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LIVING EXTENSIONALLY

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THE AIM of living extensionally lies at the heart of general semantics. Living extensionally involves remembering that your abstractions (representations, perceptions, conceptions, symbols, words, maps, etc.) *are not* what they represent. As long as you remember this, you can remain free of entrapment by your abstractions. As long as you remember that your abstractions *do not represent ‘all’* of what exists to represent — and that *you can always make new*, possibly more useful representations — you can free yourself from the tyranny of your representations.

This involves much more than superficial, intellectual agreement. Novelist Robert Heinlein invented the word “grok” to refer to the deep, internalized understanding of something or someone. Getting extensional involves grokking important aspects of a non-aristotelian, non-essentialist worldview. If you think you have grokked (fully understood and can easily carry out) what the last paragraph implies, you might be fooling yourself. For whatever we say, most

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humans (probably also you) appear to do exactly the opposite, much of the time.

Controlling Phantom Worlds

Most likely, you often take your perceptions for ‘realities.’ Probably, at least some of the time, you take words for the things of experience, the menu for the meal. You likely, at least sometimes, confuse inferences with descriptions. The habit of identifying our experience of the world with the world, and our words with our experience, leads humans into an ever-expanding maze of unresolvable conflicts and difficulties.

This habit of identification involves confusing levels of abstraction, treating similarity as identity (sameness in all aspects), and acting as if the differences between things that we consider the ‘same’ don’t exist. In this way, by identifying we make our higher-order abstractions more important than what they represent. Our words and symbols get in our eyes and we reverse the “natural order of abstracting.”

This ‘natural’ order of abstracting lays out the relative values (for living) of the different levels represented in Korzybski’s structural differential model. So the ‘natural’ order places the process world first in importance for survival; non-verbal experience second; verbal description third; inference fourth; etc. Since confusing and reversing this order, i.e., identifying, seems in some ways more ‘natural’ to humans (more people reverse the order than not), I like to call it, as did Stuart Mayer, “the appropriate order of abstracting” or what Robert Pula referred to as “the preferred order of abstracting.” (1)

Korzybski emphasized that when humans identify (lose awareness/consciousness that they abstract), they *copy animals* in their nervous reactions. This may be true in a certain sense, since animals have limited levels of abstracting and presumably don’t have the ability to understand *that* they abstract.

On the other hand, animals do not create elaborate symbolic forms with which to confuse themselves. Lacking the obscuring veil of symbolism, they cannot help but live within and as a part of the flowing, process world. So animal consciousness functions naturally in an extensional manner with the lower order of non-verbal experience primary. In that sense, we would all do well to learn to copy animals more. I have learned a great deal about constructive silence from my cats. (Of course, cats don’t have *to choose* to stop a constant stream of verbal chatter in their heads in order to bring their consciousness to the silent, un-speakable level of experience. Since they don’t have speech to begin with, they’re already there. They have no choice. We do.)

Humans, as a symbolic class of life, need to develop controls over the phantom worlds that they create with their symbol systems. Identification may exist as an inevitable first stage of symbolic development in the infancy and childhood of both individuals and societies. Identification now gets unnecessarily and undesirably reinforced and carried into chronological adulthood by powerful social forces and institutional factors — not the least of which includes the unexamined and unrevised assumptions built into the structure of our common aristotelian language and ‘logic.’

As far as I know, there is no way of knowing anything unmediated by your and others’ organism-nervous systems — *no way*. You cannot know ‘reality’ apart from the means you have for knowing it. Living extensionally requires not identifying your perceptions, descriptions, judgments, values and beliefs with “reality,” “the thing in itself,” “the naked it.” It also requires not identifying *yourself* with your perceptions, your descriptions, your judgments, values or beliefs.

I am not advocating solipsism here, the belief that only I exist and that you and the world don’t. (Would ultra-solipsism mean that even I don’t exist?) For those who find solipsism appealing, I offer this limerick:

There was a faith-healer of Deal
Who said, “Although pain isn’t real,
If I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I fancy I feel.”

(Author Unknown)

If you are alive, *you cannot not abstract*. If you accept with William James that “anything is real of which we find ourselves obliged to take account in any way,” (2) then there exist better and worse ways to take account — to abstract. What extensional tools for better abstracting does GS offer?

