

ETC.:

A REVIEW OF GENERAL SEMANTICS



CHANGING SOURCES OF SECURITY*

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MAN'S PECULIAR equipment of intellect and of imagination gives great scope for his exploration and for his development. He is endowed, through his unique brain and nervous system, with potentialities in some fields far beyond those of any other animal. On the other hand, this peculiar equipment adds many complications in his relationships with his environment. Even long ago, when the development of man's potentialities had not reached its present extent, and when his travelling was limited, his imagination reached out far beyond the area he could actually cover in reality. Even in his immediate environment he found many dangers—lightning, thunder, storms, floods, threats made by other animals and by other members of the human race—all threats to his security. The better to protect himself, man

has always tried very hard to understand the sources of these threats and to develop methods by which he might protect himself from them. It would appear that man has always found intolerable a situation where he could not understand the source or conditions of a potential threat and has in all such circumstances felt himself impelled to invent theories of the causation of these troubles. Following the acceptance of any such theory, of course it became possible to develop fairly rational protective mechanisms. Even when the theories bore little or no relationship to reality and even when the protective mechanisms had absolutely no effect at all, they could still be of very considerable value to frightened man. At least he could feel that he was doing something to protect himself.

There was, of course, plenty of room for man's speculation. He was surrounded by unknowns in both space and time. Nothing was known until quite recently about the early history of the race or of the other animals. Even the extent, size, and shape of our own little

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world was a matter for dogmata and faith until quite recent years. These were matters of loyalty to very old ideas. Any questioning of old faiths was of course commonly regarded as heretical, and was in fact a very dangerous procedure. Torture and death were taken for granted as proper treatment for people who questioned the superior knowledge of the holy people of past generations and of their present representatives. These procedures, while really expressions of the bottled-up aggression of the torturers, were rationalized as necessary to drive possessing devils or evil spirits out of the offending person. Also, it is a very important fact that our own wavering faiths can gain some strength by overt persecution of those daring persons who express some of our own hidden and shameful doubts. There is an old and badly mistaken saying, 'We damn the sins we have no mind to.' It should read, 'We damn the sins towards which we are ourselves unconsciously most inclined.' But this also is a matter of only recent knowledge.

It is clear that man's active imagination greatly extended his insecurities and consequently his pressure to find what security he could in a world in which he had to live but about which he knew very little. Always the younger and more active minds of the rising generations tended to discard the theories and practices of the old people and the ancestors. It is interesting in this connection that one of the oldest pieces of cuneiform writing ever translated represents a complaint that the younger generation are forsaking the old gods, no longer reverence their elders, and are generally going to the dogs—some of them are still, fortunately, doing it! Unfortunately, however, long ago someone learned that anything which was imposed on

children as final and certain while they were still very small would usually continue all their lives to dominate their thinking and even their behavior. Furthermore, it would usually maintain this domination entirely independently of its truth or validity. In other words, anything taught to children as absolutely true becomes a conscience value and generally a lifetime conviction, though this depends somewhat on reinforcement by outside pressures. Intelligence cannot usually get at conscience convictions at all, particularly if they are protected by threats of punishment in a future life.

Here was a very easy way for each generation to ensure that the next would accept its theories and practices almost unchanged. Teach children anything you have been taught yourself, with appropriate threats of punishment for non-compliance. A necessary feature of this method is that the threatened punishments cannot be open to investigation; they must be postponed to that unknown time beyond death.

Because of the worldwide use of this method by the elders of all times and places, many temporary and local expedients have assumed worldwide importance. For instance, because pigs were infested with worms in Palestine some three thousand years ago and were dangerous to eat in the absence of sufficient fuel and knowledge for adequate cooking, millions of people are still unable to eat pork. This is only one of many possible examples of the expedencies of one time and place becoming, by means of this method of incorporation into consciences, the moral principles of far distant times and places—and consequently sacred and not to be questioned even though they no longer have any real validity or relevance. The escape from this type of domination is very difficult, and the

attempt often leads to neurosis or un-social behavior, but with some external help it can be done and in that fact lies the hope of social progress.

