

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALFRED KORZYBSKI

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I AM Smithⁿ, a reporter of strange events. I recently had an interview with Alfred Korzybski. Don't ask me where and how. I reserve these ESP details for my friends who are doing research in psychic phenomena. For you who are familiar with *Science and Sanity*, the best way to verify the plausibility of my interview is to look in the book and check if my notes jibe with what AK wrote years ago.¹

I found Korzybski relaxed and unconcerned, as I presume is normal in the other world. I felt we could dispense with the usual greetings. You see, health, weather, and other mundane topics didn't seem appropriate. So, we quickly came to the point. Here is the transcript of my notes as I could decipher them after this very unusual experience.

SMITH: Alfred, the general semanticists of the world are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Science and Sanity* this year, 1958, in Mexico City. May I have your semantic reaction to this event?

AK: If you want my reaction to the celebration, come once it has taken place. At the moment, I am just curious to see what will happen. A quarter of a century has gone by in

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¹ The numbers in parentheses that you will find here and there in my report refer to pages in Alfred Korzybski [1879-1950], *Science and Sanity* (Lancaster, Pa., 1933; 4th ed. Lakeville, Conn., 1958), where I discovered some corroboration.

your world since I published *S&S*. What have you done with it? When Irving Lee reported to me on his arrival here, very little had happened.

SMITH: What do you mean when you say that very little had happened? Irving surely told you of the spectacular progress of the general semantics movement. He wrote such a well-documented article about it in *ETC.* of Winter 1952.²

AK: Oh, that! Yes, he did. But that does not count much in these parts, if you want to know. Here, we look for something else.

SMITH: What else?

AK: For constructive criticism. The other day, we were exchanging views here, some of us retired mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers, and Whitehead came out with his familiar statement: "To be refuted in every century after you have written is the acme of triumph." We all agreed.

SMITH: Well, if this is what you are looking for, you surely had it, didn't you. Remember Max Black?³ Among recent critics, there is a chap named Martin Gardner, who wrote *In The Name of Science* in 1952. His book was published in a revised and enlarged edition by Dover recently under the title *Fads and Fallacies*. He surely gave you the full treatment, if this is what you want to bring up your score in these parts. Gardner puts you in the rogues' gallery of pseudo-scientists and founders of what he calls "strange, amusing and alarming cults."

AK: That's good! as far as it goes. But, listen, my dear Smith. These well-meaning people actually *reject* my work, they do not *criticize* it in the sense that is accepted here. When I quoted Whitehead a moment ago, you nodded your head as if you recognized the statement. Did you ever listen to his lectures or read his books?

SMITH: I did both.

AK: Well, don't you remember what he said about con-

² Irving J. Lee [1909-1955], "General Semantics 1952," *ETC.*, IX (1952), 103-108.

³ *Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1949).

structive criticism? He wrote: "Criticism is the motive power for the advance of thought." It's the motor on the car, not the brakes! I invited that kind of criticism more than once. Do you know in advance if there will be any criticism of that kind at your Mexico meeting?

SMITH: That I can't say, Alfred. I thought that you immortals could peep into the future better than we mortals can.

AK: The future is what you make it. Here, we are observers, not doers. Our time-binding activities are over.

SMITH: Alfred, you know from experience what it means to co-exist with a system that clashes with yours. The aristotelian system was overpowering in your days, was it not?

AK: It was, indeed. But there was already afloat in the "universe of discourse" a great deal of genuine knowledge and wisdom. That knowledge was not generally applied, and, to a large extent, could not be applied as long as we failed to build a simple system based on the complete elimination of pathological factors (iii).

SMITH: You felt that there were pathological factors at work?

AK: Yes, there were. The main one was the prevalent confusion of orders of abstraction. Once this mechanism was discovered, I was led to a *theory of sanity*. Imperfect as it probably was, it opened a wide field of possibilities which I myself, at that stage, was unable to appreciate (75).

SMITH: How did you account for that confusion of orders of abstraction? Who was to blame? Was it Aristotle himself? Many people say you had a grudge against him.