Extensional Techniques

GS formulators have derived from GS theory, and incorporated from other approaches, many ways to move toward an extensional orientation. These methods involve a continuum of non-verbal and verbal techniques. In this article, I review some of the extensional techniques that emphasize the non-verbal side of evaluating and behaving in the world (although talking, I must emphasize, is definitely involved). See Chapter 14 of *Dare to Inquire* for a discussion of other more-verbal techniques or extensional devices (which definitely have non-verbal aspects as well).

Understanding Perception

Some aspects of the nature of perception — how we construct what becomes our ‘reality’ — seem of particular concern for functioning extensionally. We each perceive differently, influenced by our individual and species characteristics. Relevant individual differences can be such factors as height and acuity of senses, as well as basic assumptions and premises. When understood and accepted, this notion promotes a “*to-me-ness*” attitude that can improve relationships — reduce arguments, encourage openness to the views of others, etc. It can also contribute to a celebration of uniqueness and appropriate (though surely *not unconditional*) self-and-other acceptance.

In groups, I often use experiments which demonstrate how we each see differently, such as how we each see different colors in a spinning disc, which, when the spinning stops, appears black and white. Even with one person, this can be used to demonstrate the construction of multiple colors from a seemingly black and white figure. (3) Even more simply, note the way you create a “disc” when viewing a fan in motion, which, when still, appears as individual blades. In an analogous way, you create ‘objects’ from the sub-microscopic plenum of events.

Another approach is to study so-called “optical illusions.” These demonstrate how our ‘perception,’ as a form of non-verbal abstracting, does not involve passively reflecting what our ‘senses’ receive. Rather, our perception consists of our active attempts to construct a world out of cues we receive. These attempts are based on past abstracting, which includes assumptions, inferences and expectations, both verbal and non-verbal. (4)

In a sense, we make ‘bets’ about what is going on. These perceptual ‘bets,’ hypotheses or inferences, are made unconsciously in fractions of seconds and give us some predictability in dealing with the incomplete information that our senses provide. An awareness of this process can help you reduce absolutistic reliance on what you perceive; hence awareness can help you to reduce error and argument.



Figure 1

Draw this! Go to a carpentry shop and try to make one!

Look at Figure 1 above. If you start from the side with the three rounded ends, past experience probably leads you to bet, or guess, that they are extending out from three prongs. The figure is drawn so that from the other end you probably bet, or guess, that two extensions with squared edges extend from either side of a rectangular base. These two ‘perceptual bets’ are not compatible if you unconsciously assume that someone could build a ‘real’ figure using the drawing as a blueprint. Somewhere in the middle, you somehow realize that the spaces between the prongs also serve as sides of the squared off extensions. The result — a visual ‘paradox’ which comes from entertaining two rival hypotheses. The ‘paradox’ does not exist in the drawing. It exists/happens in you.

Un-Speakable Awareness

Each of us live and experience life on the silent (non-verbal), un-speakable level of existence, although it seems that we are endlessly talking to ourselves. (For the moment I’m putting aside the ‘fact’ that our words also exist in some sense on the silent level.) This self-talk, if intensional, can prevent us from functioning well. If we talk to ourselves extensionally, we can help ourselves to get in better touch with what is happening within and around us.

Eventually, however, a large part of living extensionally involves learning to turn down and turn off the volume of the words inside your head. So an important part of GS training involves practice in looking, listening, tasting, ‘feeling’, etc., at the silent, un-speakable level.

Most of us are concerned with building better ways of evaluating, with improving the quality of our lives. We often recognize that this quality involves some sense of a vast ‘something’ that we cannot put into words but that somehow connects us with our environments.

By learning how to contemplate non-verbally — creating inner silence — you can prepare yourself to behave extensionally. As Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a lot by watching.” Freeing yourself as much as possible from your beliefs about what you ‘should’ see, you can become a better observer as you test your higher-order abstractions.

