PEOPLE IN QUANDARIES:
And Why They Are There

I HAVE spent much of the past ten years in other people's quandaries, being company to misery, holding the damp, trembling hand of frustration. It has seemed necessary to conclude that these quandaries, these personal maladjustments, are not strictly private affairs. They appear to involve not only individual frailties and confusions, but also, and more impressively, they signify a set of conditions peculiar to our general culture. Such maladjustments intimate, as it were, that civilization is more or less allergic to itself.

Beneath their fascinating individualities, one may discern a provocative similarity among unhappy and inefficient people. The mosaic of misery is not altogether haphazard. In the contemplation of this fact one acquires a sense of the pervasive social forces influencing human behavior. George D. Stoddard has said that one can only be what one could have become—and it is to be soberly considered that what one could have become is determined, not alone by the physical structure with which one is born, but also, and profoundly, by the structure of the society into which one is born. As a matter of fact, one can scarcely understand individual personalities except as one understands the social framework within which and by which their main characteristics are determined. Since this is so, it also follows that the individual reflects that social framework, and thus an analysis of individual personalities, particularly the extreme types that we call maladjusted, enables us to gain a peculiarly keen insight into those social and cultural forces that shape the lives of all of us as individuals.

It is neither an index to 'human nature' nor an accident of 'chance' that most, if not all, so-called maladjusted persons in our society may be viewed as frustrated and distraught idealists. Distraught because they are frustrated, and frustrated because they are 'idealists,' they are living testimony of the price we pay for the traditions we cherish, and for the aspirations which those traditions encourage together with the restrictions which they tend to enforce. It is not that this 'idealism' is always immediately apparent—on the contrary, it is rather likely, as a rule, to elude the superficial observer. It is our unstudied tendency, indeed, to assume that what maladjusted persons need most is something that we call a sense of direction, of purpose, of 'noble' aspiration. In this we are not altogether mistaken—but a partial understanding serves usually as an effective barrier to more penetrating wisdom.

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The ideals of the maladjusted are high in three chief respects. Most fundamentally, they are high in the sense that they are vague. Being vague, they are difficult to recognize; being difficult to recognize, they appear to be elusive. It is the consequent misfortune of the individual whose ideals are vaguely defined that he has no sure way of determining whether or not he has attained them. He maintains, therefore, the disquieting belief that he has failed, and he becomes increasingly convinced that his ideals are difficult to reach. Ideals that are difficult to achieve, though it may be primarily because one remains uncertain of whether or not one has achieved them, have the psycho-logical or semantic value of high ideals.

As we contrive to go from A to B, from what we may refer to generally as 'failure' to something else which we may value as 'success,' the crucial point in our journey is that one which we agree to recognize as the point of transition—the point at which we leave A to enter B. Unless such a point can be recognized, we are denied the experience of believing that we have reached our destination, that we have achieved 'success.' And until we can believe that we have achieved 'success,' we continue to assume that we have not achieved it—we continue to experience 'failure.' Under such circumstances we feel frustrated and, eventually, distraught.

When B is vaguely defined, A is correspondingly obscure—when 'success' cannot with certainty be claimed, 'failure' cannot with confidence be disavowed. There can be no transition point on the road from A to B; no matter what may be the appearance of the country through which the road passes, there is nothing about it to indicate that it lies within the cherished land of B. A gentleman of the writer's acquaintance, whose ideal is 'wealth,' has acquired two million dollars—and stomach ulcers. A lady whom the writer has known for many years has pursued the will-o'-the-wisp of 'charm' with such unrelenting intensity that she has achieved almost innumerable symbols of decorum, and memories of Cairo, Vienna, London and Vera Cruz—and headaches of medically obscure origin. To such persons in pursuit of 'success,' their definite accomplishments are like a display of etchings which they readily concede to be beautiful, but cannot ever thoroughly enjoy because they are haunted by the question, 'But are they Art?'

