GENERAL SEMANTICS
AS RADICAL NOMINALISM

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In medieval philosophy, the term "nominalism" was applied to systems of thought which held that logical universals are mere nomina, or names. Platonic realists held that the universal (anything predicable of a plurality of particulars) has an existence in itself and, indeed, constitutes the reality of things. (Incidentally, Plato nowhere explicitly says this, but it seems to be clearly his basic position.) Sense-data at best serve to remind us of the real, upon this view. Spinoza and Hegel were later examples of absolute realism. The moderate realists such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas held that the universal exists in the particular, individuated.

The nominalists made the debate between Plato and Aristotle seem irrelevant, however, by denying in effect that our concepts correspond to anything whatever. For example, there is no "appleness" which is shared by all apples. Therefore, it is really meaningless to call any particular entity an apple. (This position might be taken for a variety of reasons. For the moment, we are simply identifying the position.) In antiquity, this stance had been taken by the sophists and the sceptics. In the Scholastic tradition of the Middle Ages, it was represented by William of Occam. Later, it was to be adopted by Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Mill, and Spencer. Contemporary thought is widely influenced by nominalism.

As Maritain declared, "It is impossible to over-emphasize the importance of the problem of universals."(1) Logic must deal with the nature of universals, their formal cause. Psychology needs to deal with

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the way they emerge in consciousness as concepts, their efficient cause. Philosophy needs to deal with their epistemological value, their final cause. Of course, one's beliefs in these three areas ought to be consistent.

There were, as might be expected, shades and varieties of nominalist thought. It is awfully difficult to deny that there is some sort of objective similarity among the members of a class—all buttons, for instance, or all trout. Roscelin is often taken to have maintained precisely that denial. At any rate, to whatever extent one holds the nominalistic position, he is committed to the idea that the grouping of particulars in any category is arbitrary. Since we think by putting things in categories, one is further committed to the conclusion that all thought is inherently deceptive. Insofar as one uses thought to defend that position, one is caught in a self-contradiction.

Perhaps this extreme viewpoint arose and is best understood as a reaction against Platonism, which had been introduced into Christian thought by Augustine and others. So, in exchange for Plato's meanings without a world, the nominalist-empiricist strand offers us a world without meanings. William of Occam never went the whole way with the denial of universals. He made some fine distinctions and preserved a delicate balance. Nevertheless, he went far enough to represent a bridge from Medieval thought to Hume and the older arch-empiricists. Hobbes also never went the whole way. He seems to preserve the universal in some declarations and to demolish it in others.

It will be the burden of this essay that general semantics as developed by Alfred Korzybski and expounded by Samuel Hayakawa and others represents a rather extreme form of nominalism and thus is caught in the kind of self-contradiction referred to earlier. It must rely upon the very instruments it condemns.

It is difficult to make this case as directly as one would like to, because Korzybski, for all of his prolixity, seldom stated basic positions clearly and pellucidly. Nevertheless, just as Plato's belief in universals is sufficiently clear without having received an explicit statement, so is Korzybski's.

General Semantics as Nominalism

Alfred H. S. Korzybski was a Polish-U.S. scientist and engineer. The word "general" was inserted by him to differentiate his system from other logical and linguistic studies in semantics. Korzybski, like many modern thinkers, took science as almost a self-evident good. Men's habits of thought, he argued, have lagged behind the assumptions and
findings of modern science. This lag is responsible for a pervasive "unsanity" in modern culture. Aristotle was the chief villain in the Polish Count's scenario. Drawing upon relativity theory, neurology, quantum mechanics, colloidal chemistry, and mathematical logic, Korzybski tried to show that these disciplines had reached their present development by casting aside Aristotelian premises. He especially attacked "the 'is' of identity," two-valued orientations, and the law of non-contradiction. It is easy for any student of Aristotle to show that these attacks were aimed at a straw man.