It has been relatively easy for many of us, once superficially weaned from the necessity to conform with the thinking and points of view of our parents or more remote ancestors, to attack, from that vantage point, what we think are their mistakes and the certainties of our own childhood. There is even a considerable amount of emotional satisfaction in doing just that. It represents a defiance of parental authority and a demonstration of our independence and 'grown-up-ness,' whether we are really grown-up or not. In fact, the less we are really 'grown-up' the greater the at least surface satisfaction we gain from such demonstrations. This is all very well, and a healthy phenomenon as far as it goes, but the certainties of our parents, and of theirs, were developed in response to certain needs which we still recognize as of great importance. It might prove to be a serious mistake to remove the ability to use the parentally imposed patterns if the needs are still there and if no better answers are immediately available. It would seem necessary to develop new patterns more in harmony with the present stage of understanding of the universe and with what is now known of man's development in the past. It might be possible to make certain improvements so that less damage would be done to the integrity of the individual personality and the ability of man to live with man than is being done by those patterns which have been in vogue for so long. The need would seem to be for revised patterns of adjustment to reality, which will in fact produce a greater degree of real security. It may be worthwhile to look more closely at these old patterns.

For long ages in the history of man, the prevention and treatment of all his misfortunes, including his illnesses—storms, lightning, raids by other tribes, famines, floods, and so on—in fact, everything which, with his limited knowledge, he could not understand on a cause-and-effect basis—were all commonly regarded as matters of relationships, either personal or tribal, with the local spirits or gods. Formulae were developed in every tribe for the appeasement of these supernatural beings and even for the enlistment of their active interest and protection. The interpreters of the nature and demands of these spirits and gods were, of course, the wisest men of the tribe, and these relatively wise men commonly interpreted the will of their gods in the light of what they themselves believed was best for the tribe, and for their own prestige and security. As experience was passed on to succeeding generations, the local concepts of what was good and what was not good for the tribe, or for the wise men, changed—generally gradually, but sometimes suddenly when a particularly wise, strong, or ruthless interpreter of the 'will of the gods' was in control. Such a one, for instance, was Moses, who introduced extensive and revolutionary public health and social legislation on the authority of the tribal god. Some of those measures are still valid; others are long obsolete.

As a tribe became more and more civilized, by which I mean more self-controlled in its internal and external relationships in the common interests of the group, the less civilized aspects of its tribal gods of course increasingly became unacceptable. A moody, capricious, jealous, vengeful, easily angered, and inconsistent god, who yet demanded unques-

tioning worship and obedience, showed personality qualities which merited strong disapproval in developing social systems. But in many cases for long periods gods whose ascribed personalities were clearly inferior to or less civilized than those of their individual worshippers were still tolerated and worshipped. This situation of course sooner or later would demand adjustment. Whenever, from the point of view of a developing civilization, the moral attitudes demanded of the people became superior to those ascribed to their gods, extensive reinterpretations of the nature of the deities became necessary. With developing civilization and the enhanced value placed on self-restraint, protectiveness, kindness, and ability to live peacefully together, these increasingly admired attributes had to be ascribed to the gods who were at the time worshipped by the people. As more and more protectiveness and loving-kindness became ascribed to gods, differentiations between the sources of man's joys and sorrows had to be developed. The malignancies which were still evidenced in all man's misfortunes and diseases could not easily be ascribed to a loving, kindly, and protective god. The vengefulness, unpredictability, anger, and so on, that still seemed to be the cause of so many misfortunes could not go on being ascribed to the newly-interpreted gods, at least in their normal emotional states. Either the gods had to be thought of as righteously angry or other agencies had to be invented, such as evil spirits or devils, the enemies of the righteous gods.

