

Consciousness of Abstracting: A Master Principle

Master principle

We can think of consciousness of abstracting as not only the master principle in Korzybski's general semantics, but also a master principle of principles. This master principle provides us with one of the most important psycho-logical tools we have for human development, improvement, and progress in any field of endeavor or activity. As a tool, consciousness of abstracting is **a label for a self-conscious self-reflexive activity--something we can do, and know we are doing**. This involves using one instance of conscious awareness to modify, evaluate, critique, refine, another instance, and its contents (an experience, an idea, a thought, a feeling, a belief, etc.) along specified general semantics psycho-logical boundaries.

As a principle, a theory, and a prescription for sanity, Korzybski's consciousness of abstracting can be considered one of mankind's highest orders of abstracting. Encompassing the general semantics principles of "non-allness", "non-identity", "non-elementalism", "dating" and others, it provides us with a theoretical foundation for epistemology. It provides us with a standard for critical thinking. It provides us with a theoretical foundation for psychotherapy, and offers us a psycho-logical tool, we can use as an attitudinal and behavioral modifier. We could think of consciousness of abstracting as the semantic $E = mc^2$ --the supreme 'relativistic' principle applicable to and covering the study of human awareness, human values, understanding, communication, interactivity, interrelationships, and limits of human understanding and knowledge.

Progress of Science

We can attribute the progress of science to scientists' acknowledgement (even if tacitly) of the consciousness of abstracting principle (non-allness, non-identity, non-elementalism, and others). We find clues to this acknowledgement in the following: Einstein's theory of relativity in emphasizing the importance of "frame of reference of observers"...Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty in its emphasis of "the role played by the observer in measuring physical quantities, and the natural limits of measurements"...Bohr's complementarity

principle proposing that “an experiment yields only a limited amount of information since other experiments will give other information hidden by the first experiment”...Field theories in terms of interconnectedness--“bodies modifying the structure of surrounding space and affecting bodies entering that space”...And in general, “the importance of experimentation, theories, and the revision and refinement of theories”.

We could also present the consciousness of abstracting principle in the form of a mathematical metaphor: $ct/3 = f(ct/1)$. Let $ct/1$ represent an instance of consciousness at time (1)—an experience, something seen or heard, an idea, a memory, etc. “f” represents consciousness of abstracting acting at time (2)) as a “non-allness-non-identity operator”, a modifier, acting on $ct/1$. And $ct/3$ represents the “non-allness-non-identity-non-elementalism” awareness resulting from this modification. We can become conscious of having abstracted minutes, hours, days, weeks, years, after an abstraction. With practice, there is no time gap between each mode... $ct/1$ is instantly followed by $ct/2$ and $ct/3$.

Abstracting

Abstracting is generally understood as “taking away from, “summarizing”, “leaving out”, and so on. But in the field of general semantics (since to leave out involves selecting), abstracting involves both selecting-and leaving out. All general semantics principles (including “consciousness of abstracting”) qualify as abstractions). These principles refer to “particular ways, we could, with training, learn to apply to all our abstracting”. To be rigorous, whatever we say about abstracting, also applies to these principles. As such general semantics principles can be thought of as abstractions of abstractions, thinking about thinking, speaking about speaking, etc. Principles in all other fields of study or activity (including what is labeled “commonsense”) also qualify as abstractions.

If we think of abstracting or abstractions as labels for the set of human activities, members of this set include anything we ‘do’: our seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, believing, interpreting, understanding, opinions we offer, knowledge, talking, feelings, remembering, expecting, wanting, rules, policies, regulations, doctrines, explanations, theories, science, mathematics, psychotherapies, philosophies, religions, and so on.

In his text book on general semantics Korzybski defined consciousness of abstracting as “*awareness* that in the process of abstracting we have *left out* characteristics”: In other words, “remembering that we have left out a great deal in our seeing, hearing, thinking-feeling, imagining, remembering, theorizing, believing, explaining, expecting, desiring”, and so on. What we most often leave out in our abstracting is *the fact of ourselves as abstractors-interpreters, theorizers*, the unavoidable parts we play, and how we contribute to our own distress and accomplishments (principle of “non-elementalism”).

