

**Changing Reputations:
Demarginalizing General Semantics**
Bruce I. Kodish, Ph.D.

We humans appear to be in a mess. We've gotten stuck in a phase of arrested development. This 'stuckness' seems very much a problem of 'philosophy'—a problem of prevailing fundamentalist doctrines, i.e., habits of thinking-feeling which keep individuals and humanity as a whole from moving into something that might more resemble 'adulthood'. (Kodish 2003, 11)

Starting with *Manhood of Humanity* in 1921, Alfred Korzybski developed general semantics (GS), a system for helping humans move closer to a possible adulthood of humanity. Initially his work gained widespread review and respect. Presently, his books remain in print and continue to sell well worldwide, as do other general-semantics publications. Work in the field continues and general semantics is applied in a number of different areas of study.

And yet, all too often formulations originating from Korzybski's work now remain unacknowledged as such or have gotten watered down in various ways. This seems due not only to ignorance of their source or through misinterpretations of it, but also from fear of being associated with either Korzybski or GS.

For instance, the editor of an anthology of GS-related articles informed a close associate of mine that one of the potential contributors, a behavioral scientist, had withdrawn his article. The man had 'second thoughts' about coming out openly in print with his GS-inspired formulations. This, he worried, might damage his academic career.

In the field of philosophy, Korzybski and his work have suffered serious neglect. Philosopher Lou Marinoff, a founding father of the philosophical practice movement seems exceptional in recognizing the value of GS for his work. In his book, *Plato Not Prozac*, Marinoff courageously listed Korzybski between Kierkegaard and Lao Tsu in a "Hit Parade of Philosophers," an "overview of the sixty-odd philosophers and classic works...whose ideals I find useful in philosophical counseling" (1999, 282).

Among scientists interested in investigating the structural assumptions of their disciplines, there seems to have been some awareness of GS (see the writings of David Bohm, for example), although they are just as likely to consider it passé and somewhat suspect or even a pseudo-scientific cult.

As I show in my book *Dare to Inquire*, GS can contribute enormously to helping people deal with problems from the personal to the international level. Given its significance, why has it not become better known among those whose fields it affects, and more importantly, how did it become marginalized by some philosophers, scientists, and skeptics. And *why, in the year 2003, do some people fear being associated with it?* Given the world situation, I consider it important to clear away the underlying misinterpretations, etc., which might account for this.

So let's explore some of the possible reasons for the marginalization of GS. After describing the unique location of general semantics among disciplines, I briefly examine the critique of GS by

Martin Gardner, one of its main skeptical opponents. In my view, a close look at Gardner's writings on GS will explain some of the current confusion about and neglect of GS by the educated public and various academic communities. A look at the work of Korzybski's students S. I. Hayakawa and Anatol Rapoport also provides some insight into misinterpretations of GS. My presentation concludes with an exhortation for bridging the gaps between 'the GS world' and academics, scientists, philosophers, skeptics and T. C. Mits and T.C. Wits (The Celebrated Man and Woman in the street).

Locating General Semantics

GS qualifies as an unusual, hard-to-classify, interdisciplinary field, tough to 'pin down'. "Is it a science or a philosophy?" This has probably served as part of its appeal as well as contributing to some of the difficulties that some people have had understanding it. GS explicitly straddles the border area between empirical science and philosophy and between theory and application in a way that may appear off-center from people's usual either/or categorization of fields. As a result, this rich interdisciplinary discipline provides new vistas for research in human evaluative processes. (See *Dare to Inquire* for examples.)

GS, as Korzybski claimed, has elements which qualify it as an "empirical science" within the larger field of the behavioral/social sciences. "There is nothing as practical as a good theory," psychologist Kurt Lewin said (qtd. in Marrow). Korzybski's main accomplishment in scientific research, like Einstein's, was theoretical: his integrative theory of human evaluation. This theory was based on the best science of his time in a variety of fields. Formulated as a foundation for a new interdisciplinary "science of man" (Korzybski 1994 [1933], 17), it provides methodological guidelines for all of the sciences and substantive suggestions for ongoing research on neuro-semantic, neuro-linguistic factors in human behavior. This interdisciplinary project, which "leads to a far-reaching revision of all existing disciplines" (Ibid, xcvi), surely seems ambitious and, no doubt, inspired hostility among certain guardians of aristotelian orthodoxy and disciplinary insularity.

