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GENERAL-SEMANTICS A CRITICAL and META-CRITICAL SYSTEM

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Without an awareness of what we are doing, and how we are doing what we do, we stand little chance of improvement. General-semantics 'invites' us (among other things) to become more conscious of the ways we use language and the ways language uses us. It 'invites' us to become more conscious of ourselves as evaluators, map-makers, story tellers, individual and unique expressions of human consciousness, if we hope to improve our behavior to ourselves and others.

A criticism unavoidably involves comparisons: comparisons based on explicitly stated, or unstated goals, ideals, norms, standards, criteria, premises, frame of reference, expectations, traditions, etc., against which some person, behavior, situation, thing, statement, and so on, is measured. Unfortunately, very rarely does one come across a criticizer, critic, or school of critical thinking that emphasizes the importance of being explicit in stating, or that takes the time to mention the particular criteria, ideals, standards, etc., that ground a criticism; or that supports prescriptions and directions for

developing skills in what is called critical thinking. I propose that addressing this neglect is especially urgent for advocates of critical thinking.

If the above is taken as a criticism, a valid question is, "What personal criteria, ideals, etc., stand behind this criticism?" Here is a response. My criticism is based on an assumption that the chief objective in promoting critical thinking is to improve 'ordinary' thinking. But to do this, one would have to study, analyze, and evaluate 'ordinary' thinking, on the basis of some antecedent dissatisfaction, and with a belief that improvement is possible. Following this, it seems reasonable to me to expect anyone promoting critical thinking to show what their studies revealed about the shortcomings of 'ordinary' thinking; and on what grounds they have evaluated certain aspects of 'ordinary' thinking as shortcomings. I would also expect such persons to support their claims that their suggested improvements qualify as improvements. If this does not happen, I am of the opinion that what is promoted as critical thinking will incorporate, at more sophisticated levels, much of what was considered unsatisfactory about 'ordinary' thinking. And this could be very damaging as a consequence of the added factors of expertise and institutionalization.

Alfred Korzybski formulated a critical, educative, psycho-linguistic, and psychotherapeutic system some sixty years ago. He called his system *An Introduction to Non-aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. Although a great admirer of Aristotle, his studies and publications were in effect a review of the 'aristotelian structures' embedded in our Indo-European languages; and their continuing harmful influences on our human situation. Korzybski did not call his work critical thinking. This would have been a gross descriptive inaccuracy. But critical evaluation was at the heart of his work. It is also very unlikely that he would have used the word 'thinking' without quotations. In his major publication *Science and Sanity* and in his other writings 'thinking' is usually put in quotes. He used the term "evaluation" rather than "thinking" mainly because he considered that term a more accurate representation of the psychophysiological processes referred to. He classified the term 'thinking' as "elementalistic". In reference to this, the following can be found in *Science and Sanity (S&S)*: "Languages have structure, thus we may have languages of elementalistic structure such as 'space' and 'time', 'observer' and 'observed', 'body' and 'soul', 'senses' and 'mind', 'intellect' and 'emotions', 'thinking' and 'feeling', 'thought' and 'intuition'., which allow verbal division and separation. Or we may have languages of non-elementalistic structure such as, 'space-time'..." (751). "If we use languages of a structure non-similar to the world and our nervous system, our verbal predictions are not verified empirically, we cannot be 'rational' or adjusted," (751). He also wrote, "We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of semantic reactions and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is automatically projected upon the world around us" (90). In brief, we 'see' the world through the structure of our languages: Our attitudes, behavior, personal relationships, institutions, society, international relations, etc., are functionally related to the structure of the languages we use to

communicate with ourselves and others. We create our human world in the 'light' of our words.

Korzybski was an officer in the first world war. He was horrified at the carnage and atrocious human behavior. He wondered how it was that we humans had advanced so far in science, mathematics and technology, yet demonstrated so much confusion, misunderstanding, and violence in our interactions with others and within ourselves. His curiosity and disgust led him to study what he considered human evaluating at its best -- science and mathematics -- and human evaluating at its worst -- psychiatric patients, The title of his book Science and Sanity is no coincidence.