AK: Who can say that I had a grudge against him when I put him first on the list of the great thinkers to whom I dedicated my work?

SMITH: Well, I am glad to hear you say that, Alfred. I realize that the list is alphabetical, and this puts Whitehead way down near the end. It remains that you called your system a non-aristotelian system. That singles out Aristotle as the main bugbear, does it not?

AK: Aristotle as a person and aristotelianism as a system

are different. A system, in the sense that I mean it, represents a complex whole of co-ordinated doctrines resulting in methodological rules and principles of procedures which affect the orientation by which you act and live (iii). The system by which the white race lives, suffers, "prosperes," starves, and dies is not in a strict sense an aristotelian system. Aristotle had far too much of the sense of actualities for that (iv).

SSMITH: If you don't blame Aristotle, whom do you blame? His followers?

AK: There are followers and followers. Study carefully the older disciplines. You will be amazed to learn to what extent the recorded "thinkers" rebelled against the limitations and insufficiencies of Aristotle's system, which, naturally, became antiquated a short time after its formulation (408).

SMITH: I spoke of followers, and you start talking of "thinkers," with a gesture that I interpret as meaning quotes.

AK: No system is perfect. "Thinkers" know that. My own system is far from being so. Such a work as this has, of necessity, to be altered with the years. If you are ready to alter it, you are a thinker; if you ascribe too much generality to the work of the system-builder, forget its limitations and, perhaps, the one-sidedness which underlies it, you run the danger of being a "follower." This may happen with all systems, including my own (47, 143).

SMITH: So, the "thinkers" who saw the limitations of Aristotle's system and the "followers" who ascribed too much generality to it co-existed for centuries, didn't they? Why didn't the thinkers win over the followers before you came on the scene?

AK: Nobody wins as an individual in this time-binding class of life. If some individuals happen to be "geniuses" who upset popularly held theories, they are under the scrutiny of other scientists who, no matter how biased or slow, remain judges of their products. It is of little importance that some "wise statements" be made by someone somewhere, if they have no influence on the great masses of the race. Science is

a cultural product, you know. *In principle*, it is more reliable and important, particularly in its negative aspects, than the individual abstractions of individuals. It may be considered as the *generalized* results of semantic reactions acceptable to the majority of informed and not heavily pathological individuals (479, 408, 26).

SMITH: This brings me back to your theory of sanity. Do you claim that the majority of individual scientists who preceded you were pathological and did not know it?

AK: Exactly. The pathology was in the system. You remember, don't you, my analogy of the emery powder in the lubricant of human affairs? The emery powder that retarded technical development in the science of man and in the management of man's behavior was what I called the aristotelian system. This system had been formulated by those who, for nearly two thousand years since Aristotle, have controlled our knowledge and methods of orientation, and who, for purposes of their own, selected what today appears as the worst from Aristotle and the worst from Plato and, *with their own additions*, imposed the composite system upon us.

In this they were greatly aided by the structure of language and psychological habits, which, from the primitive down to this very day, have affected all of us consciously or unconsciously.

Their aristotelianism, with its further elaborations and its delusional identifications, elementalism, etc., represents a coordinated *system* which molded our semantic reactions, languages, and institutions. It influenced every phase of our lives. Isolated doctrines, no matter how wise, became powerless in the face of such a system, or, more correctly, a system of interlocked systems. Separate statements, no matter how important by themselves, remained inoperative (ii, iv, 408).

SMITH: How are you and Aristotle getting along now that you co-exist in the same world?

AK: We are getting along fine. The other day, we were talking together, a few of us thinkers, and Whitehead came out with one of his earthly statements: "Aristotle discovered

all the half-truths which were necessary to the creation of science." We all understood it as a very high compliment to Aristotle.

SMITH: Do you ever discuss how true or false is your system as compared to Aristotle's?

AK: We do not discuss systems as systems here. We all know that, at different epochs, different postulates seemed structurally closer to experience and appeared more expedient. Such an attitude, if you humans could cultivate it, would not retard so greatly the appearance of new systems which will supersede my own (405).