Conscious Abstracting...Precursor to Consciousness of Abstracting

One way we can practice consciousness of abstracting involves practicing “conscious abstracting”. Conscious abstracting involves being aware of what we are doing and how we are doing what we are doing in the moment (often referred to as “witnessing”). We will find this of utmost importance--if we desire to improve--since we first have to be aware of what and how we are doing, in order to make deliberate changes. (Practicing conscious abstracting: Every now and again, silently talk to yourself about what you are seeing, hearing thinking, feeling, doing, etc. After a while, without any effort, conscious abstracting will become automatic. You will not only notice more—in noticing more you will also become more aware of how much you have been leaving out.)

If we diligently practice conscious abstracting and consciousness of abstracting we develop a particular self-aware-self-correcting-self-improving attitude and approach to life. In being aware that we have not included all (principle of “non-allness”), we do not identify our abstractions by treating them as being the same as whatever we are abstracting from (principle of “non-identity”). (Readers might recall the popularizations of these two principles in the following: “The map is not the territory”, “The map is not all the territory”, and “The word is not the thing”.) If we study conflicts, disagreements, problems in communication, diverse beliefs, etc., at many levels (personal, interpersonal, international, ecological), we will notice many examples of “allnessing”, “identifying”, and elementalistic compartmentalizing. We find individuals (including ourselves), experts, authorities, politicians, managers, groups, etc., acting as if they always knew the ‘right thing’, the “best thing”, the “only thing”, to do, resenting advice or suggestions, and generally behaving as if all

there was to know, about particular areas of human interactions, diverse topics, or fields of activities, was known.

Benefits

We can benefit a great deal by constant practice in conscious abstracting and consciousness of abstracting. In being aware that we have not included all, we seek to learn more--we become better listeners, more attentive, more restrained in making judgment: *We become improved evaluators* . In being more attentive to what's going on in and around us, we notice more. *We develop skills in recognizing patterns, repeated patterns of activity, and similarity of structures at different scales* (principle of “relative invariance under transformation”, or “structural similarity”): we abstract that we live in a fractal Universe.

In being more attentive, we notice more how things are different and similar--*we notice change*. As change often involves both differences and similarities: (To notice that something has changed involves being aware that aspects of the thing have remained recognizable (principle of “relative invariance under transformation”). In being more appreciative of differences, we become more open and accepting of other points of viewing; we have less disagreements and conflicts--*we become better communicators, and enjoy more satisfying relationships*. In being appreciative of the pervasiveness of differences, we become more open and accepting of other points of viewing. With greater skills in differentiating, with higher levels of sensitivity to both differences and similarities, and developing an appreciation of change: We experience inconsistency as a “new order”; a new way of making sense; a different structural and functional pattern--*We become less confused about things*.

In noticing more, we see more and notice more how things are connected and related; we learn more about structures and multidimensional structures (principle of “non-elementalism, and “interconnectedness”). By noticing relationships, structures, repeated patterns, how things interact, that-and-how things change, we become better at recognizing trends; we are not embarrassed to ask questions. We become better at anticipating possibilities. We become better at dealing with new and trying situations, and anticipating, minimizing and resolving problems--*We become more intelligent beings*. In becoming more sensitive to structures and interactivities, *we lean more about how ourselves,*

others, and Universe work. In being aware that we have not included all; in being aware that what we know, understand, or believe is not the same as whatever is to be known understood, or believed (principle of non-identity”); in being aware that no truth is the whole truth (principle of “non-allness”)--*We become more critical thinkers.*

In being aware that the way we approach, think about, understand or do anything, is not the only way to think about, not the only possible approach, not the only way to do something (principle of “non-allness), we seek to know more--*We become more imaginative, more speculative, more philosophical, more creative beings.* In remembering that we don’t know all, we become aware that *there are many other ways to interpret and understand anything.* We become sensitive to the possibility that there could be *many other meanings than the ones we give* (principle of “multi-meaning”). Re-cognizing this, we do not identify the meaning we give to words and events as the only possible meaning or meanings.