In a word, these individuals recognize their specific achievements, are sometimes temporarily buoyed up by them, and may even recount them with an air of unmitigated boasting. But they do not find them satisfying. As a matter of fact, they frequently appear to state their goals in quite definite terms, but the uneasy fervor with which they continue to grope beyond these goals as they annex them, one by one, suggests something of the Hitlerian delirium, so well distilled in that ironical refrain, 'I have no more territorial claims in Europe!' Unable to recognize any one of these specific goals achieved, any one definite accomplishment, as the point of transition from A to B, from 'failure' to 'success,' the individual comes at last to the unhappy and exasperating state in which he evaluates each new achievement as further evidence of 'failure.' In spite of all the prizes he captures, 'success' eludes him!

It eludes him for the remarkably obvious, but persistently unnoticed, reason that 'success' is merely a verbal mirage. What he seeks to escape is an absolute 'failure,' what he anxiously pursues is an absolute 'success'—and they do not exist
outside his aching head. What he does in fact achieve is a series of relative successes; and these are all that he, these are all that anyone, can ever achieve. But in the midst of relative abundance, absolutistic idealists suffer the agonies of famine. They suffer because they do not know, because it has never occurred to them, because in our culture they are not clearly informed that 'success' is a word that may signify many, many things but no one thing. It is the one thing that they seek; it is the one thing that eludes them. Not gaining the one thing, 'success,' they are not comforted, they are rather dismayed, by the many things—they are dismayed by their very successes.

II

Another respect in which the ideals of the maladjusted are high is that they are highly valued. The intensity with which they are wished for generates the despair with which they are foregone. And the intensity with which they are wished for is generated by the dread with which the foregoing of them is contemplated. If not to succeed absolutely is to fail utterly, then to succeed absolutely becomes all-important. 'Success' becomes indispensable, as 'failure' becomes catastrophic. 'Success' becomes indispensable when it appears to be the only alternative to 'failure'—and absolute 'success' is, by definition, by virtue of a semantic trick, the only alternative to absolute 'failure.' In order to give to these remarks a more lively significance, it is necessary to place them in a proper context, by indicating the basic pattern to which they refer. If we are to appreciate the human importance of this basic pattern, we must go for a moment to the man who, for the most part, established it as the pattern upon which our traditional culture has been based. That man lived 2300 years ago in Greece. His name was Aristotle. So influential were his works that our civilization has come to be referred to as aristotelian. There is not one among us who has not been deeply affected by his teachings. What each one of us could have become has been determined in no small measure by the fact that Aristotle lived and wrote twenty-three centuries ago. Many of us may not be particularly conscious of all this; undoubtedly many of us have scarcely heard of Aristotle and 'know' little or nothing about him. Nevertheless, insofar as we are not scientific, we are all essentially aristotelian in our outlook, in our fundamental attitude, or set, or orientation to life. This is to say simply that, as individuals, we share the orientation that has been for so long a time basically characteristic of our culture; each new generation absorbs it from the last, and quite unconsciously transmits it to the next.

We need not be 'academic' or complicated in what we must say briefly about Aristotle. What he did was to observe the behavior, and especially the language of the people of his day and of his world. He was a remarkably astute observer. Then he formulated in words, words that have proved to be all but indelible, the 'as-if-ness,' so to speak, of the behavior and the language of his people. What he said and what he wrote, in effect, was this: 'They act as if, they talk as if, all that they feel and believe and live by might be reduced to three fundamental premises or rules. First, they seem always to talk and to act as if a thing is what it is. It is possible to put it in this general form: A is A. That is to say, man is man, truth is truth, etc. This we may call the premise or the law of identity.

In the second place, they speak and they behave as if they assumed that any-
thing must either be a particular thing or it must not be that particular thing. We may give this notion the general form: Anything is either A or non-A. That is, anything is either a man or it is not a man, anything is either true or it is not true. We may call this the premise or law of the excluded middle. It represents the fact, as I observe it, that men are oriented in an either-or-ish, or two-valued way.

Thirdly, they talk and they conduct themselves generally as if they took it for granted that something cannot both be a particular thing and also not be that particular thing. This we may state in the general form: something cannot be both A and non-A. That is, something cannot be both a man and not a man, something cannot be true and not true, etc. We may refer to this as the premise or law of non-contradiction.