The Aristotelian orientation, declared Korzybski, leads to dogmatism, rigidity, and emotional instability. People with this orientation confuse symbols with the things symbolized. They do not understand the limitations of abstraction. They think in either-or terms and make reflex responses to stimuli. Therapy is needed. General semantics was to be that therapy. In a two-valued orientation of his own Korzybski equated "Aristotelian" with "bad" and "non-Aristotelian" (abbreviated as A) with "good." Simple techniques were advocated such as indexing ("woman_1 is not woman_2") and dating ("Nixon_1950 is not Nixon_1960"). All statements should be thought of as followed by "et cetera," abbreviated ".." to show awareness that not all was said. A gadget called the "structural differential" was developed to aid in consciousness of abstracting. On the whole, the scholarly community has remained unmoved by the system and its techniques.

Korzybski's lengthy book, *Science and Sanity*, was his *magnum opus*. (2) In it, he devoted a chapter to abstracting, the process by which the intellect is usually held to arrive at the universal. Near the end of that chapter, summing his basic viewpoint, the author wrote, "If we use a language of adjectives and subject-predicate forms pertaining to 'sense' impressions, we are using a language which deals with entities *inside our skin* and characteristics entirely non-existent in the outside world." (3) Recall what was said about the most radical form of nominalism. This appears to be precisely that form. The author speaks in the next sentence of various characteristics as "manufactured by our nervous system inside our skins, as responses only to different energy manifestations, physico-chemical processes." (4)

Near the beginning of the same chapter, Korzybski gives his explanation of how primitive man developed the habit of abstracting: "If we saw an animal and called it 'dog' and saw another animal roughly resembling the first, we said, quite happily, 'it is a dog,' forgetting or not knowing that the objective level is un-speakable and that we deal only with absolute individuals, each one different from the other." (5) Korzybski is right in that the particular (Fido or Rover) is not the universal (dog) and existence (the fact of being) is not essence (what a thing is). He is seriously wrong in that he implies that people are ordinarily not aware that one dog does not have all the same incidental
characteristics as another. Most definitions of “dog” stress that the species is highly variable, and sometimes prefer to speak of a dog family (Canidae). There are marked individual differences in size, color, weight, shape, etc. Still, did you ever know anybody who couldn’t tell a dog from a cat? Has any zoologist suggested that grouping particular organisms as dogs or cats is completely capricious?

To illustrate the alleged fallacy of groupings, Korzybski offers the example of someone’s approaching a dog, beginning to play with him, and being bitten by the beast. He concludes that “This is a dog” was not a safe statement, because the person approached the animal with “semantic expectations” which were not borne out.(6) In this argument, abstraction is confused with generalization. It is one intellectual operation to comprehend that any carnivore of the species Canis familiaris is a dog. It is quite another operation to hazard such generalizations as “All dogs bite people” or “No dogs bite people.”

Korzybski did not stay consistently with a radical nominalism, probably because he could not do so and make sense in discussing specific examples. Using a pencil as an illustration, he declared, “... this object is unique, is different from anything else ... Hence, we should give this object a unique name.”(7) People do this in naming their children. They do not christen them Child₁, Child₂, etc. Someone who wanted I-thou relationships with his pencils could similarly christen them Max, Gertrude, Fred, etc. Is the adjective “unique” really appropriate for the individual pencil? No; for, as Korzybski admits, “By keeping the main root word ‘pencil,’ we keep the implications of daily life, and also of similarities.”(8) Heaven knows what was meant by “the implications of daily life.” Perhaps that is a way of saying that we need to know a pencil when we see one. The adverb “main” and the adjective “root” are interesting here. They tacitly say that the fact that this object is a pencil (i.e., a writing implement with a slender cylinder of a solid marking substance) is more essential than its color, whether it has an eraser, its exact length, and so forth. By implying that there is some defensible reason for grouping objects as pencils, Korzybski abandons or at least compromises his nominalism. Does he mean to suggest that, prior to general semantics, nobody noticed that pencils have various shapes, colors, sizes, weights, and materials? The world is full of school children who know that, and who never heard of general semantics.

We have not dealt here with the reasons for Korzybski’s nominalism, chief of which is his ontology of pure process, which inevitably leads him into contradictions when he tries to render anything intelligible. He does not state the law of identity as Aristotle stated it: that whatever is, is. Rather, he tries to turn it into an “is of identity” that
Aristotle would have been the first to repudiate. As Korzybski describes it, this “is” means that, if Wittgenstein is (or was) a philosopher, then to be a philosopher is to be Wittgenstein. If this knife is sharp, then to be sharp is to be this knife. Obviously, only a lunatic would hold such views.