In GS, we seek to encourage contemplation and so greater creativity, aesthetic appreciation, sense of well-being, communication, etc. We also seek to connect such contemplation with our higher-order verbal evaluating, in recognition of the inevitable connections between silent-level and verbal-level functioning. We seek, as expressed by Charlotte Schuchardt Read, “To *feel* ourselves as time-binders, considering ‘time-binding’ not just intellectually but as participating in the human experience of millenniums ...” (5)

Many disciplines and philosophies touch on this. For example, Zen practices and other forms of meditation, hypnosis, “healing” practices, etc., can

point people toward experiencing such connections. I have found the discipline of sensory awareness particularly useful in developing skill in “silence on the un-speakable level.”

As part of silent level practice, Korzybski also emphasized the organism-as-a-whole interconnectedness of ‘psyche’ and ‘soma,’ ‘mind’ and ‘body’ — not separate — which function within a particular environment. This focus on the organic basis of evaluating and the rhythmicity of our organic processes led Korzybski to devise his own approach, which he called “neuro-semantic relaxation,” a method of learning self-relaxation to eliminate excessive muscular effort related to ‘emotional’ tension and “defensiveness which is no defense.” (6)

Neuro-semantic relaxation has connections to various forms of posture-movement work such as the Alexander Technique and the work of Wilhelm Reich. However, elaborate study is not necessary to start with. For example, momentarily bringing attention to your breathing throughout the day can begin to bring some useful organismic awareness into your life.

Visualization

Visual imagery, either remembered or imagined, constitutes an important aspect of ‘object’ level experience which merges into higher levels of abstraction. Visualization often forms a more-or-less unconscious background to our foreground verbalizing. We can benefit from doing it more consciously. Visualization works at a lower order of abstracting than verbalization. As Korzybski pointed out, it provides a direct link to structure and can show possible non-verbal relations, order, etc. By means of conscious visualizing (formulating, planning, etc.) you can move yourself in a more extensional direction — as long as you remember that your visual maps are not the territory, either. So practice drawing, diagramming, making visual models, etc. (however crudely) of what you see, plan, and formulate. (7)

A Calculus Approach

GS writer/teacher Milton Dawes, building upon Korzybski’s work, refers to differential/integral calculus as an approach to living. Beyond doing calculations, getting a feel for the ‘logic’ or underlying structure of evaluating in calculus can have importance in evaluating more extensionally in everyday life.

Let’s consider the value of calculus as a metaphor for living. The calculus is based on the mathematical notion of a function — a more-or-less exact relation between variables. Thinking-feeling in terms of functional relations can have usefulness in itself. If I feel tired, for example, I can ‘step back’ and consider some of the variables that my tiredness may exist as a function of: perhaps

the amount of sleep I've had; the time of day; when, what, and how much I last ate; how much coffee I've had; what medications I may have taken; etc. Considering some of these functional relations may have some bearing on what I decide to do next and what I decide not to do. Perhaps it's not a good time for operating heavy machinery or crossing a busy street.

The calculus was developed to better understand and describe 'instantaneous' change and rates of change involving distance, speed, acceleration, etc., in moving objects. Extended further, it provides a way for talking about rates of change, flow, etc., involving any kind of functional relation (often functions of time), e.g., the rate of cooling of a hot liquid, the rate of growth of compound interest, etc.

Calculus provides an especially good way of taking a dynamic, flowing process (a "continuous function") and stopping it (so to speak) for purposes of analysis. A dynamic process can be translated into a moment-to-moment series of indefinitely small static steps. Somewhat like the still frames which make up a motion picture, these static steps can be examined, studied, etc., more closely and carefully. The static pictures, when summed together, can be translated again into a moving picture, a dynamic process. This translation, from dynamic to static and back again, resembles the structure of human nervous system abstracting processes — with lower-order abstractions providing the more dynamic aspects, the higher-order abstractions the more static.

Dawes notes:

...if the continuous function we study is our own behavior with respect to time, one can easily get a feel that the calculus is more than a mathematical device. Since we live in a world of changing relationships, the calculus can also be used as a 'psycho-logical tool.' We can apply it to help us study factors related to personal development, improving communication, problem solving, conflict management, time management, stress management, and much more. The method of the calculus can be applied to help us understand and improve almost anything we do. It's mainly a matter of paying very, very close attention to what we are doing — how we are doing what we are doing — and what happens when we do whatever we happen to be doing. (8)

In his teaching, Dawes has used the example of attempting to park a car by pulling into a tight space. Making small enough movements of the car while gathering moment-to-moment feedback — paying very, very close attention to the results of what we are doing — will more likely lead to success than large and abrupt movements with less frequent checking on results. The latter will more likely lead to frustration and perhaps to scraped paint and dented fenders.

