

DID KORZYBSKI OVERDO HIS MODESTY?

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I'VE come to feel that Korzybski overdid his modesty — *not* in insisting on the limited nature of his work — limited to the premises that I consider most important — but *in saying the discipline would soon be superseded*. "Supersede" seems a badly chosen word.

So wrote the most outstanding disciple-collaborator of the master, in *ETC.* of June 1972.³

I beg to disagree. Instead of chastising — oh! metaphorically — our defunct leader for his bad choice of words, I'd rather look around and see if what he said is not a plain truism. He is not the only philosopher-scientist who sees disciplines replacing disciplines. Whitehead had this to say about a science and its initiator: "A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost."⁴

The common tendency is to enshrine founders and initiators rather than to keep innovating as they themselves did in their days. The enshrinement of Karl Marx did little good to the communist movement. Some well-meaning people are enshrining Teilhard de Chardin, but are not helping the cultural evolution he was hoping for.

We are dealing here with a general phenomenon, and the Korzybski-general-semantics case is only one among many. We may use it as an illustration, however, since it is close to our experience.

Let us start with the common term *follower*. What does it imply?

Well, *follower* implies a *leader*, does it not? When you follow someone, he is there ahead of you, blazing the trail to parts unknown. If he stops for some reason or other, you may stay with him where he stands. In that case, you have stopped, too. You may just look around from where you chose to stop, of course, or you may leave the spot where your leader is standing and venture on explorations of your own.

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Korzybski came to a dead stop in 1950. Whatever can be said or written about him, whatever can be published of the material he left in his files will never be anything but a record of his semantic reactions up to the time he died. Nobody can now follow him in a forward direction for the simple reason that he is not advancing any more.

The world has kept going since 1950. Scientists have kept working, and our cultural environment has kept changing very rapidly. In fact, Korzybski's original contribution dates back to 1933, when he published his *Science and Sanity*. In spite of his tremendous capacity to absorb the findings and the theories of his time, he was unaware of developments that became significant later on.

If I defend myself from being a follower of Korzybski, I want to make it clear that I do not ignore him either. I feel that, as years go by, more and more people will recognize the importance of his writings and of his teachings. In my own case, it happens that his *Science and Sanity* was the book that revealed to me the dangers of the assumptions hidden behind our speech forms. Had I been brighter or better informed, I might have come out of the mist earlier. The fact is that I didn't.

Moreover, I found in Korzybski's works an attempt at a *system*, a structural method of thinking-evaluating that has served me as a matrix in which I can fit a great many scattered notions that I have gleaned here and there. I can now put them together in a pattern that makes sense.

There is a danger in accepting a theoretical system that answers the questions you have in mind at a certain stage of your development. It gives you such a sense of security and comfort that you may hesitate to pull it apart when you begin to feel that it cramps you. It is so easy to become a doctrinaire against all doctrines but the one you have accepted! This I am trying not to become. If I express my convictions with enthusiasm here and there, please don't take them as more than earnest invitations to test hypotheses in the crucible of your own experience.

On my way through life, I met a great many persons, (Korzybski would say, "a great many Smiths"). Some were Smiths-scientists, Smiths-thinkers, and Smiths-philosophers. A great many of them were Smiths-businessmen. Some wrote, some taught, some were mostly *doers*, and the records of their achievements are part of the dynamic structure of our technical and economic world. I see our

generation as a caravan of pioneers on a trek where we discover the country as we advance. Some have stopped as did Brigham Young when he said: "This is the place." Some keep going until they drop dead on the road, leaving it to their followers to carry on in the same spirit as animated them.

Alfred Korzybski is one of the outstanding Smiths I had the privilege to travel with. I acknowledge with gratitude what I owe him, but I don't worship at his tomb. I would rather push forward in the directions he suggested, or branch off in some adventure of my own. I am a semantician who joined the Korzybskian group, but I remain a free explorer, ready to run the chance of making my own mistakes.

The central theme of Korzybski is what he calls *consciousness of abstracting*, or self-training in the awareness that *what we say is not what is going on*. In chapter VIII of *Knowing and the Known*, Arthur F. Bentley gave him due credit for this fundamental distinction.¹

Fusion of 'symbol' and 'entity' is what [Bertrand] Russell demands, and confusion is what he gets. With an exhibit as prominent as this in the world, it is no wonder that Korzybski has felt it necessary to devote so much of his writings to the insistent declaration that the word is *not* the thing. His continued insistence upon this point will remain a useful public service until, at length, a thorough theory of the organization of behavioral word and cosmic fact has been constructed [p. 220].

This alone, it seems to me, is more than sufficient to give Korzybski an honorable place among the thinkers of our time.

Does it mean that we have to limit ourselves to the implications of the analogies that he used to convey his message? In other words, is it wise for us to take his well-known premise, "the map is not the territory," as a full, complete, never-to-be-changed description of the phenomenon he is dealing with?

I don't think so. If we did, we would be sliding back into the rut out of which he was trying to pull us. His own words, as he put them together in his premise, are *not* the territory; they do not represent *all* the territory. The analogy of the map and the territory is fraught with dangers for people addicted to flat thinking, as many of us are. I don't know to what extent Korzybski himself was free from those implications; I presume he was. I have met many people whose reverence for the master is so pervasive that they take every one of his words as a revelation of *what is*. The mental picture of a map confirms them in their flat thinking.

