SEMANTICS AND DECISION MAKING

Edward MacNeal

"Gravitation, Darling"

I shall never forget my first meeting with Korzybski. February, 1946. His office at the Institute of General Semantics, 1234 E. 56 St., Chicago. An acquaintance had brought me for a private visit. She was going to take a seminar. I had read Language in Action (1) three times and craved more.

The bald count sat behind a table. He repeatedly raised and dropped a book of paper matches. Three times he said only, "Gravitation, darling." Then, more confidingly, three times, "Space-time curvature, sweetheart." Then, forefinger to his lips, three more drops in verbal silence. Drop. Plop. Splop. Looking straight at me he summed up, "The damn thing still does what it does."

Astounding! Marvelous! What spirit! I signed up.

Thirty-seven years later I feel the heart of general semantics beat in "The damn thing still does what it does." Whatever we say or don't say. Call it "the map doesn't equal the territory." Or "the word is not the thing." Or "whatever you say it is, it isn't." Or "nonidentity." the damn thing still does what it does.

The observation alone — without a practical application — is almost trite. I am not my name. So what?

But the practice of general semantics goes beyond verbal observations. Into the non-verbal level. Into consciousness of abstracting. Into a constant subliminal process that virtually eliminates surprise

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(occasionally a drawback). Knowing about "nonidentity" is not the same as behaving as if one knew.

I repeatedly buried myself in *Science and Sanity*. (2) A few pages at a time. I took the seminar in Chicago. My widowed grandmother put me up in her apartment in Oak Park. She checked with neighbors on current social customs before giving me a telephone message so she could warn me to look out for the girl who had dared to call. She — my grandmother — related to me her nightmares about snakes in her bed as I slogged through Korzybski on order and relations.

I silently practiced calling my "mother" not "Mother" but "Mrs. Cummin," her remarried name. She still did what she did. But I didn’t exactly.

I checked up on Piaget (3) by talking with children. About the name of the moon being on the moon and its being wrong to call it the sun. About the first brother not being a brother. I challenged kids to bring me identical objects. Identity and non-identity are viable topics of conversation at ages three to seven.

I indexed, and dated, and et ceteraed and immersed myself in the practice of general semantics. I wandered a whole day in the mindsweeping solipsist exercise of consciously treating every sense impression as being only in my head — with the "out there" being only a presumption, also in my head.

I laughed at the innumerable mistakes I made based on semantic naivete. Like the time I took an elbow pipe off a sink and then — standing up and wondering where to pour the glop — emptied it into the just-disconnected non-sink.

All this practice eased my progress as an aviation analyst. Transportation is particularly prone to errors that general semantics helps to avoid. Take ten people who make six round trips by air apiece. In the process they become 120 (one-way) passengers. If their journeys require an average of one change of carrier each way, they become 240 (coupon, or on-line) passengers. The analyst for a carrier transporting one-fourth of these "passengers" might then try to analyze the behavior of sixty "people." A tough job. There were only ten people to begin with. (4)

Without Korzybski’s general semantics, how would I have accepted that a passenger is not a person? Answer number one: I wouldn’t have. Answer number two: Superficially.

**General Theory of Values**

Korzybski envisioned in 1933 that his analysis would ultimately lead to "a general theory of values."
It should be recalled that structure, relations, and multi-dimensional order supply us with a language which completely bridges daily-life experiences with all science, leading toward a general theory of values. . . . [A] general theory of values will lead to adjustment or sanity and will some day include ethics, economics, [etc.]. (5)

He emphasized the need for a general theory of values in his concluding remarks and gave many examples involving alternative uses of drugs, law, newspapers, religion, lawyers, and police, among others. (6) Indeed, Korzybski suggested that "a general theory of values . . . may some day include all human interests." (p. 759)

In the signal texts that followed, value judgments were more warned against than analyzed. Stuart Chase avoided "the psychological domain of motives," even while urging "more competent students to extend and make lucid the analysis in this field. . . ." (7) S.I. Hayakawa wrote of judgments, snarl-words, and purr-words, (8) but his point was how "to get at the facts behind the judgment," (9) not at the judgment itself.