Far from accepting any “is of identity,” Aristotle cautioned against such a thing, pointing out that subjects and predicates are not ordinarily reversible. If X is Y, it does not follow that Y is X. Again, far from advocating any “either-or,” two-valued orientation, Scholastic philosophies had a famous dictum, “Never deny; rarely affirm; always distinguish.”

Next to Korzybski, the leading figure in general semantics has been Samuel I. Hayakawa. In his book, *Language in Thought and Action*, Hayakawa develops his own treatment of the system. He treats logical universals under the heading of “classifying.” Hayakawa says that when we name something we are classifying. He adds, “The individual object or event we are naming, of course, has no name and belongs to no class until we put it in one.” The statement made here applies only to general names, incidentally, not to particular ones. To call a woman “Mary Jones” does not classify her, but to call her a woman does put her in a category. It is quite true that a thing has no name until somebody gives it one. It is quite another matter, however, to say that the thing belongs in no category until we put it in one. This implies that we act arbitrarily in all acts of classification, that there is no basis outside our minds for differentiating elm trees from pocket calculators, or hairpins from porcupines.

General semanticists are usually ambivalent about abstracting. On the one hand, they cite science as the ideal form of knowledge and admit that science involves abstracting certain ideas from the flow of sensation. On the other hand, they regard abstracting as taking us away from reality. This conclusion can only be correct if we adopt the formula,

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\text{Particulars} = \text{Reality}
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Such a view is consonant with the total denial of universals. To a moderate realist (one who finds the universal in the particular), abstracting takes us towards that in reality which renders it intelligible: the essences of things. As Gorman notes, “To abstract is not to falsify since it is merely [a] means to isolate some aspect away from the existential conditions of things in which the aspect has being.” If we supposed the height of a desk to exist apart from the desk, we would be mistaken, but it is surely a greater mistake to imply that the desk has no height apart from subjective fancy. This latter is the error of radical nominalism, exemplified in general semantics.
Authors in general semantics other than Korzybski have for the most part paraphrased his ideas, although there have been some original developments. One cannot always tell how radical a nominalism such an author is espousing. For example, Bois wrote, “To put some order in the facts we have gathered, we classify them according to the features we think they have in common; and we decide—rather, our language has decided for us—what label will apply to each group of them.”(12) This statement is about “judgment” more than about abstractions. The latter, in itself, involves only concept-formation. A concept cannot be called right or wrong since it does not assert anything. It deals in essence, prescinding from existence. Judgment joins sense with intellect in the knower, particular with universal in the known. It is in judgment—beyond that, in reasoning—that we can err. Does “we think” in the foregoing quotation imply that classifications remain in the last analysis subjective? The reader can peruse the entire chapter on “The Process of Abstracting” and make up his own mind.

Wendell Johnson is another prominent author on general semantics. That he holds to a radical nominalism seems clear from such passages as this: “In order to be logical, we must first agree that there are certain categories, or classes, or pigeonholes into which all people, or things, or experiences are to be sorted. In the meantime, there are, of course, no categories, or classes, or pigeonholes in nature. We just say there are categories.”(13) If Johnson means that the category, the type, does not exist apart from particular cases, he is in agreement with Aristotle, the bête noir of the movement. He seems to mean, however, that the type has no status at all outside the mind. Elsewhere, Johnson objects to the sentence, “John is smart,” saying that “John and smartness properly represent, respectively, not a thing and a quality of that thing, but a comprehensive on-going series of events (John) and some part of that series (the smartness).”(14) So near and yet so far! We shall not tarry here over how it is that a series of events comes to be recognized as John, although the process view of reality, the denial of being, is at the very core of the troubles of general semantics. If intelligence is some part of this series of events, we have a great mystery as to why the same name is applied to other parts of other series. Would Johnson say that the concept of intelligence is wholly arbitrary, that we have no valid basis for differentiating between intelligence and bananas? Probably not, but that is what he is saying in effect.