These, then, the laws of identity, of the excluded middle, and of non-contradiction—these appear to be the basic laws of thought for these people. It will be noticed that each implies the others: if A is A, then everything must be either A or non-A, and, of course, nothing can be both A and non-A. It may be said that the law of identity is basic to the other two; but, at least, if it is accepted, and it appears to be, the other two laws are necessary also, are required by the law of identity. These three laws, then, taken together, constitute the basic mould in which men shape their feelings, and their thoughts and all their living reactions.

In large measure they still do. These laws are, in the final analysis, what we speak of when we speak of common sense. That is to say, they are, and they have long been, commonly accepted. Most of us, however, are as unconscious of Aristotle's laws, as such, as he formulated them and as they have been expounded by teachers of logic ever since, as were the ancient men whose actual conduct and language the laws were intended to describe. But once stated, they sound as 'right' to us as doubtless they did to the ancient Greeks. What Aristotle did was to give men words with which to make acquaintance with themselves. What he did, that is, was to make men more precisely conscious of themselves, conscious of the rules of their own behavior. Being more conscious of the basic pattern of their conduct, they could behave more deliberately, more consistently in accordance with the basic pattern. They could plan what they might say and do, for they had been given a 'blueprint,' a 'map,' of language and of 'thought' and of action. And the plans which they proceeded to work out, on the basis of Aristotle's laws, gradually became civilization as we know it—in the sense that civilization may be regarded as institutionalized 'logical' forms and verbal structures, involving relatively standardized ways of making distinctions and generalizations, and of reacting in terms of them.

The value of Aristotle's generalizations is to be measured, therefore, in terms of the benefits which our civilization has yielded, just as the viciousness of his generalizations is to be gauged by reference to the misery which that civilization has entailed. Latest reports from our own country, the United States, indicate that the number of persons admitted each year to hospitals for the 'insane' tends to equal the number entering colleges and universities. (In fact, some of them go from the universities to the hospitals!)

Against this background, we shall resume presently our discussion of the 'idealism' of maladjusted people. Before we do that, however, it is appropriate that we take due pains not to leave the
impression that Aristotle is to be regarded as having been a malicious or stupid person. Beyond question, he was neither. His contribution to human progress was stupendous. The difference between an aristotelian and a pre-aristotelian, primitive society is vast, indeed. As a matter of fact, insofar as the consequences of Aristotle's generalizations have been unfortunate, they have been due chiefly to the shortcomings, not of Aristotle himself, but of his followers. After all, when Aristotle formulated his laws he made it possible for men to become not only more highly conscious, but also more effectively critical, of the basic pattern of their behavior and their language. But men made the tragic error of mistaking the laws of Aristotle for laws of nature, to be universally employed and never revised. They accepted them as 'Truth' in an absolute sense. Consequently, if they were 'Truth,' modifications or contraries of them were 'non-Truth.' Thus, they were perpetuated, and they were used wittingly and unwittingly to build a system of doctrine and an elaborate social structure. This system and this social structure we shall call aristotelian—without implying, however, that criticisms of them and suggestions for their revision are to be construed necessarily as criticisms of Aristotle. Indeed, the genius of Aristotle was such that one may well assume that he himself would have succeeded in improving upon his original notions. If he were living today he would surely be numbered among the great non-aristotelians.

Against the backdrop of this brief sketch of the aristotelian system, we are able to gain a more revealing view of what Karen Horney has called 'the neurotic personality of our time.' Maladjusted individuals appear to take an 'A is A' attitude toward 'success,' or 'wealth,' or 'happiness,' or whatever other ideal they pursue. Automatically, therefore, they operate in terms of a two-valued (excluded middle) orientation in terms of which anything must be either 'success' or 'failure,' 'wealth' or 'poverty,' 'happiness' or 'misery.' And the pattern is rounded out with their further assumption that nothing can be both 'success' and 'failure,' nothing can be both 'wealth' and 'poverty,' etc. (non-contradiction). Locked within this two-valued structure of orientation, they weave about themselves a web of wonderful confusion.