Wendell Johnson wrote about "the IFD disease: from idealism to frustration to demoralization." (10) But his interest was more in scientific method than in decision method. Irving Lee's emphasis was on "Facts First — Then Words." (11)

Only Anatol Rapoport attacked the value judgment problem head on in full-length works. He pointed up the bond between value judgments and choice.

The question, "Is X good?" can be asked only if X is a matter of choice. (12)

He suggested the outline of an ethic based on his derivation of the fundamental goals of man from invariant needs, scientific preferences, and semantic principles (for example belonging, freedom of inquiry, and extensional orientation). (13) The effort produced useful insights both into human affairs and into the limitations of the approach.

Structure

The three longest entries in the index to Science and Sanity are: structure, language, and semantic. "Language" receives a few more lines, but "structure" has by far the most page references. (14)

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The detailed subheadings under structure reveal the nature of Korzybski's interests. Chief of these are (number of page references at end):

- as the only content of knowledge — 15
- of knowledge — 7
- language of similar — 7
- linguistic — 52
- as a link between the objective and verbal worlds — 5
- of mathematics — 5
- similarity of — 17

He points to the analysis of structure as the way forward.

Let me be entirely frank about it: the main issues are found in the structure of language . . . (p. 64)

As words are not the objects which they represent, structure, and structure alone, becomes the only link which connects our verbal processes with the empirical data. To achieve adjustment and sanity and the conditions which follow from them, we must study structural characteristics of this world first, and, then only, build languages of similar structure, instead of habitually ascribing to the world the primitive structure of our language. (p. 59)

. . . structure, relations, and multi-dimensional order supply us with a language . . . leading toward a general theory of values . . . [which] will some day include ethics, economics . . . (p. 453)

Physical scientists have a great advantage in matching linguistic structures to empirical structures. The physical structures don't talk back. Star systems do not indulge in self-analysis. Chemical reactions do not volunteer rationalizations. Metals do not mentalize.

Social scientists also have a great advantage: the structure of languages is potentially known.

The structure of the world is, in principle, unknown; and the only aim of knowledge and science is to discover this structure. The structure of languages is potentially known, if we pay attention to it. Our only possible procedure in advancing our knowledge is to match our verbal structures, often called theories, with empirical structures, and see if our verbal predictions are fulfilled empirically or not, thus indicating that the two structures are either similar or dissimilar. (p. 63)

Thus, in analyzing human behavior we have the advantage of our ability to understand the structure of language, the language both of our theories and of our subjects, if we pay attention to it.
Decision-Making Structures

Decision making is a multiordinal term. It encompasses different structures on each of at least five different levels (to be discussed more fully later).

1. Elements: the several parts of decisions that do not constitute decisions in themselves (e.g., situations, courses of action, consequences).

2. Basic patterns: the several ways that one reason can be linked to one course of action (e.g., re-responsive, goal-directed, absolute, originative).

3. Compound patterns: the several ways that multiple reasons can be linked to one course of action (e.g., uniform, multiform, scorecard, sequential).

4. Processes: the several ways that decisions can be transformed or related to each other (e.g., self-reflexive, quantitative, allocative, interpersonal).

5. Systems: the many self-reinforcing networks of decision making (e.g., games, kinship, economics, politics).

Successive levels of structure mark many fields: biology, chemistry, mathematics, music, physics. Korzybski urged frontal assault.

Today there is no way to understand and manage the bewildering diversified array of known facts unless we first get conscious of structure, then orders of complexity of dynamic structures, and finally of the increased complexities when dynamic structures begin to be superimposed upon, and interact with, other dynamic structures. (15)

An assault on decision making can best proceed without the encumbrance of any particular ethical judgments. Such a lightening of the load accords with the usual general semantics practice.

