

ALFRED KORZYBSKI

COLLECTED WRITINGS: 1920-1950

ROBERT P. PULA* ***An Appreciation And A Review***

ITEM 24 of the 56 "public" writings of Korzybski included in this major publication is his own "review" of *Science and Sanity*. As he writes, "I am grateful to the Editor of *The Humanist* not only for inviting me to do the unusual — review my own book...but also to discuss the type of work we are doing at the Institute of General Semantics."

In a much more modest way, my own position faintly echoes Korzybski's; I helped Charlotte Read to prepare this compendium (1) for publication, a process begun forty years ago by Korzybski's colleague, M. Kendig. Charlotte Schuchardt Read's work in seeing this book to print is an example of champion time-binding and an act of deep friendship. We can all use such friends. So, allowing for the differences, I am grateful to the editor of *Et cetera* for asking me to write this review.

What a body of work this book represents! Fifty-six papers, chapters, transcripts, reviews — everything Korzybski published during his lifetime, other than his major book-length studies (*Manhood of Humanity* and *Science and Sanity*) and the fourteen lectures that make up the Spring 1937 Seminar given at Olivet College. In addition, there are seven "Supple-

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mentaries" constituting nineteen items which graphically chronicle some of Korzybski's, the Institute's and the International Society for General Semantics' activities from 1933 until Korzybski's death in 1950.

There is also an Introduction by Charlotte Schuchardt Read, M. Kendig's "Forenote," and Allen Walker Read's most valuable "Formative Influences on Korzybski's General Semantics," first published in the *General Semantics Bulletin*, No. 47, in 1980.

Surely a review of a book which contains 78 varied items (which range from scholarly formalism to quite, may I say, Polish verbal saber thrusts, with some extra-Korzybskian neuro-linguistic dog-paddling in between) and which, including a thorough "Index of Personal Names," numbers 915 pages — as I say, such a review could not hope to even highlight all of the riches that await the student and/or historian of general semantics. A mere listing of the contents takes nine pages. So I will select a few items and aspects of these *Collected Writings* that may draw the reader to the work itself; to, that is, months and years of neuro-epistemological adventure.

Among the pre-*Science and Sanity* writings of Korzybski, long-time favorites of mine have been the two *Time-Binding* papers of 1924 and 1926, published while Korzybski was still, in print, listing his places of residence as "Warsaw, Poland and New York City," a habit he maintained until the early '30's. For me, these two pages have long represented in "microscriptum" the first clear, vigorous, and rigorous adumbrations of *Science and Sanity* (1933). Has there ever been a more startling, challenging, *inviting* first sentence of a scientific paper than this one that begins Korzybski's 1924 effort?: "All human knowledge is conditioned and limited, at present, by the properties of light and human symbolism." And, immediately thereafter, signalling the *program* of what became "general semantics": "The solution of all human problems depends upon inquiries into these two conditions and limitations." Two other potent claims from this paper: "...all human life is a permanent dance between different orders of abstractions." and "...all human knowledge is postulational in structure."

Often, when I want to remind myself of (re-learn) the core formulations of general semantics, I put *Science And Sanity* aside and turn to the *Time-Binding Papers*. It's rather like reading one's own notes from early seminars; the semi-pleasant shock of recognizing that most of the clever things you've formulated since, come right out of Korzybski. Ah, the demands of epistemodesty!

Having these (combined) 97 pages of text at hand, embedded within the context of their companions, seems to me a great advantage to readers at every level of general semantics sophistication — from neophyte to neuro-pundit.

Another "Summary" paper, which became "Supplement III" of *Science And Sanity* (the work the supplement "summarizes" in advance), is "A non-Aristotelian System and Its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics." Here, again, Korzybski states succinctly, with his usual verbal *élan*, the central formulations of his system. Let me merely quote here, by way of enticement, the last paragraph of this brilliant formulational safari, a quote which at once reminds me of Korzybski's humor and depth; what we might call his humor-in-depth:

It is amusing to discover, in the twentieth century, that the quarrels between two lovers, two mathematicians, two nations, two economic systems, etc., usually assumed insoluble in a "finite period," should exhibit one mechanism — the semantic mechanism of identification — the *discovery of which* [*italics mine: RPP*] makes universal agreement possible, in mathematics and in life.