In addition to its obvious behavioral/social science aspects, GS focuses on examining the assumptions of many fields in a way that many people would call "philosophical." However, Korzybski did not find that term entirely congenial—chiefly because it had become associated with the academic activities of many 'philosophers' of his day who had gotten caught up in verbalistic speculations detached from scientific knowledge and practical application. (Despite some progress, this still seems very much the case today.) Remembering that what we now call "science" was once called "natural philosophy," may allow us to more easily understand *Korzybski's unitary, naturalistic vision which saw 'philosophy' and 'science' as inseparable aspects of general inquiry.*

Korzybski especially respected the work of "a few 'philosophers' [who] really do important work. This applies to the so-called 'critical philosophy' and to the *theory of knowledge or epistemology*" (Korzybski 1994 [1933], 78). Indeed, he viewed his own inquiry into "the structure of human knowledge" (Ibid, 73) as "an *up-to-date epistemology*" (Ibid, 554). Korzybski pioneered in applying scientific studies in physics, biology, neuroscience, psychology, etc., to epistemological questions (how we know what we *think* we know), and conversely, in applying this up-to-date, scientific epistemology to questions in physics, biology, etc.—*and to daily life.*

As this discussion indicates, the humanistic, interdisciplinary discipline of GS may best be seen as neither ‘science’ nor ‘philosophy’ but rather as both/and—a *philosophy-science*. Korzybski’s broad naturalistic view of the connectedness of ‘philosophy’ with ‘science’ may seem radical to some—especially his audacity in daring to actually apply it. However, theoretically at least, this view has become more common and acceptable in recent years.

A great deal of wisdom was present in the culture when Korzybski formulated this theory of applied epistemology. Nonetheless, much of this wisdom did not get applied. To an appalling extent—despite the work of Korzybski and many others—it still doesn’t. To a significant degree, this seems due to the neglect of neuro-semantic, neuro-linguistic, and epistemological factors in their own formulating by perhaps a majority of scientists, philosophers, politicians, economists, businesspeople, etc. Korzybski’s legacy, his particular contribution to world culture, consists of his extensional system of evaluation and evaluational methods—general semantics—which *does* apply this wisdom.

With this *emphasis on application*, the philosophy-science of GS exemplifies the practical philosophy of humanism. It connects GS to various other philosophy-like disciplines, like Zen. GS can be seen as an early precursor of the present philosophical practice/counseling movement, which has emphasized the everyday usefulness of rational inquiry for individuals, groups and organizations. Lou Marinoff has noted that “It is only in the twentieth century that the term ‘philosopher’ came pervasively to mean someone inherently incapable of anything practical” (2002, 273).

GS has preeminent value as a *philosophical practice* in the best and most comprehensive ‘meaning’ of that much abused term ‘philosophy’ (which includes ‘science’)—*the love of wisdom*. How, then, did the reputations of Korzybski and the discipline he founded become associated with pseudo-science?

The King of Korzybski-Bashers?

At least a partial answer may be found in the March 2002 edition of *Scientific American* where Michael Shermer, a well-known science writer, devoted his monthly *Skeptic* column to the work of Martin Gardner. Gardner launched the modern skeptic movement in 1952 with his book, *In the Name of Science*, renamed *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*, in 1957. Shermer lists Korzybski among the now forgotten and irrelevant ‘pseudoscientists’ that Gardner wrote about in his early book. The book is “still in print,” Shermer wrote, and “arguably the skeptic classic of the past half a century.”

Arguably, indeed! In this book, Gardner served as a ‘hitman’, devoting most of Chapter 23—“General Semantics, Etc.”—to a critique which lambasted Korzybski as a ‘crank’ and labeled GS a ‘cult’. Sniping at Korzybski and GS remained a persistent, albeit minor, theme throughout Gardner’s career. Something about Korzybski’s work got under Gardner’s skin, and he has intermittently scratched away at the irritant for more than forty years, with inaccuracy and invective.

For me, Gardner's writings on GS and Korzybski remain a low point of a particular style of scientific skepticism, which I dub "the horselaugh school." Gardner, hailed as one of "the ten outstanding skeptics of the twentieth century," took as his motto a witty saying from H. L. Mencken, "One horselaugh is worth ten-thousand syllogisms" ("The Ten Outstanding Skeptics...", 24). In his work on (or, perhaps more aptly stated, his 'working over') of Korzybski and GS, Gardner exposed the limitations of this motto. Although there remains a place for satire and humor in skeptical writing, derision does not work well as a general strategy for legitimate criticism. The chapter on Korzybski which Shermer briefly referred to, and Gardner's subsequent picking at GS, actually constitute an 'Achilles heel' for Gardner and a continuing source of potential embarrassment for the skeptical movement.