In general semantics we do not “preach” “morality” or “ethics” as such, but we train students in consciousness of abstracting, consciousness of the multiordinal mechanisms of evaluation, relational orientations, etc. . . . and then as a result “morality,” “ethics” . . . etc., follow automatically. (p. xvi)

Whether one subscribes to the last phrase of this quote or not, the rest parallels usual scientific practice. Facts first. We seek a general theory of values that can be understood and tested, one that conforms to scientific canons. Clarity, testability, parsimony, and preferably a deductive ultimate form. Such a theory, to be general, must encompass known value beliefs (ethics, moralities, decision-making systems of all kinds) as specific cases. The theory must also accord with evidence in the social sciences, from psychology at the lower levels of structure to law, economics, and politics at the higher levels of structure.
We face much work. Not just because of the complexities of five levels of structure. Not just because of the breadth and depth of social science. And not just because of the innate difficulties of the subject. We also face enormous semantic difficulties.

Every existing decision-making practice (personal habit, business convention, scientific practice, legal rule, ethical system) depends upon some decision-making structures more than others. These structures are embedded in our language and provide foundations for our more overt actions and beliefs. In exploring alternative foundations, we may inadvertently threaten forgotten justifications for particular actions and beliefs, even for a whole life's work. Resistance is predictable.

Events

What is the structural relation of events in the world to given decisions?

As detached observers we would note that most events occur independently of any one decision we select for study. That is, they either occur before that decision or are unaffected by it. If we note another particular event as the course of action in the decision, we would then see still other events as consequences (in whole or part) of that chosen course of action.

As deciders, however, we view the scene in different colors. Some of the independently occurring events become situations to which we respond. The course of action we take may have counterparts in actions not taken (nonevents). We consider the chosen event and the nonevents as alternatives. Our consideration of consequences ranges from ignoring them completely ("What happens when you get there is not my business, I just deliver the summons") to exalting them as goals ("Winning is everything").

Verbal Splits

Korzybski considered elementalism — splitting verbally what cannot otherwise be split — as a grave structural flaw in language. Among the elementalisms Korzybski found particularly mischievous were 'intellect' and 'emotion,' 'mind' and 'body,' and 'space' and 'time.' (16)

In a non-aristotelian system we do not use elementalistic terminology to represent facts which are non-elementalistic. We use terms like "semantic reactions," "psychosomatic," "space-time," etc., which eliminate the verbally implied splits, and consequent misevaluations. (p. xxxv)
The only usefulness of a map or a language depends on the similarity of structure between the empirical world and the map-languages. If the structure is not similar, then the traveller or speaker is led astray, which, in serious human life-problems, must become always eminently harmful. (p. 61).

Korzybski was well aware of the popular resistance to new terminology, but he insisted on the necessity of non-elementalistic terms, and their practice.

In the beginning of my seminars when I am explaining space-time, students often react by saying, “Oh, you mean ‘space’ and ‘time.’” This translation would abolish the whole modern advances of physics, because of the structural implications of a delusional verbal split. (p. xxxv)

The use of the new terms should be deliberate. (p. 108)

A Structural Flaw

Consider, then, the verbal separation of courses of action from their consequences. So great is this separation that no English term satisfactorily bridges it. Words like “plan” or “program” or “scenario” don’t fill the gap. Such terms create no sense of choices whose effects ripple into the future. Indeed, we need to resort to epigrams. “Just as the twig is bent the tree’s inclined.” “For, as you sow, you are like to reap.” “How great a matter a little fire kindleth.”

Of course, we all “know” that actions have consequences. But watch out. “Knowing” provides no bulwark against semantic habits encouraged by linguistic structure. Korzybski made the point repeatedly.