In remembering that we don’t know all about how anything works, we are *not so easily surprised or disappointed: We do not get so quickly frustrated* when things don’t go our way or work as we expected. And when things don’t go well with us--we learn to go well with things. In being more aware of that we live in a world of interconnections, and interactions (principle of “non-elementalism”)--We avoid thinking in terms of one cause one effect (principle of ‘multi-causality”): we become more sensitive to which ‘cause’ we select as a starting point or important grounds for re-solving our problems. (In a fast moving culture, where quick results are expected, we often rush to treat the ‘symptoms’ (the cause) rather than spend time researching many other possible underlying contributing factors.)

In being conscious of abstracting, we develop higher levels of awareness and appreciation of the power of words (power as “ability to influence change”), and also the inadequacy of words to cover all aspects of our experiences. Being conscious that things are not what we think-feel-say they are (principle of “non-identity”, word not thing), we develop an appreciation of the importance of “metaphor” (this is somewhat like that) operative in our sensory, cognitive-and-emotional processes). Remembering that “words are not the processes we use

them to represent”, and that in our experiences we have left out a great deal, we *practice a “postulational, heuristic, experimental, probabilistic, let’s see what happens”* approach. And we work at expanding our vocabulary with general semantics terms: a way to modulate our abstractions, and modify some of the ways we are influenced by our culturally expected ways of thinking, talking and behaving. (See “Chalice” at <miltondawes/com>)

We Harm Ourselves Through Our Usual Ways of Thinking

Our “allness-identifying-non-conscious of abstracting” ways of thinking result in our creating political, economic, social, educational, and other institutions with shaky foundations. Similar to the fate of a bridge or building built--ignoring physical factors of Universe--many of our institutions can be expected to collapse or become problematic from time to time. Our governments, institutions, organizations, agencies, policies, etc., emerge from, and are usually built on a firm foundation of human beliefs, fears, current values, non-scientific ‘theories’, untested ideas and ideologies, etc.. And we re-inforce, repair, and shored them up with these constructs and related practices, rather than reconstruct, repair, and operate following what we understand presently from science, anthropology, history, and psychology, about how humans, human societies, and Universe work. And since our problem-solving efforts are usually informed by, and grounded in our usual ways on thinking, we reflexively establish more and more inefficient and ineffective institutions, organizations, agencies, etc.--compounding the problems and challenges we face. Consequently, as a species, and as individuals, we find ourselves spiraling to higher and higher levels of simplistic, foolish, violent, and insane behaviors. We could benefit from being consciousness of abstracting by including the power that the social-political-educational-economic-media, and other structures we have created, have over us. (For some examples Google “Media Ecology”)

I must emphasize: To gain the above benefits, and many others you will discover, conscious abstracting and consciousness of abstracting have to be constantly practiced so that they become installed as *automatic interferers and interveners* in our sensory, cognitive and emotional processes. Constant practice becomes necessary if we are concerned to minimize the harmful and distressing effects of many of our usual culturally conditioned ways of

thinking-feeling-talking about things, others and ourselves (Our usual automatic ways of thinking need no practice). With consciousness of abstracting, we enhance our creativity. We critique our thinking, beliefs and values, expand our intelligences and strive to become better at being human--better in terms of 'being' conscious of abstracting and the benefits we derive.

Engage Consciousness of Abstracting

Remember to think of all the above as abstractions *representing a 'theory' and tools* based on the general semantics master principle "consciousness of abstracting": a principle to be applied as an overall behavioral modifier, and a tool *to be used* (not just talked about), as a way to improve ourselves and our social, political, economic, and other environments.

For more on general semantics principles read Korzybski's "Science And Sanity", and "Manhood Of Humanity" available from The Institute of General Semantics. Also visit <miltondawes.com> Read "Practicing Conscious Time-binding", "Creating A Self A General Semantics Way", and others. Remember to visit "The Chalice".

Milton Dawes/11