So, through further long ages, many if not all man's illnesses and woes were generally ascribed to punishment by righteously angry gods or to man's possession by, or the machinations of, evil spirits or devils. Prevention and treatment, of course, were by propitiation of

angry gods or by warding off the spirits or devils by frightening them or by enlisting the aid of the gods. In many times and places minor gods or spirits have been given specialist protective roles against illness, or accident, or loss, or many other types of misfortune. Gradually, however, over long periods, one by one, other causes of misfortune and of disease were recognized, though these commonly continued to be regarded as merely the instruments or channels through which the righteously angered gods or the malignant devils attacked their human victims. Devotional exercises, payments in cash or in kind to the official interpreters of the gods, or magic spells were still the treatment of choice in most cases, though for the illnesses, employment of surgical and medicinal aids gradually became increasingly popular. Even yet, with many of the laws of cause and effect now available to man, one finds remnants of these old beliefs. For instance, fairly recently, in this century, the belief has been proclaimed that venereal diseases are inflicted on wicked people by an angry god, and therefore methods of preventing infection by the venereal diseases should not be used.

III

Naturally every discovery of the real cause or causes of misfortune or illness has been met by an outcry of 'heretic' or 'iconoclast' or 'reactionary' or 'communist' or whatever was in bad odor with the orthodoxy of the time and place. Naturally, every such advancement of knowledge has narrowed the field of magic and revelation and freedom to interpret the 'will of the gods,' in the special interest of the particular orthodoxy concerned. Calling names, a typical juvenile defense pattern, has been a favorite method of delaying the search for truth

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for a long time; in fact, reverence for words has been used and is still being used extensively to protect vested interests and to prevent rational developments in many fields.

Consider, for example, the emotional connotations of such words as 'we are told.' This statement has been used as authority very often, without any explanation of who told us or how much he knew about the subject. Think of the amount of ignorant certainty, superstition, or intolerance bound up in such words as 'white supremacy,' 'caste,' 'chosen people,' 'herrenvolk,' 'the flag,' 'Deutschland über alles,' 'America First,' 'The Empire,' 'My Country, Right or Wrong,' 'The White Man's Burden,' 'God's Country,' 'A Super-Race,' 'Revelation,' 'Sacred,' 'God's in His Heaven and All's Right with the World,' 'Mother knows best,' 'Taboo,' 'Miscegenation'—the list could be extended indefinitely.

All these expressions, and of course very many others, have some deep emotional meanings for large groups of people, meanings founded on misinformation, superstition, intolerance, uncritical acceptance of authoritarian teaching, or other unreliable foundations. All these words and very many others represent whole areas of human experience which in the minds of very many people are not open to any honest thinking or unprejudiced consideration. These are examples of some of the kinds of certainty which have had at one time or another or in one place or another a certain degree of validity. Some of them hold in certain places still a certain amount of validity, but many of these words which I have quoted no longer have any validity whatever in the minds of mature people. In very many cases, they and other concepts like them have simply become protective mechanisms for vested

interests. If we could imagine ourselves coming afresh into this world as it is now, we can hardly imagine that we would invent many of these expressions or the concepts which lie behind them for active use in the world as it is today. Concepts such as these represent a heritage from our ancestors which may in fact be a very great burden on this and succeeding generations. It is undoubtedly true that some of these concepts and their like are even now doing much to prevent the degree of mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation which the world must have in the future. Many of these expressions play important parts in the defense of the principle that the attitudes which happen to be the patterns of parents are forever right and inviolable and assist many people to take for granted that it is sound to impose these same patterns without question on defenseless children, a method which should be given very close and critical scrutiny. Some of these concepts represent attitudes which are in fact medieval, or at least so far out of touch with reality as it is now understood that the validity which they used to enjoy no longer exists at all. In spite of this undoubted fact, there are very many people throughout the world who are still living by rules imposed by their parents or grandparents or still more remote ancestors. Wendell Johnson, in his book *People in Quarantaries* says, 'A civilization cannot exist half-scientific and half-medieval.' He also says, 'We cannot safely traverse new territory with old and obsolete maps.' If people generally were emotionally free to look at reality the way it is, it would hardly be possible to quarrel with these statements. The difficulty would seem to have been, not only now but in many times and places in the past, that the apparent truth of the moment has

been taught to children and then passed on to succeeding generations as absolute or final truth. It is of course sound to acquaint children with the new knowledge gained in each generation as well as with the knowledge gained by our parents or grandparents and so on, as far back as may be possible. On the other hand, all such knowledge given to children should be amenable to revision as more extensive and more reliable information is acquired from time to time. We can hardly presume at this stage of our development to claim any absolute knowledge or final truth. On the other hand, we do know a very great deal more about everything than any of our ancestors ever did.