SMITH: How does one go about building a new system? Please tell me of your own experience.

AK: The building of a non-aristotelian system in 1933 was an extremely laborious enterprise, to say the least, and, in all probability, beyond the power of any single man to complete (43).

SMITH: Did you actually think you had effectively absorbed all the scientific information available up to 1933?

AK: Of course not! I spoke of science (1933), not to give the impression that, from a technical point of view, I was familiar with the results of all branches of science at that date, but to indicate that no advance in *structure* and *method* up to 1933 had been disregarded. My main interest was structural and semantic, so I only had to know enough of the techniques of different sciences to be able to understand sufficiently their *structure* and *method*. Revolutionary structural and methodological advances are few in the history of mankind; hence it was possible, though not easy, to follow them up in 1933. In a second edition, it did not seem necessary to revise my text because the methodological data had not changed, although a great many scientific discoveries had been made (143).

SMITH: You sounded very dogmatic at times, Alfred. You must admit it.

AK: In writing I found it extremely difficult and impracticable always to state explicitly the limitations of a statement. Each statement was given *definitely*, but with the semantic

limitation that was based on the information available in 1933. Some of this information might have been incorrect or wrongly interpreted. The statements cover just as much as further investigations will allow them to cover—and no more. Errors will come to light and be corrected as the years proceed (10, 142).

SMITH: How did you disentangle the *structure* and the *methods* of science from the *facts* of science?

AK: I had no general theory to guide me in my researches. So, I had to select some device. In such a novel attempt over-subtlety was impossible and even not desirable. I felt it was preferable, as well as expedient, to formulate the general outline and thereby draw more men into the work for details (408).

SMITH: And this general outline, as you call it, how did you come to it?

AK: I did not proceed by strict induction, if you want to know. I could have surveyed those achievements of mankind which have proved to be most beneficial and of most lasting value, studied their structure and tried to train myself and my semantic reactions in repeating the psycho-logical processes and methods which have made them. I thought such a method was wasteful.

I found it simpler to have general non-elementalistic theories of my own, which I proposed to call general semantics and psycho-logics, replacing the older elementalistic "logic" and "psychology," and study these short, structurally correct, ready-made formulations to train my semantic reactions rather than study the actual performance of scientists and mathematicians, and formulate generalizations from it (95).

SMITH: What a task! What a bold undertaking!

AK: At the start, I did not realize the difficulties of the task and the magnitude of the undertaking. The last revision alone of the manuscript required more than a year. I am too well aware to what extent the presentation falls short of my expectations and how much better it could have been written by someone more gifted. You ought not to be surprised if

such a pioneering enquiry proves to need many corrections and elaborations in the future (539, 171).

SMITH: Didn't you get many of your insights from the performances of mathematicians?

AK: Without the study of mathematics, I probably would have not been able to discover the ultimately extremely simple yet workable principles outlined in my book (311).

SMITH: So, you claim that mathematicians are the sanest of the sane.

AK: No. Quite often this is not true. I do not want you to conclude that, because in mathematics we have followed the survival order through extension, the mathematicians must, by necessity, be the sanest of the sane. But, only in technical mathematics can people behave semantically like "gentlemen." They analyse and agree; no quarrels are possible (182, 365).

SMITH: Must we all become mathematicians to behave like gentlemen and survive?

AK: No. What is needed is the recognition of mathematics as a language similar in structure to the world in which we live. The intelligent layman, although he needs to know about mathematics, probably never will need more technical mathematics than is given in the high schools and supplemented by the fundamental notions of the differential calculus. In fact, the minute you treat all languages, including mathematics, from the more general aspect of structure, you obtain all the psycho-logical benefits of modern science by absorbing the non-aristotelian system and habits. This will result in completely novel standards of evaluation and distinctly modern and adult semantic reactions (247, 274)

SMITH: I think that most of us have absorbed your non-aristotelian system. It sounds quite sensible to me, now that I understand and know the content of your book (130).

AK: To know and understand is not enough. You must *train* yourself in the *use* of the *new* terms, such as *semantic reactions*, *structure*, *non-elementalism*, *multiordinality*, and the like. Then only can you expect the maximum semantic results (130).