If we rather stress the negative relation expressed by the phrase *is not*, by the stated absence of identity and common measure between the two "thingumbobs," without attaching too much importance to the mental images evoked by the word *map* on one side and the word *territory* on the other side, I think we stir in ourselves a less inadequate semantic reaction.

While he was warning us of the pitfalls of our subject-predicate language, Korzybski kept using nouns more often than is good for such readers as I was. For many years his Structural Differential was a trap to me because of the substantives *event*, *object*, and *label* that he used to describe its three main divisions. Yes, yes, I know what he wrote about the event:⁴

A mad dance of 'electrons', which is different every instant, which never repeats itself, which is known to consist of extremely complex dynamic processes of very fine structure, acted upon by, and reacting upon the rest of the universe, inextricably connected with everything else [p. 387].

Nevertheless, there was for me a subtle feeling of "thingness" in my reaction to that word *event*, and I got rid of it by using a different expression. The expression (often abbreviated to the initials of the four words, WIGO) is: *what is going on*. This new synthetic term is devoid of any former implications or connotations.

What is going on becomes a standard question that we can ask ourselves whenever we want to study a situation without prejudice of any former formulation, conscious or unconscious. It does not do away with all possible assumptions, of course, but it helps.

For instance, if you ask yourself: "What is the problem?" you assume that there is a problem out there facing you. The problem may not be there; it may be within you. It may be due to your inability to map the territory. It may be, as William James put it years ago, that "our vocabulary is wholly inadequate to name the differences that exist." When we speak of a *problem*, we have already abstracted a cluster of elements from what is going on, we have classified this cluster as a *problem*, and we are probably searching already for its solution. We are at the "object" level, not at the "event" level.

Whenever we talk of anything, as Korzybski does in his classical example of the pencil, we are already dealing directly with an "object" and only indirectly with an "event." The less definite question, *What is going on?* keeps you uncommitted, as it were, to any surreptitiously abstracted object.

The next term, *object*, had also for me an aura of "thingness" that created all sorts of difficulties in my thinking and my teaching. It was only later that I "discovered" how William James, the psychologist-philosopher of three quarters of a century ago, was aware of the dangers of objectifying our reactions into the objects we talk about.²

The *object* of our thought is really its entire content of deliverance, neither more nor less. It is a vicious use of speech to take out a substantive kernel from its content and call it its object . . . The object of my thought [when I say 'Columbus discovered America'] is strictly speaking neither Columbus, nor America, nor its discovery. It is nothing short of the entire sentence, 'Columbus-discovered-America-in-1492.' And if we wish to speak of it substantively, we must make a substantive of it by writing it out thus with hyphens between all its words. Nothing but this can possibly name its delicate idiosyncrasy [p. 275].

I tried to convey that "delicate idiosyncrasy" by replacing the term *object* by a statement where a verb dominates. I took the circle of the Structural Differential to symbolize "how I react to what is going on," or "how I relate myself to what is going on." Of the two statements, I used the first one, because it fitted better with my general scheme of using semantic reaction as the basic unit of discourse. When I react to what is going on, I am not only perceiving an object, thinking about it, classifying it, seeing it in relations with other objects. My reaction also involves feeling, evaluating; it goes with subtle movements of my musculature, with electro-chemical phenomena. It is an organismic reaction, influenced by my total past, oriented by my anticipation of the future, and giving shape to my immediate future. Experience is remolding us every moment, and our mental reaction to every given thing is really a result of our experience of our whole world up to that date.

The third term, *labels*, underwent a similar transformation. We seldom speak with separate labels, anyway; so, the first order of verbal abstraction gains in being viewed in a more comprehensive manner. I describe this first order of verbal abstraction by the statement, "How I talk about how I react to what is going on." This makes it clear that speaking in high-order terms — generalizing as it is commonly called — is talking about talking. It may be several steps distant from an actual reaction to what is going on. The abstraction ladder can be visualized as follows:

How I talk about talk,
about talk, about talk, etc.

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•
•

How I talk about
how I talk about
how I react to WIGO

How I talk about
how I react to WIGO

How I react to WIGO

What is going on

If you are acquainted with *Science and Sanity* or with some of the derivative books that expound the Korzybskian system, you saw from the preceding discussion how much I owe to the Polish-American scholar and how much I depart from his views. If you are not familiar with the Korzybskian techniques and special vocabulary, let me tell you that the Structural Differential, which I took the liberty to revise in part, is accepted as one of the most distinctive contributions of this discipline.

I remember hearing Will Durant say in one of his lectures years ago: "It is easy for us to see better and farther than Aristotle, since we stand on his shoulders." Similarly, it is easy for me to revise some of Korzybski's formulations because he created them for us to develop further. He warned his readers when he wrote:⁴

One of the dangers into which the reader is liable to fall is to ascribe too much generality to this work, to forget the limitations and, perhaps, the one-sidedness which underlies it [p. 143].

Elsewhere he said:

We should not discuss how 'true' or 'false' the A[ristotelian] system appears, but we should simply say that, at a different epoch, other postulates seem structurally closer to our experience and appear more expedient. Such an attitude would not retard so greatly the appearance of new systems which will supersede the present non-A[ristotelian] system [p. 405].

In making these statements, Korzybski was not too humble; he was ranging himself with all the creative scientists and thinkers to whom we owe what we are today. Each one of them had to start where his predecessors left off; each one had to stop somewhere; none of them saw the human enterprise as ended in his own time. It would be false humility to shy away from our own duty to carry on from where Korzybski left off.