Just as the premise that 'truth' is 'truth' leads eventually to Pilate's jest, and thence to cynicism, since no man can answer for all men, nor for himself in absolute terms, 'What is truth?'—so the premise that 'success' is 'success' leads ever nowhere but to worry and frustration. Moreover, the assumption that there is something that is 'success' requires the further assumption that all other things are 'failure,' and so the beleaguered individual reduces himself to only two alternatives, the one to be cherished as the other is to be abhorred. In this sense, and by these means, he comes to place a very high value upon his ideal. And when one strives long enough for a highly valued ideal that appears also to be persistently unattainable, one feels not only thwarted but also, at last, demoralized.

III

It has already been said that in some instances maladjusted persons appear to set for themselves goals that are not vague, but that are quite specifically defined—although such goals turn out usually to be transitory. It is by means of a consideration of these specific goals that we discover the third respect in
which the ideals of the maladjusted are high. They are high in the sense that the odds against their being achieved are very great.

It has been reported, for example, that approximately two out of every three students enrolled in a large midwestern university expressed themselves as wanting to become doctors, lawyers, university professors, or to achieve some other comparable status. The crucial fact is that only about one out of sixteen university students can achieve such an ideal in our society. People who turn away from listening to Information Please with a reinforced conviction of their own stupidity; young girls striving to look like Myrna Loy or Betty Grable; people driving bigger cars than they can pay for; young brides frantically wondering whether to give up their husbands or their Hollywood-engendered definition ('ideal') of 'husband'—all these, and the millions they resemble, live the 'high idealism' conducive to what Dr. P. S. Graven has called 'unsanity.'

This tendency of maladjusted persons to set unrealistically high standards for themselves appears as a necessary consequence of their aristotelian orientation. Since their notions of 'success' and 'failure' are ultimately of an absolute character, and are consequently vague and two-valued, they tend to assume that they have 'failed' until they have unquestionably 'succeeded.' As a result, they feel driven to 'aim high,' to be 'tops,' to break records, to do something 'bigger and better.' In this they are continually encouraged by many of the more obvious features of their semantic environment. It is this urge to 'aim high,' to out-snob the snobs, that is appealed to—and stimulated by—advertisers generally, and by Hollywood producers, popular magazine writers, etc. All of which means that this reaching for the moon is not a unique characteristic of the maladjusted individual; it represents, rather, a characteristic of our society, and the maladjusted person simply reflects it. And it is one of the influences of his semantic environment that contributes definitely to his difficulties.

Quandaries, then, are rather like verbal cocoons, in which individuals elaborately encase themselves, and from which, under circumstances common in our time, they do not tend to hatch. The peculiar structure of these cocoons appears to be determined in great measure by the structure of the society in which they are formed—and the structure of this society has been and continues to be determined significantly by the structure of the language which we so unconsciously acquire and so unreflectively employ. Simply by using that language and by living in terms of the basic aristotelian orientation which it represents and fosters, we tend to cultivate this 'idealism' and so to suffer the frustration and demoralization which are so conspicuous in the lives of people in quandaries.

Because such people are 'idealists,' they subject themselves more or less continually to the experience of 'failure,' and from this fact they acquire another of their outstanding features: a tendency to develop what we have learned to call inferiority feelings or inferiority complexes. There is an old saying that nothing fails like failure. Nothing does, indeed. The tears which it produces water the soil from which it grows ever more luxuriantly.

Various investigations made by psychologists have served to demonstrate beyond reasonable dispute that feelings of inferiority are the rule rather than the exception. As a matter of fact, so common is the tendency of individuals to
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regard themselves as 'under par' that the renowned Viennese psychologist, the late Dr. Alfred Adler, constructed an elaborate theory of human behavior, and sought to explain the greater share of our personal adjustment difficulties, on the basis of such negative self-evaluation. He made the term 'inferiority complex' a part of our common vocabulary; the fact that it has been so generally adopted indicates that it does express a feeling with which most people are familiar.

In definitely maladjusted persons this common mode of self-evaluation is merely exaggerated. In this, as in practically all other respects, people whom we call maladjusted, or neurotic, or abnormal, are not unique. They are not a different kind of people; they simply present more extreme forms of what is, after all, quite ordinary behavior. 'Everyone is crazy except thee and me' — and we wouldn't know about ourselves, of course. In a sense, there are no 'crazy' people — there are only 'crazy' ways of behaving. And we all behave in those ways more or less.