The moralizing and combating of primitive-made metaphysics is not effectual; but the habitual use of a language of modern structure... produces semantic results... (p. 63)

The main semantic difficulty, for those accustomed to the old, consists in breaking the old structural linguistic habits... (p. 379)

Thus, when non-identity is pointed out, even a moron will “agree,” or wonder at the silliness of an author who fusses about it; yet, because all of us were trained in a linguistic and semantic system based on identity, that infantile identification will unconsciously play havoc with all our [semantic reactions]... (p. 540)

The power of terminology, because of its structural implications, is well known in science, but is entirely disregarded in our daily neuro-linguistic habits. (p. xxxvi)
CORRECTION NOTICE

Et cetera

Summer 1983 Issue

1. On p. 165 the last word of the poem's first line should be changed from "discuss" to "dispense."

2. On p. 162, Item 2, the "re-" after "e.g.," should be deleted.
Curiously enough, the principles involved are often childishly simple, often “generally known,” to the point that on several occasions some older scientists felt “offended” that such “obvious” principles should be so emphasized. Yet my experience, without any exception, was that no matter how much these simple principles were approved of verbally, in no case were they fully applied in practice. (p. 539)

... a single structurally important new term might lead to the re-postulation of the whole structure of language in the given field. (p. 107)

Alterna — what?

Autumn 1950. South side of Chicago. As Ed Kessler and I reach the middle of Kimbark Street on our way to a planning seminar at the university, he proposes to bridge the elementalist gap between action and consequences with the term “alterna-quence.” Before we reach the far curb I reject his suggestion. The term is ugly. Too long. It sounds bad. Besides, it splits the Latin source words in the wrong places. (17)

Wrong again! One ground block farther, I realize that I had reacted as if the new term were an affront. I had not delayed my reaction. Indeed, my response was exquisitely ironic. I had disliked a new term and chosen to reject it without considering the consequences!

TURNING POINTS

I. Words

Oh may we not, sir, please discuss
With, ugh, the term “altern quaence”??

For in the present I would live
And stick to plain “alternative.”

That deeds have outcomes, yes, I’ve heard,
And know it well without that word.

Make up a term to please the ear
That’s short, or sweet, or needed here.

You’ll find me then among the first
To take it up. But your’s the worst.

I pray you, sir, avoid offense.
Abandon now “altern quaence.”

There’s more. I was the planning seminar’s leading advocate of combining actions with consequences before judging the actions. (18) My knowing, even my wanting, hadn’t done the trick.
II. Decisions

Nothing brings me to my senses
Like previewed alternaquences.
Knothole gapes reveal profusions,
Rules, my tastes, my goals, confusions.

Wire-walking on high fences
Barbed with acts and consequences,
Dare I style so goal-directed
Sequelae flow side-effected?
Shall I social signals stack, so
All presume I just react? Oh,
Off, pretenses! Out, defenses!
Come, my live alternaquences.

So much for public penance.

Decision-Making Elements

Although actions cannot in fact be separated from their consequences, deciders talk about them as if they could be. Our theory of decision making must cover this separation and similar elementals. We must avoid being misled by what we believe deciders should do. Rather, we should listen to deciders. What they say is a truer reflection of their semantic habits than what we believe they should say. Our theory must cover semantic habits that we, as general semanticists, might not recommend.

At this point our line-up of decision-making elements must be expanded to include:
1. situations (independently occurring events)
2. courses of action (and alternatives)
3. consequences (including goals)
4. alternaquences (combined actions and consequences)

Basic Patterns

Basic patterns of decision making are the several ways one reason can be linked to one course of action. Ignoring some variations, there are four basic patterns: (19)

1. Responsive. Situation-action. If x happens, do y. ("It was a red light, so I stopped.")
2. Absolute. Direct like or dislike for an action in itself. Do x, you'll like x. ("I'd like my eggs turned over lightly, please.")
3. Goal-directed. Action-desired consequence. To get x, do y. ("I trained hard, because I wanted to be the best.")
4. Originative. Preference for one alternaquence vs. another. Do x, you’ll prefer it to y. (‘I’ve decided that I’d prefer an academic to a business career.’)