As in the parking example, I can apply the calculus metaphor by viewing the cycle of action-awareness in terms of a series of variably-sized steps. When I have a problem, a goal, want to change a habit, etc., I can divide it into a larger number of smaller steps. Any one of these steps can serve as a “wedge of awareness or consciousness,” as Dawes has called it, which allows me to ‘break up’ the situation into manageable pieces.

Thus, when clients want to change their posture-movement habits, I help them to become more aware of what and how they are doing what they do from moment-to-moment. They learn that they can change their posture-movement habits, for example, by starting modestly with small areas of attention and brief moments (wedges of awareness) rather than trying to tackle all of their habits at once.

The metaphor of calculus can help you view your action-awareness in terms of variable increments or steps. Your degree of knowledge in a situation depends upon the number and size of steps you take to map, observe, assess, etc., what is going on. Your understanding-at-a-given-date will then depend on whether you have taken a “gross macro-mapping” approach with a few large steps, a finely-grained “micro-mapping” approach, or something in between. (9)

Awareness is key — awareness of what you are doing and then choosing what kind of mapping seems most appropriate in a particular situation. This calculus approach to knowledge and understanding can help you to consciously abstract, i.e., to become aware of your awareness and to manage your awareness better. You can apply the calculus (or wedge of awareness) approach to practicing non-verbal awareness and the other extensional techniques.

Seven Steps of Personal Inquiry

GS, as an applied theory of knowledge (epistemology), provides an approach for helping people to become *personal scientists*. GS ‘fellow traveler,’ psychologist George A. Kelly, wrote:

Might not the individual man each in his own personal way, assume more of the stature of a scientist, ever seeking to predict and control the course of events with which he is involved? Would he not have his theories, test his hypotheses, and weigh his experimental evidence? And, if so, might not the differences between personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical points of view of different scientists? (10)

We don't need to have laboratories or degrees in scientific studies to improve how we observe, form hypotheses, and, most especially, check them out; in other words, *how we challenge our beliefs with evidence*.

As a personal scientist, you can follow these seven steps of inquiry:

1. Formulate your assumptions, theories, etc.
2. Clarify them by defining your terms as extensionally as possible. What do your assumptions imply?
3. Frame them in the form of clear answerable questions that you can ask in order to make observations that will help you test them.
4. Make your observations in a calm, 'unprejudiced' manner.
5. Report your observations as accurately as possible and in such a way as to answer the questions that you asked to begin with.
6. Revise/reformulate any assumptions, theories, etc., held before the observations were made, in light of the observations made and the answers obtained.
7. Begin again, and again, and again...

Implications of this approach include:

- Formulating/reformulating your assumptions, theories, etc., involves imagination as much as 'logic.' Asking "How is this like that?" can open up new perspectives as long as you also remember to ask "How is this different from that?"
- Our 'knowledge' evolves in a circular or spiral manner. You can 'begin' at any one of these steps. However, the decision to ask questions and make observations usually seems to arise when you encounter something unexpected, have some problem, due to some questionable assumption(s) you hold.
- At any step, "we can know more than we can tell." (11) As a personal psycho-logical process, inquiry/discovery unavoidably involves layers of tacit assumptions, habits, and skills which at a given date will remain more-or-less in the background of consciousness. You, inquirer, can learn how to cultivate this "tacit dimension" of knowing, as Polanyi called it, by allowing time for silent level contemplating, exploring, playing with, becoming acquainted with, etc., the object(s) of study.

- As fallible abstractors, our conclusions are more-or-less supported or refuted; nothing is ‘finally proven.’ Therefore, you had best hold your views tentatively, subject to further revision.

The steps of inquiry can be summarized by the following questions, which we do well to ask when we want to use inquiry as an approach for everyday life.