The sense of failure or of inferiority is more readily observed in maladjusted individuals, because in them it is more elaborately developed than it is in ordinary folk. When clearly observed, it is seen to be quite vague or generalized, very persistent, and bound up with anxiety or fear, discouragement, and other 'emotional' reactions. Unless persons with inferiority complexes have progressed to the grave stage of sheer de- spondency and stuporous lassitude, they tend to be on the defensive, to exhibit a high degree of 'insultability,' to resent criticism, and to be generally 'touchy.' They appear to be, and if you examine them you find that they are, quite tense. Frequently they react to something they see, and especially to something they read or that is said to them, in a sudden, undelayed manner, and in an exaggerated way. They tend, that is, to react too quickly and too much. In conversing with them one senses that they might be easily offended or 'hurt,' and so it is somewhat difficult to feel at ease in their company. They do not make good companions — least of all for themselves.

IV

Now, what these people have not learned is the simple fact that there is no failure in nature. Failure is a matter of evaluation. Failure is the felt difference between what you expect and what you get. It is the difference between what you assume you have to do, what you demand of yourself, and what you actually do. It is what you feel when your expectations exceed your realizations. If your ideals or goals are too high, in the sense that they are too vague, or too highly valued, or unrealistic, then you are likely to experience a sense of failure. Eventually you are likely to suffer from an 'inferiority complex,' a low opinion of yourself. You are likely to be more or less overwhelmed by what you will call 'the general impenetrability of things.'

To this unhappy development, however, you do not remain indifferent. At least until you become quite thoroughly demoralized, you fight back. You feel anger, more or less, toward the persons and even toward the social rules and material circumstances which, as you suppose, are responsible for thwarting you. This tends to become very complicated; you even develop food dislikes, aversions to colors, to names, to places, or to other things associated somehow with your frustrations. You tend to behave accordingly. If aggressiveness is permitted — and in some forms and under certain con-
ditions it is definitely encouraged in our culture—you are likely to attack openly or indirectly the persons who seem to be blocking your progress. You will try to weaken their influence by talking about them, by opposing them in elections, by trying to block their plans and in various other ways. By any means permitted, you will carry out your own variety of 'bloodless purge.' Of course, some individuals resort to outright murder, but they are in the minority. The important point is that you end up devoting more and more of your available energy to these side-tracking activities of hatred and aggression. You have less and less energy, therefore, to expend in efficient and productive work. Besides, you increase the number and the vigor of your enemies. ‘Success’ therefore, recedes farther and farther from your grasp. You cannot forever escape the growing realization that you are waging a losing fight, and a kind of desperate weariness creeps over you as the clouds of failure more deeply darken your horizons.

The sense of failure, thus generated and nurtured, tends sooner or later to blend into a state of boredom, a generalized loss of interest in possible opportunities for achievement. Finally, you find yourself in a state of depression. This happens because in our society you are not permitted, as a rule, to be simply bored. The influences of your semantic environment, acting through the urgings, pleadings, scoldings, threats, encouragements, and taunts of your family, friends and associates, and the incessant stimulation from press, radio, movies, and whatnot—these influences keep prodding you. They will not let you rest. They will not allow you the easy solution of sheer boredom. Because of this persistent goading you may continue to sally forth from time to time to storm the bastions of 'success,' but absolute 'success' continues, as always, to elude you. As your sense of failure deepens, you settle more and more into despondency. You are then not only bored, but you are also sorry about it. You are forced to evaluate your 'failure' —to feel inferior because you feel inferior.

In all this is to be seen the basic design of our common maladjustment. We may call it the IFD disease: from 'idealism' to frustration to demoralization. Probably no one of us entirely escapes it. It is of epidemic proportions. Certainly anyone occupied professionally with personal problems of men and women—and of children—comes to recognize it as a sort of standard base upon which are erected all manner of specific difficulties and semantic ailments. In 'the troubles I've seen' it has predominated conspicuously. In my experience, no other ailment is so common among university students, for example, as what I have termed the IFD disease. It is, moreover, a condition out of which there tend to develop the various types of severe 'mental' and nervous disorders, the neuroses and psychoses that fill our 'mental' hospitals with such a lush growth of delusion and incompetence.

