Books and courses on general semantics are available from the Institute of General Semantics.