Throughout the collection the reader will find interspersed, chronologically, examples of Korzybski's correspondence with some of his main collaborators (e.g., Cassius Jackson Keyser of Columbia University) scientific correspondents (e.g. the important discussion of over/under defined terms sent to Alston S. Householder of the University of Chicago), and workers in the trenches, represented primarily in the "Supplementaries." Readers who are particularly interested in "How did he do it?" and "Just what was the problem with Hayakawa?" kinds of questions may find these items (some

published for the first time) of special interest; gossip, you know. Let's be open about it. Check pp. 783-837, wherein you can find Korzybski's complaints about, among other things, "...misinformations and distortions about my work." As a serious issue, the reader may find that study of these sometimes acrimonious passages will sharpen her/his neuro-semantic evaluations *re* general semantics. For example, just how does one get off of (or reverse directions on) Hayakawa's Abstraction Ladder?

Another treasure-aspect of the collection is the many "Forwards," "Reviews," "comments" and "Letters" Korzybski published in ETC., the sole journal in general semantics until Kendig launched the *General Semantics Bulletin* in 1950, the year of Korzybski's death. These are especially valuable because they show the founder of general semantics applying general semantics to other people's formulating. Two essays the reader may find especially intriguing (they're all crucial, you understand) are the August 1945 comment titled "Release of Atomic Energy" and, still responded to confusedly by many, "Why Non-Aristotelian."

The first, pp. 537-538, contains these pronouncements:

That knowledge [which led to the release of atomic energy] was due to the uniquely human capacities of transmitting "knowledge" from generation to generation, not present in any other form of life. I called that human capacity *Time-binding*, in my *Manhood of Humanity* (1921). All science goes that way, and empirical results speak for themselves, destructively or constructively. [N.B.: Time-binding *results* are not automatically "positive"; we time-binders still have to evaluate the results of our (and others') time-binding. Sorry. No escape: RPP.]

The study of the most important mysteries of atomic energy depended on empirical data from physics, mathematical physics, astronomy, celestial mechanics, etc. but also on investigations in biology, neurology, medicine, psychiatry, etc.



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IGS Seminar, Chicago, 1939. (1) S. I. Hayakawa. (2) Charlotte Schuchardt (Read). (5) Alvin Weinberg? (6) William S. Burroughs. (10) M. Mead (Secretary to M. Kendig). (13) Pearl Johncheck. (16) M. Kendig. (17) Margedant Peters (Hayakawa). (20) Spencer Brown? (21) Willard V. Quine. (22) Alfred Korzybski. (23) Wendell Johnson. (25) Hartwell Scarborough. (27) Ralph DeBit. (28) Irving Lee. (36) Elwood Murray. (Names provided by Charlotte Schuchardt Read)

Dealing with human beings, who are also mysterious and confusing, it is found in general semantics that the physico-mathematical method can also be applied in solving the complex individual and group human evaluations.

From the 1947 "Why Non-Aristotelian," pp. 571-572 I select these passages to whet your appetite:

Professor Thomas D. Eliot's letter summarizes such serious misunderstandings of my work that I take the liberty to answer it at some length...

The following passage strikes me as vital for teachers of "general semantics" (or, more likely, "semantics") who feel compelled to schmooze their "students" into consciousness of abstracting (a prime goal of general semantics training):

...the only thing to do with such people is to jar out of them the old dogmas in which they were trained in the nursery, not to appease them. In my work, if I were to play up to popular beliefs, and actions based on them, I would fail. I cannot write just to please the orthodoxy of uninformed and misinformed people who do not read, yet "know better."