There remains to be considered one other symptom of what we regard as personality maladjustment. It is so obvious that it is generally overlooked, although it has been stated in various ways by various writers. A practicing psychiatrist, Dr. Coyne Campbell, however, speaking in 1941 before the Central States Speech Association meeting in Oklahoma City, expressed it so pointedly and so simply that it will serve our purpose well to recall his main statements. What Dr. Campbell said in effect was that the pa-
tients who were brought to him, because they had been judged to be seriously maladjusted or even 'insane,' showed one chief symptom: They were unable to tell him clearly what was the matter. They simply could not put into words the difficulties with which they were beset. Surely no one who has made it his business to help people in trouble has failed to observe their relative inarticulateness. In the course of some conferences with a lady in distress, who laid claim to a pronounced feeling of personal worthlessness, I one day placed a mirror in front of her and asked her what she saw in it. For a full minute by the clock she stared at the mirror and said nothing at all. Then she said weakly, 'I can't say anything.'

Such a reaction is not to be taken for granted. It is something that must be understood. So, also, is the sort of reaction one frequently encounters in persons who talk at a great rate, with an impressive verbal output, but who never get outside their elaborate verbal circles. They are full of theories spun from almost pure sound. One suspects that their seeming compulsion to talk on and on is due mainly to the fact that they themselves realize vaguely that, after each outburst, they have not yet said anything, and so they try again to put into words the feelings from which they suffer. Essentially they are no more articulate than are the individuals who scarcely speak at all.

Dr. Coyne Campbell remarked further that when he had succeeded in training a patient to verbalize his difficulties clearly and to the point, it was usually possible to release him. The patient was usually able then to take care of himself. This will seem strange to anyone who has not thoroughly considered the role of language in personality adjustment. The wild and irrelevant and vague remarks of people in quandaries have been regarded generally as nothing more than the foam on the beer, so to speak. That they might be an integral part of the beer, that the language of distress might be part and parcel of the distress, this does not seem to be a commonly held notion. It has not even been emphasized clearly and definitely by the psychoanalysts, who have demonstrated so elaborately the curative value of talk and more talk. The tremendous amount of talking done by the patient on the psychoanalyst's couch is hardly to be regarded as unrelated to such changes in the patient's behavior as may come about during the long course of treatment.

Back of Dr. Coyne Campbell's statements lies the plain fact that before a problem can be attacked effectively it must be stated with reasonable clarity. And as soon as it has been so stated, some kind of solution to it becomes more or less apparent. In other words, people who are confused and maladjusted are likely to remain so until they learn to state their problems clearly enough to indicate what sort of steps might be taken in order to change their situations or their behavior to advantage. Certainly any scientific worker of experience knows that by far the most important step toward the solution of a laboratory problem lies in stating the problem in such a way as to suggest a fruitful attack on it. Once that is accomplished, any ordinary assistant can usually turn the cranks and read the dials. Competent research directors understand the uses and limitations of their apparatus, certainly, but their major contribution comes, not in the answers they wring from nature with their own hands, but in the incisive and crucial clarity of the questions they put to nature. Technicians can man the scientist's machines and obtain answers to his well-
stated questions; what distinguishes the scientist is his ability to state problems, to frame questions, so that the technicians can make the machines yield facts that are significant.

Now, intimately personal problems are not greatly different in this respect from the problems of the laboratory. Before they can be solved they must be stated. Before helpful answers can be got, suitable questions must be asked. We all want answers. They can be very relaxing. What the maladjusted person cannot do—and what he must learn to do—is to specify the sort of answers he needs. This is a way of saying that he has a conspicuous lack of ability to ask questions in such a way as to obtain answers that would be relaxing, or satisfying, or adequate. As soon as he develops such ability, he can, as Dr. Campbell has implied, take care of himself for all practical purposes.