The world is changing and will continue to change so quickly that it is impossible for us to give clear-cut and definite plans for living to our children. It is impossible for us to present them with maps of reality with any degree of belief that these maps will continue to have validity after the passage of twenty or thirty years. What children need from their parents is not maps of the world as it used to be, nor of the beliefs of their parents or their ancestors, but the great gift of freedom to think, the ability to look clearly at reality by themselves and to make up their own minds how best to arrange their own relationships with the reality they see.

IV

As long as man continues to believe that his destiny is in the hands of understandable forces completely beyond his control, so long will he continue to be irresponsible in his relation to his environment and to his fellow men. In the future, man's security must come not from his relationship with spirits or gods

or devils, not from his ability to placate or to modify the behavior of these creatures of his own imagination by ritual or by magic, but rather must he learn to take charge of his own destiny and to develop his security from his true knowledge of himself, of man's needs, and his potentialities, and of how man may learn to live cooperatively, safely, and pleasantly with man. To do this effectively man cannot depend on any of the ideas of his ancestors. His ancestors were almost without exception remarkably unsuccessful in this field. Even the present generation has been quite unsuccessful in this aspect of living.

There are no mysteries about how tolerance and understanding and ability to live and work cooperatively can be obtained. These abilities are simple results of particular ways of developing. Tolerance does not come out of intolerance. Intolerance and hate and impatience and frustration breed their kind. Many books have been written already, pointing out quite clearly how it is possible to bring up children who will in fact be able to live pleasantly and comfortably with other people without having to fight each other almost continuously as we and all our ancestors have always done. The difficulty is that the methods of development of children pointed out in such sensible books as these are incompatible with the things that many of us had imposed on us in childhood as permanent, inviolable, and even sacred truths. Because these sensible books do not agree with some of the things we learned at our mother's knee, our consciences of course tell us that these books are bad and destructive. It is time we learned never to trust our consciences on such matters. Our consciences can only repeat back to us whatever we believed when we were children. There are many questions

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we should face and think about in our maturity which were not among our experiences as children or, if they were, were often entirely misunderstood.

We must learn that our intellect is of much higher development than is our faith or our belief in our parents or whatever we learned when we were children. It is our intellect that distinguishes us from the lower animals, not our faith. Our intellect should always be given seniority.

There is real hope that the time is

coming closer—is already here for some groups of people—when their own thinking and tentative conclusions, and those of their wise contemporaries, may be recognized as of greater validity than the conclusions of past generations. Only by this pathway can man really take charge of his own destiny, relate his behavior patterns to reality, and eventually find security in a new concept of man's relation to man. Only so can he even begin to chart his future as a race, or hope to ensure its survival.

The old idea that words possess magical powers is false; but its falsity is the distortion of a very important truth. Words *do* have a magical effect—but not in the way that the magicians supposed, and not on the objects they were trying to influence. Words are magical in the way they affect the minds of those who use them. 'A mere matter of words,' we say contemptuously, forgetting that words have power to mould men's thinking, to canalize their feeling, to direct their willing and acting. Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us. The magician is a man who observes that words have an almost miraculous effect on human behaviour and who thinks that they must therefore be able to exercise an equal power over inanimate nature. This tendency to objectify psychological states and to project them, thus objectified, into the external world is deeply rooted in the human mind. Men have made this mistake in the past; men are making it now; and the results are invariably deplorable. We owe to it not only the tragic fooleries of black magic, but also (and this is even more disastrous) most of the crimes and lunacies committed in the name of religion, in the name of patriotism, in the name of political and economic ideologies.

ALDOUS HUXLEY, *Words and their Meanings*
(Los Angeles: Zeitlin, 1940).