Of the many things Korzybski wrote about science and mathematics as models of evaluating excellence, I'll mention just a few. (But before doing this let me remind the reader not to confuse science with technology, or with the military and political applications of the discoveries of science.) He wrote:

"As words are not the objects which they represent, structure, and structure alone, becomes the only link which connects our verbal processes with the empirical data. To achieve adjustment and sanity and the conditions which follow from them, we must study structural characteristics of this world first, and, then only, build languages of similar structure, instead of habitually ascribing to the world the primitive structure of our language. All our doctrines, institutions, etc., depend on verbal arguments. If these arguments are conducted in a language of wrong and unnatural structure, our doctrines and institutions must reflect that linguistic structure and so become unnatural, and inevitably lead to disasters." (59)

He wrote, "Science represents the highest structural abstractions that have been produced at each date. It is a supreme abstraction from all the experiences of countless individuals and generations" (553). "Sanity means adjustment, and without the minimum of the best structural knowledge of each date concerning the world, such adjustment is impossible" (727). He wrote this about mathematics: "Because the nervous system is an abstracting, integrating mechanism, all human psycho-neurological reactions and, particularly, psycho-logical, to be similar in structure, must be based on the mathematical theories of statistics and probability" (310).

The main goal of Korzybski's general-semantics is better human relationships at all levels of our human interactions -- personal, interpersonal, societal, international. This can be accomplished by being highly and unceasingly attentive to the ways we speak, listen, understand, interpret, give meanings to, give values to, 'think' about, and evaluate

words, symbols, and other features of our human and physical environments. The critical evaluating models to be used are the structural investigating methods of science and mathematics. The models have been selected based on their progress and achievements over the centuries; and their successes in increasing and improving our knowledge and understanding of our world. (When something works well, we want to know, "How come?") Korzybski made the assumption that if we studied and applied the methods of science and mathematics to our personal and professional lives, we would achieve a similar measure of success to that achieved by scientists and mathematicians.

In S&S we find over fifty examples of the structural impact of the "aristotelian system" on our language (xxv). (By the way, Korzybski did not attribute this to Aristotle but to followers, who selectively applied aspects of Aristotle's system; and also to our human psycho-logical tendencies.) Korzybski wrote "The aim of the work of Aristotle and the work of the non-aristotelians is similar, except for the date of our human development and the advance of science....In general-semantics, in building up a non-aristotelian system, the aims of Aristotle are preserved yet scientific methods are brought up to date" (xl). "He was undoubtedly one of the most gifted men mankind has ever known" (xxviii).

Here are some examples of the many dissatisfactions with our ordinary everyday 'thinking' from a general-semantics frame of reference. In our everyday living, we tend to think-feel, judge, make decisions, solve problems, talk with ourselves, and others, using a language that implies that the world we live in, our family, our personal and professional relationships, and so on, is best described:

a. using an either/or, two valued logic: We ask "Is it because ... or is it because ...?" "It must be either ... or ...": good/bad, right/wrong, etc.

b. in elementalistic terms: mind, soul, body, the heart
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c. in terms of qualities, properties: We say, "The truth of the matter"; we want to know "the real meaning".

d. in terms of one cause, one effect (We say "It's because"; We ask "Why?")

e. in terms of identity: Those people are lazy; He is a liberal; I am a teacher; It's the same; There's no difference.

f. in additive terms: One more drink won't do any harm.

g. in terms of all: everybody; always; every time; the American people; absolutely true; this has nothing to do with it; the

whole truth and nothing but the truth; and that's all there is to that

h. in terms of absolutes: safe car; absolutely the best deal; there's nothing more to be said

i. intensionally: we give higher priority to our definitions, beliefs, shoulds, and oughts, than to what is observed to be going on; We say "This shouldn't be happening. It can't be so." ...

j. objectively: truth; love; justice; laws of nature

To minimize confusion and misunderstandings, it might be worth remembering that the above examples are quite acceptable when used discriminately in terms of `time', `place', particular context, and so on.