There cannot be a precise answer to a vague question. The terminology of the question determines the terminology of the answer. Scarcely any other principle is more important in relation to a consideration of the befuddlement and conflict that make for personal inefficiency and unhappiness. The particular questions we ask ourselves determine the kinds of answers we get, and the answers we get make our lives in a large measure the sort of lives they are. Unschooled in the techniques of inquiry, we tend to flounder in a fog of obfuscation and error, individually and socially. If all that we have ever tried to mean by 'mental hygiene' might be reduced to one word, that word would be accuracy—in the sense of adequate map-territory relationships. And the techniques of accuracy are, in the main, techniques of language. The verbal confusions of maladjusted people are not independent of the confusions in other aspects of their behavior. The relation is close; the one cannot be understood in isolation from the other.

VI

In this view of maladjusted persons as frustrated and distraught idealists, we may glimpse the broad outlines of problems that are common to us all in varying degrees. The IFD disease, as we have sketched it, is not so much an affliction of individuals as it is a reflection of strong semantic forces that play upon and through individuals. So long as these forces are prevalent, each one of us is in some measure susceptible to the misfortunes they engender. There is a contagion about semantic maladies. We are continually exposed to them, and we tend to 'catch' them.

This raises the question as to how they are transmitted. What sort of 'bacilli' infect our lives with confusion and frustration and despair? A clue to an answer is to be found in the relative inability of maladjusted people to verbalize their difficulties, to state their problems, to ask their questions clearly and in such a way that they might be answered readily and effectively. This clue points somehow to language. It indicates that in the structure of our common language there are disintegrative factors, which affect adversely in varying degrees the living reactions of those who use the language. To a significant degree the structure of our common language can be described in terms of the aristotelian 'laws' previously discussed. The problem has been treated elaborately by Alfred Korzybski in Science and Sanity and it has been concisely considered by Hayakawa in Language in Action.

A systematic consideration of these matters points to the double significance
of our language structure. On the one hand, it plays a role in determining the structure of our culture, our society, our civilization. On the other hand, it serves as the chief medium or means whereby the individual acquires or interiorizes that culture structure. Thus, a study of language structure leads both to a deeper understanding of our civilization and its problems and to a keener insight into the basic designs of individual lives and personalities. It is as though mankind had spun an enormous web of words—and caught itself. Our problem is in large degree one of unraveling this net of symbolism in which our human destiny has become entangled.

It is to this problem and its many ramifications that general semantics is addressed. General semantics, however, is not to be adequately grasped nor effectively applied except as it is viewed in a proper setting and in relation to the individual and social problems upon which it bears. Alfred Korzybski has put the matter in these words, 'General semantics is not any "philosophy," or "psychology," or "logic," in the ordinary sense...In brief, it is the formulation of a new non-aristotelian system of orientation which affects every branch of science and life.'

Among the problems in relation to which its foundations and significance can be well appreciated are those of personal maladjustment which we have discussed in the preceding pages. The idealism that leads to frustration and the demoralization that rounds out the unhappy sequence become something more than merely unfortunate and mysterious when viewed in relation to the neuro-linguistic rigidity and confusions which general semantics is designed to illuminate and counteract.

It is in relation to this fact, with its pervasive and intimately personal implications, that one may recognize the reasons for both the appeal and the significance of general semantics. There is something about the 'time of the world' in which we find ourselves that is conducive to restiveness and self-searching, though not necessarily—not at all necessarily—to weariness or cynicism. Whatever else we may say of our time, we must, if we do not deceive ourselves, recognize that this is an age of intensive and candid questioning. As we come to appreciate the degree to which an older generation did not know the answers, we come to understand more and more clearly the importance of knowing the questions—the importance of designing techniques of inquiry by means of which a greater wisdom might be distilled from experience. It is in its deliberate and systematic concern with the techniques of inquiry that one may most readily find the distinguishing features of general semantics and the degree of promise which it holds for the emancipation of the future from the misfortunes of the past, in our lives individually no less than in that cooperative adventure that men call civilization.

A civilization which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.

...almost any idea which jogs you out of your current abstractions may be better than nothing.


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