On re-reading this, I felt reassured that my sometimes challenging manner at seminars is appropriate. At Alverno College in the summer of 1991, I was talking about the human nervous system as an abstracting (selecting-transducing-integrating-projecting-languaging) system and emphasizing that, while we may "transcend" prior abstractings (e.g., learn something new), we cannot (as far as we know, 1991) "transcend" abstracting as such. In other words, we can't leap out of ourselves as organisms-as-wholes-cum-nervous-systems-in-environments. A participant, much given to "metaphysics" speculation referred to reports of "out-of-body experiences" and asked, "Do you believe in out-of-body experiences?" I, in my most complex mode, replied, "No." But then, I don't believe in general semantics, either. I use "it" as a system, a method of evaluation.

In his 1947 letter to ETC. (the Journal's name became ETC./*Et cetera* in 1977), Korzybski says these things:

Aristotle was indeed more "extensional" than Plato...the fact that Aristotle did such exceptional work in his time only made the work of his successors more difficult.

Plato objectified "ideas" as if they were something concrete. In other words, he identified verbal with non-verbal levelsBut Plato did not build a workable system as Aristotle did, which we can inflict on each generation, training them in the primitive magic of words.

In *Science And Sanity* I deal deliberately and explicitly with my admiration for Aristotle,...The power of a system is that it is teachable, and the three "non"-systems [non-euclidean, non-newtonian, and non-aristotelian] are even more teachable, as they include the older systems as special cases....We must discriminate between a theory and a system. There are many theories by many men, but very few great systems....When it comes to the revision of a system...we must use a historically and epistemologically correct generic term, such as "non-aristotelian,"...The educational value of such terms is tremendous, as it indicates to future generations the planned generalizing of the older restricted systems to make them more adequate and inclusive for present-day needs.

In other words, non-aristotelian is *not* anti-aristotelian — just broader, representing higher order (and later) orders of abstracting, which is, therefore, more structurally appropriate to the job at hand — until, as Korzybski (so far) mistakenly predicted, a new, a meta-non-aristotelian system will be required.

There is one final item I would like to call your attention to before concluding this non-short review of a quite long book. It's Item II of the Supplementaries, "Letter to Co-Workers," pp. 731-735. This is one of the few items that Charlotte Read and I needed to edit. It is headed by a telegraphic note from M. Kendig, dated March 1968: "Copy of carbon of a letter typed by Alfred Korzybski that I recently found in box of pa-

pers received from him (probably 1934–1935), while I was director, Barstow School, Kansas City, Missouri (1934–38)."

The letter is of particular interest as it gives some indication of Korzybski's teaching method and attitude, four years before the founding of the Institute of General Semantics, after which his approach became increasingly accommodating though no less rigorous. It is addressed to "actual co-workers" and reads very much like "marching orders," chock full of "allnesses," ("only," "never," "entirely," etc.) that yet seem appropriate to the shock (the "jar" referred to above) that Korzybski was convinced was needed to free people of their old dogmas.

The difficulties of the world are *neurological* (improper "canalization"); the *only* remedy is to establish new canalization, "similar in structure"...

..."inhibitions"; (this term should never be used without quotation marks, and in fact, it is a disgrace to use it in neurology).

Through training (drill) in the *ordering* of the semantic reactions through "*silence on the objective levels*" [i.e., the levels at which we construct the "joint-phenomenon" of the given process level and our own abstracting, not yet mediated by language: RPP]...we introduce *directly a delay* in reactions and so *directly stimulate* the cortex (orient ourselves *humanly*)...

...*Entirely eliminate* elementalistic terminology; if impossible, use quotes....Study hard the technique of passing from static to dynamic and the reverse and get the technique of indexing your words inwardly or outwardly....

And, skipping ahead,

I most seriously suggest for the benefit of your students and yourself, for *the time being*, blindly obey my advices; in other words, TRY THEM.

That's a good place to stop. During and after this remarkable excursion through Korzybskian formulations in process of being formulated, perhaps pausing to read Charlotte Read's "Biographical Sketch" (pp. 739-748) when you need a "break," *Try them.*

REFERENCE

1. *Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings 1920-1950* Collected and Arranged by M. Kendig. Englewood, NJ: International Non-Aristotelian Library/Institute of General Semantics, 1990, pp. XXV + 915.