Max Black described general semantics as “a crude nominalism” and commented: “When we are exhortcd to eschew such a general term as ‘cow’ in favor of individual names—‘Bessie,’ ‘Mollie,’ and the like—or are solemnly told by no less an authority than Stuart Chase that ‘fascism is only a word,’ unreflective nominalism reaches a laughable pitch of absurdity.”(15)
Reality as Process

We can now look more deeply into the reasons why general semantics is committed to a radical nominalism. The ultimate basis is found in an ontology (not acknowledged as such) of pure process. This view, too, has its historical lineage. Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus stands out as having taken an extreme position beyond which no one else has been able to go. The aspect of things to which he reduced all else was change or becoming. Most people believe in a world of changing things. Heraclitus kept the change but denied the things. There is no arrow which flies; there is only the flying. There is no grass which grows; there is only the growing. Change, in short, has no subject, such as a wheel that remains a wheel while it turns. Thus, that which is (whatever changes) at the same time is not, because nothing persists through the change. Heraclitus did, to be sure, recognize the need to posit some kind of substratum for this ceaseless alteration. He conceived of it as a kind of ethereal fire.

For a transition to take place, there must be something which is changed. In other words, change presupposes being. We cannot say that what has no being changes. In more conventional philosophical parlance, there is no motion without a subject which is moved. On this subject, too, Korzybski nowhere took a definite, explicit position and argued it systematically. It is sufficiently clear, however, that for him the objective level, the unspeakable ding-in-sich, was an electro-chemical process field. We "know positively [sic] that the internal structure of materials is very different from what we gather by our rough 'senses' on the macroscopic level. It appears of a dynamic character and of an extremely fine structure, which neither light, nor the nerve centres affected by light, can register."(16) For the general semanticists, the world of particle physics is much more real than the world of sense-data, even though the former is highly inferential and many physical scientists insist that such things as protons and electrons are constructs, not necessarily to be endowed with any ontological status. Korzybski held that "we must visualize the world in general as a submicroscopic dynamic electronic process and life in particular as an electro-colloidal process of still much higher complexity."(17) Korzybski did not even make Heraclitus' concession: He denied the need to posit any ultimate substratum of the phenomenal world. To Hayakawa, what we call Bessie, the cow, is really "a whirl of electro-chemical-neural eventfulness . . ."(18) He speaks of "the process that is the real Bessie."(19) Interesting that this hypothetical process should be pronounced more real than the cow we see, and this in the name of empiricism!

Wendell Johnson directly acknowledged the lineage from Heraclitus to Korzybski. The former, he declared, "was over two thousand years
ahead of his time. The notion which he so aptly expressed has about it a distinctly modern flavor. It is one which Einstein might heartily endorse. It is the basic notion of science . . ."(20) The notion of reality as pure process is described vaguely as one which Einstein might endorse. It is not, however, one which he did endorse. If there was one deep faith which actuated most of Einstein's work, it was a conviction that the universe is intelligible in a way that a cosmos of pure becoming would not be. It is also not the case that science is committed in any way to a world of pure becoming.

About the philosophy of pure becoming as used by Korzybski and his followers, Gorman wrote: "... the general semanticists have transferred a scientific hypothesis as to the nature of the sub-microscopic world into the structural metaphysics they wished to construct in order to replace the Aristotelian rigid metaphysics they themselves condemned because it was postulational. They have replaced one hypothesis by another."(21)

General Semantics as Self-Contradictory

Proponents of general semantics might argue that, after all, this treatment has predicated of it only what it predicates of itself. For instance, to the comment that radical nominalism denies identity, a Korzybski follower might reply, "We readily admit denying identity." Such a response would miss the basic point that these positions lead the general semanticists into self-contradiction. They deny universals but depend upon them for the validity of every statement they make. They deny identity but presuppose in their every utterance that there is such a thing. To some extent, the system hides from such internal inconsistencies by trying to have it both ways at once. It denies universals but speaks of "structural invariances." It denies identity but speaks of approximations to the way things are. The radical nominalist is always obliged to resort to such strategems. He cannot say what he means or mean what he says. He says universals. He means particulars. He is committed to a world that one cannot talk about, but he goes on talking.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

3. Ibid., p. 384, emphasis in the original.
4. Ibid., p. 384.
5. Ibid., p. 372.
6. Ibid., p. 373.
7. Ibid., p. 381, emphasis in the original.
8. Ibid., p. 381.