I consider this an occasion for genuine sadness. For Gardner has also done significant legitimate work as a skeptic and as a writer/critic about science and mathematics. Serious students of GS share in a general skeptical outlook. Gardner's vituperations—as well as those of other eminent anti-korzybskians who should have known better, like Sydney Hook, W. V. Quine, Ernest Nagel, and Max Black—drove a wedge between "skeptics" and their korzybskian allies.

It also put other debunking efforts by Gardner into question, at least in the eyes of some people—as well it should have. If Gardner could so misrepresent GS, one wonders what else he might have distorted as well during his long career. How much trust can one give to a 'fringe watcher'—which Gardner has called himself—who does not seem to be able to adequately distinguish between a flat-earth enthusiast and a Korzybski?

Quite the reverse from what Shermer suggested in his column, a careful analysis of Gardner's writings about GS indicates the folly of honoring Gardner's 'founding command' to guard the 'borderland' of science by applying a criteria of crankdom in the way he did in relation to Korzybski. A scientific skeptic has the duty—if he or she truly follows an attitude of inquiry—to carefully examine controversial viewpoints on their own merits. Overzealous 'fringe watchers' defining and guarding the borderlands of science may make some very serious miscalculations—particularly when they become overly dependent upon, and uncritically apply, criteria for detecting 'cranks' and 'pseudoscientists', based on presumed character traits.

The main problem with depending on the criteria of crankdom and related labels to determine the value of a set of formulations was noted by philosopher Morris R. Cohen: "If the premises are sufficient, they are so no matter by whom stated." (qtd. In Chase, 60). Gardner's criteria not only do not rule out the scientific value of a set of formulations. Quite the contrary, they may encourage the premature rejection of potentially useful viewpoints.

More significantly, as in Gardner's apparently shameless attack on Korzybski, Gardner's criteria can easily become excuses for ad hominem attacks. Self-anointed fringe-watchers can very easily slip into an attitude in which they try to confirm their beliefs in someone else's 'crankdom'. Unless one applies the criteria very carefully with an attitude based on fairness, they can provide an excuse for an inquisition—a distortion of 'facts' about a person and his/her views which can block the way of inquiry.

How unfortunate that Gardner couldn't sufficiently delay his evaluation long enough to have considered an alternative outlook more fairly. Instead, this description by Lichtenberg seems to fit Gardner's published sniping at GS and Korzybski from 1952 to 1996, "He can't hold his ink;

and when he feels a desire to befoul someone, he usually befouls himself most” (Lichtenberg, 85).

Gardner’s misrepresentations and their not insignificant influence constitute, I think, a significant source of the transmission of error about GS (continued by Shermer) in the scientific, philosophical, academic communities.

With a Little Help From Korzybski’s ‘Friends’

Gardner appreciated much more the work of Korzybski’s student S. I. Hayakawa. With his close colleague Anatol Rapoport, Hayakawa promoted a watered-down version of GS, called “semantics,” which Gardner found more palatable (Gardner 1957 (1952), 287). Hayakawa’s work led many people to a rather circumscribed and narrow view of korzybskian general semantics.

However, despite his simplifications and oversimplifications, Hayakawa had much positive effect from a general-semanticist’s point of view. For years, Hayakawa, an English professor, edited *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* with a consistently high standard of scholarship, readability, and interest. His excellent books with their focus on language led at least some people to explore Korzybski’s broader realm. And he consistently gave credit to Korzybski without, as far as I know, denigrating his teacher. (See my article “Getting Off Hayakawa’s Ladder” for a detailed assessment of Hayakawa’s presentation of GS in his book, *Language in Thought and Action*.)

On the other hand, despite his training as a mathematical physicist, Rapoport reports that he found no value in Korzybski’s work without the help of his mentor, English professor Hayakawa. (2000, 3) Although he served Hayakawa as an assistant editor of *ETC.* for about 20 years, Rapoport, who made a name for himself in systems theory and mathematical approaches to the social sciences, had an especially uneasy relationship with Korzybski and his work. Rapoport waxed hot and cold about GS throughout his long career and at times seemed similar to Gardner in the level of inaccurate portrayal, misinterpretation and nasty invective against Korzybski, both in print and to colleagues.