SMITH: Didn't you use some old terms yourself?

AK: In writing I had to use some of them. In practice, it is difficult, at first, to avoid the use of old terms. When you want to digest fully a new and important work based on new structural terms and acquire corresponding semantic reactions, the best way to train yourself in the use of the new terms is by gradually dropping the old terms. If you *have* to use the old terms, then train yourselves to be aware of their insufficiency and of their fallacious structural implications. I used the old terms with quotation marks (96, 108).

SMITH: Are the new terms always structurally satisfactory?

AK: Probably not, but in science experiments check predictions, and so new structural issues become clarified. The new terms seem to correspond closer to facts. Test them (108).

SMITH: So much for the use of old and new terms. You also speak of acquiring non-aristotelian habits. Would you say a bit more about them?

AK: Well, practice has shown me, definitely, that to acquire the new reactions (the "habits" as they can be called) of *consciousness of abstracting* is difficult and requires "time" and effort to accomplish. The silence on objective levels sounds very innocent. Yet it is very difficult to acquire, as it involves a complete checking of all semantic disturbances, identifications, confusion of orders of abstractions, habitual "emotions," "preconceived ideas," etc. This is practically impossible without the use of the objective Structural Differential to which you can point your finger and be silent (410).

SMITH: I thought you were mainly concerned with "intellectual" habits, Alfred. Is not abstracting an intellectual activity?

AK: This phrase "consciousness of abstracting" is made of old elementalistic terms, Smith. This is a case where you should beware of the insufficiency and the fallacious implications of such old terms. The main disturbances in daily life, as well as in "mental" illness are found in the affective field. Have you ever made the experiment I suggest to enquire into

the meanings of words? Of asking someone to define a term, then to define the defining words, then to define the words which he used to define the defining words, etc.? Eventually the subject speaks in circles, and sooner or later signs of *affective disturbances* appear. Here you have reached the bottom and the foundation of all non-elementalistic meanings—the meanings of *undefined terms*—which we “know” somehow, but cannot tell. In fact, we have reached the un-speakable level, right down in the “affective” field (421, 31).

SMITH: I never saw it that way, I must admit. It is a simple experiment indeed, but very revealing when you observe carefully what happens and study all its implications.

AK: Now you see why I call my work *empirical*. Years of patient and sometimes painful labor often result merely in a very few and brief, but important sentences. The most cheering part is, perhaps, the practical results which my investigations have accomplished, combined with the simplicity of means employed (44, 143).

SMITH: From experiments to theories, and from theories to applications, is that the order you suggest?

AK: Yes. I called it the engineering attitude. Applications were experiments of a kind. In them the non-aristotelian system (the theory) actually worked, and so there is some hope that it is correct. Further investigations will, of course, add to, or modify, the details, but this is true of all theories (73).

SMITH: At last, we have a comprehensive system. All we have to do is to work out the details on the fringe.

AK: I warn you against undue generalizations, as they may be unjustified. It is still impossible to foresee all the possible ramifications of the work I have initiated. If my work has accomplished nothing more than to suggest the possibilities to produce a science of man, I am satisfied. I have done my share as a time-binder. Others, I hope, will succeed where I may have failed (10, 171, 17).

SMITH: Who are those “others” you are alluding to?

AK: You may be one of them. I hope there are many

among my "followers" who will gather in Mexico City this coming summer. Give them my best wishes.

THESE were parting words, evidently. They must have triggered off some mysterious electronic control in my space-time ship, for it quickly swung around and brought me back to the gravitational field of our aristotelian culture.

On my desk was a copy of *S&S*, opened at page 561, where I read: "If the non-aristotelian system has accomplished nothing more than to draw the attention of mankind to some disregarded problem; if it has done nothing more than point the way, not to panaceas, but to suggestions toward an expedient, constructive and unified scientific program whereby future disasters may be avoided or lessened—the writer will be satisfied."

In the light of the conversation I just had with AK in the world that time does not measure, this passage became pregnant with meaning.