What do I (and you) mean? (Steps 1 and 2 and 3)

How do I (and you) know? (Steps 3, 4 and 5)

What then? (Steps 6 and 7) (12)

What then? Elaborate on these steps with problems you experience and find out how they work for you.

Personal Time-Binding

We talk to ourselves a lot. We can use this internal chatter for worse and better. When we label ourselves “stupid” or with similar negative higher-order abstractions, we create a negative time-binding environment for ourselves. When we make perfectionistic demands on ourselves, unconditionally and absolutistically telling ourselves what we “must” do, we diminish our chances of fully realizing our potentialities. Instead, as Albert Ellis has emphasized throughout his writings, we can extensionalize our internal chatter, just as we extensionalize our talk with others. Ellis’ books provide valuable material for learning how to talk to yourself in this way.

For example, I can change absolutistic demands, such as “I must have good relationships” into probabilistic preferences, such as “I prefer to have good relationships but I don’t absolutely have to have them.” Rather than absolutistically ‘shoulding on myself,’ I can use conditional or non-absolutistic shoulds instead. So I can tell myself that “If I want good relationships, I probably should accept other people and take responsibility for how I act. However, it is not absolutely guaranteed that people will accept me just because I accept them and act responsibly. Moreover, I am not a total ‘shit’ if I fail to do this perfectly all of the time even if it might seem more preferable.”

In learning how to talk to yourself this way, you not only take greater responsibility for your behavior, but take responsibility for treating yourself well. Thus, you can learn how to use your time-binding capacities most effectively by cooperating with yourself — enhancing your realistic self-acceptance.

Part of time-binding involves each of us learning from ourselves, learning how to make the most of our individual experiences. My wife has referred to

this as *personal time-binding*. With personal time-binding, you can recognize that you communicate with yourself as well as with others. Your personal time-binding includes both the environment you create for yourself and others as well as the personal legacy you leave for future generations. As you act in such a way as to bring your legacy to fruition, you also contribute to your own and others' daily well-being: Inquirers — Go for it!

The Abstracting Model

Korzybski's structural differential model provides a hands-on technique for becoming more conscious of abstracting and thus more extensional. Looking at, manipulating, explaining, and applying this visual and tactile model of the abstracting process in relation to actual problems (analyzing different aspects of the problem in terms of the different orders or levels) can help you to grok GS increasingly deeply on both non-verbal and verbal levels. (13)

General Semantics and the Non-Verbal World

James D. French, present Editor-in-Chief of the *General Semantics Bulletin*, has noted that:

As a field of study, general semantics is not predominantly about language but (one might say) about neuro-evaluating; and yet language and how we use it play a prominent role in apprehending and using the discipline. (14)

In this article, I have sought not to focus on language use but rather on some of the more non-verbal aspects of general semantics as an extensional practice. For the verbal 'world' we inhabit remains a smaller, in some ways less important, 'outgrowth' of the larger, more inclusive, non-verbal, un-speakable, extensional world.

NOTES

1. Mayper (Personal Note), Pula (Personal Note).
2. Quoted in Abel, p.3.
3. Gregory 1987.
4. See Block and Yucker 1992 and Hoffman 1998.
5. Charlotte Schuchardt Read 1965/1966, p.50.
6. Korzybski 1994 (1933), pp.lix-lx.
7. See Gelb for further suggestions on visualization including drawing, “mind-mapping,” etc. See Wenger for advanced visualization methods, many of which are available online at www.WinWenger.com.
8. Dawes, p.412.
9. Dawes, pp.410-411.
10. George A. Kelly, p.5. This applies to women, as well as men. Kelly wrote at a time when few thought about non-sexist terminology.
11. Polanyi 1966, p.4.
12. Wendell Johnson wrote, “The scientific method reduces essentially to three questions ... ‘What do you mean?’ ... ‘How do you know?’ [and] ‘What then?’ ... I have discovered that these three are about the most liberating questions you can imagine.” (Johnson and Moeller, pp.37, 40). As an exercise, you can examine how the seven steps of personal inquiry map onto the logical fate model, Einstein’s model of thinking, and the abstracting model.
13. You can obtain a wall chart of the Structural Differential from the Institute of General Semantics. Email: igs@time-binding.org. Web: www.time-binding.org.
14. French 2002, p.8.

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