Korzybski-bashers like Gardner couldn’t have done much better than what ‘semanticist friends’ like Rapoport did at times. Gardner and Rapoport (and perhaps even Hayakawa) did not see the richness and complexity that others have found in Korzybski’s work.

Demarginalizing GS

Other factors besides critics like Gardner and ‘friends’ like Rapoport may be responsible for some of the relative failure of the scientific and philosophical academic communities to embrace GS.

Some of the difficulties may have come from Korzybski himself. He had a blunt honesty which showed no deference to presumed authorities—even Nobel Prize winners expounding on their work.

Allan Walker Read has also noted Korzybski's "charisma that attracted many friends, but those same qualities of personality may have repelled others. Korzybski sometimes showed a freedom of behavior that did not bow to mere social convention" (Read 1984, 16).

I have little doubt that the aristotelian, essentialist 'worms within the apples' of much scientific, humanist and skeptical formulating had an important part to play in Gardner's and others' basic opposition to Korzybski's pioneering, non-aristotelian, non-essentialist system. Their overwhelmingly aristotelian orientation, with their concomitant ignoring of neuro-semantic, neuro-linguistic factors in their own formulating, fueled their opposition to GS.

Korzybski's applied, interdisciplinary, and individual-focused approach no doubt left some academics, among others, very unhappy. This applied character of GS, however, seems to have appealed to scientists and humanists like William Alanson White, Oliver Reiser, Allen Walker Read, Hervey Cleckley, Cassius Keyser, Edward Kasner, Gaston Bachelard, C. B. Bridges, Arthur F. Bentley, and American Humanist Association laureates Mary Morain and Lloyd Morain, among many others. These courageous individuals risked disapproval in order to extend a non-aristotelian outlook.

One would expect that Korzybski's naturalistic, applied approach to human knowledge would find opposition from fundamentalist religionists, who would also oppose humanism and scientific skepticism. It now seems appropriate at least to move beyond its unreasonable dismissal by so-called 'skeptics'—functioning as fundamentalists themselves—who have created a climate of ridicule and fear that has prevented humanists and scientists from fairly examining GS.

"Misread, unread, and superficially treated" has been the lot of Benjamin Lee Whorf's work, writes Whorf scholar Penny Lee (1996, 14). Korzybski's related work has shared a similar lot. Perhaps we have now reached a time when humanists, philosophers, scientists and skeptics, as well as laypeople—who are seeking to create a broadened understanding of 'science' and its relation to humanity—will now reexamine previously accepted accounts of GS.

The transmission of errors about Korzybski, GS and the non-aristotelian orientation, based on hostile and/or oversimplifying opponents and followers, will no longer do. Detractors 'trash' general semantics—often while unknowingly reviving or reinventing some piece of it—a colossal waste of time-binding 'energies'.

There is important work to be done in taking the korzybskian extensional discipline as a whole—and applying it to problems, integrating it with related theories and approaches, developing it, and reassessing it in the light of new understandings and data in science, philosophy, etc. Korzybski's claim to have formulated the *first* non-aristotelian system—providing a foundation for a unified, applied human science—deserves to be taken seriously *as a foundation*, certainly not as a stopping point, for the further development of human knowledge and well-being. As a first step in this process, skeptics, scientists, philosophers, etc., will need to understand this foundation—in other words, to practice and internalize the extensional discipline of GS.

The performances of some ‘skeptics’ and some ‘followers’—unable to delay their initial evaluations about GS—show how ‘science’ and ‘skepticism’ can become labels not for inquiry, but rather for ‘emotional’ outbursts, the avoidance of ‘ideas’, and the ‘freezing’ of convictions. This kind of performance by ‘critical thinkers’ demonstrates the need for many avowed skeptics to further develop the kind of evaluational skills that GS training can help provide.

What results might we find from using Korzybski’s ground-breaking methodology for evaluating and for delaying premature evaluations? How can we apply GS to extend human potentialities in science, religion, ethics/social policy, etc., in these beginning, critical years of a new millennium? As I wrote in *Dare to Inquire*:

...an attitude of inquiry (perhaps seen most clearly in the fields traditionally labeled “science”) can be extended to apply to broader areas of personal and social life. This has already been done for centuries by isolated individuals and small groups. General Semantics, emerging out of a scientific, humanistic background, is one such effort to make the attitude of inquiry explicit and teachable and thus to fulfill the ideal of humanism by making it workable. (Kodish 2003, 327-323)

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