As mentioned before, and I 'think' it worth repeating, the way we talk, think-feel, understand, what's going on in and around us will have some effect on, and will to some degree determine, our attitudes, the kinds of institutions we build, our approaches to 'solving' problems, the ways we relate and interact with each other, and so on. From a general-semantics perspective, our successes and problems are functionally related to our discriminate and indiscriminate use of words.

General-semantics as a critical `thinking' system provides us with principles, formulations, and practical devices that we can use to help us become more attentive word users. Distinctions are made between our maps and the territories they are supposed to be maps of. As maps, our beliefs, expectations, plans, wishes, fears, rules, values, meanings we give, memories, observations, etc., are not given more importance than, but are considered abstractions from, whatever is going on. Things-processes are not defined in terms of ideals, properties, or "what they are", but in terms of their behaviors, structures and relationships. Distinctions are made between an extensional approach to living, and an intensional approach. (With an intensional approach, we work hard at making the territory fit our maps, and even believe that our maps are more important than the territory.) Distinctions are made between our descriptions, assumptions, generalizations, speculations, opinions, etc., and what they are about. Distinctions are made between our words and their references.

General-semantics critical 'thinkers' practice 'thinking' in terms of many probable causes -- not one cause, one effect. This is based on a belief that we live in a world where, as far as we know, everything is related. And so, to any 'effect' we can attribute an indefinite number of 'causes'. This uncertainty requires us, in terms of consistency, to think-feel-judge-believe in terms of probabilities, and infinite valued, rather than two valued either/or, logic. Following quantum theories, observers and their observations are not elementalistically separated: What is observed depends on how and where one 'looks',

what one expects to find, and so on. The above represent just a few examples of Korzybski's courageous attempt to improve the structure of our language and evaluations, based on twentieth century science; very courageous I 'think', and you may agree if you stop and 'think' about what he was up against -- over two thousand years of an habitual and institutionalized way of 'thinking', and the whole history of human neuro-linguistic development.

"The map is not the territory that it is a map of ... the word is not the thing being referred to." This so simple sounding formulation may yet turn out to represent one of our highest states of self-consciousness. It encapsulates the general-semantics principles of non-identity, non-allness, and self-reflexiveness. It is fundamental to general-semantics as a critical evaluating system and a human development system. A recognition of our self-reflexiveness is, I 'think', fundamentally important in our attempts to improve our philosophies, epistemologies, science, critical 'thinking' and ourselves. How can we improve any area of our existence, if we don't know what we are doing, how we are doing what we are doing, or even that we are doing?

The principles mentioned above, and others, are not buried in the system; no deep probing is required to bring them to light. They are exposed to analysis, criticism, refutation. Critics simply have to demonstrate that two things that are claimed to be identical (same in all respects) are identical to demolish the principle of non-identity. They simply have to show a map that is in every way the same as the territory of which it is a map. They simply have to show a word that is no different from the complex processes it represents. But, to be fair, it must be remembered that the system, evaluated by its own formulations, qualifies as a map, and so general-semanticians do not claim it to be more important than any new findings.

The goals, principles, and formulations that constitute general-semantics as a critical evaluating system, being explicitly stated, facilitate criticism of the system. The system, as a meta-critical system, shows ways to critically evaluate, not only other systems, but also itself. Godel's incompleteness theorem notwithstanding, the self-critical system is not generated from divine revelations, or self-evident propositions, but by appeals to the structural similarities between its statements and their referents. General-semantics as a critical evaluating system provides us with tools we can use not only to improve our critical 'thinking' skills, but also ourselves.

Reference

Korzybski, Alfred. *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. Fourth Edition. Lakeville CT (now Englewood, NJ): International Non-aristotelian Library Publishing Co., 1958. (Fifth Edition, 1994)