Are you tempted to go “behind” these words to reformulate them into other patterns? Resist the temptation. Allow yourself to be led by the words. Look at how they relate a reason to an action. If you can do this, you will have no difficulty sorting the following proposals (the other side of the decision coin) into their four different patterns. (20)

5. Think it through. Would you rather take me or Alice?
6. To enter the kingdom of heaven, believe in Him.
7. I don’t know why. I just like beer.
8. After the first trimester, carry the fetus to term.

The linguistic structural implications of these four patterns are profound. Already we can draw the following conclusions.

a. There is no one semantic pattern of decision making, but at least four (before getting into compound patterns).
b. Decisions can be made in at least three different ways without reference to alternatives.
c. Decisions can be made in at least three different ways without reference to independent situations.
d. Decisions can be made in at least two different ways without reference to any consequences.

Further research reveals that each of the four basic patterns has its own predominant vocabulary. (21) The responsive pattern sports the longest list and the originative pattern suffers with the shortest. A few words (omitting some dead giveaways) that favor each pattern are listed below. Can you figure out which list goes with each of the four patterns? (22)

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<th>List B</th>
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<th>List D</th>
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<tr>
<td>ambition</td>
<td>altogether</td>
<td>cheat</td>
<td>aversion</td>
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<tr>
<td>failure</td>
<td>options</td>
<td>deserve</td>
<td>detest</td>
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<td>instrument</td>
<td>overall</td>
<td>fitting</td>
<td>enjoy</td>
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<tr>
<td>plan</td>
<td>prefer</td>
<td>promise</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problem</td>
<td>rather</td>
<td>revenge</td>
<td>unpleasant</td>
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I need not labor the implications. Certain terms guide decisions into one rather than other basic patterns. You don’t have to reread Science and Sanity to grasp the power of linguistic structure here. Just consider the differences in these questions that might be asked during a marriage crisis. (23)

1. How am I supposed to act in a situation like this?
2. Isn’t it enough just to know that I hate living like this?
3. How do I figure out what it is that I really want?
4. What will happen to me if I stay, or if I go, and which would I prefer?

**Goal-Directed Allness**

Nobody knows today how frequently each basic pattern occurs. My estimate of their frequencies is something like this (with a wide range on each side): responsive, 60%; goal-directed, 20%; absolute, 15%; originative, 5%. (24)

Most of the social science theory I have read over the last thirty-five years, however, concentrates on the goal-directed pattern. Most authors treat decisions — or even behavior in general — as primarily, if not exclusively, goal-directed. The words they use could be "aims," "purposes," "problems," "needs," or others. The terminology doesn’t matter, so long as the primary pattern they see involves taking action toward desired consequences.

A great deal of behavior, and particularly the behavior of individuals within administrative organizations, is purposive — oriented toward goals or objectives. [1950] (25)

Without this purposive aspect, most of the elements of the orientation of action under consideration here — and above all the patterns of value-orientation — would become analytically superfluous epiphenomena. [1951] (26)

Fourth, and finally, what is the relation of decision processes to problem solving? We see these two as much the same, and use the concepts interchangeably in this book. [1962] (27)

Decision-making is ordinarily formalized as a means-end relationship: . . . [1964] (28)

The definition of a problem is simple and hard nosed. "A problem is the difference between the present condition and the desired condition" (or objective). [1969] (29)

... a decision is a deliberate act of selection, by the mind, of an alternative from a set of competing alternatives in the hope, expectation, or belief that the actions envisioned in carrying out the selected alternative will accomplish certain goals. [1972] (30)

This is a book about how people can make decisions and how they can make better decisions. It focuses on an analysis of the effects of policy alternatives upon valued goals. [1976] (31)

By "general intelligent action" we wish to indicate the same scope of intelligence as we see in human action: that in any real situation behavior appropriate to the ends of the system and adaptive to the demands of the environment can occur. . . . [1981] (32)
The last quote comes from a lecture not about people, but about machines. Could it be that we are spiraling back through the beliefs of primitives, animists, and some early Greeks?

**Purpose**

Every "thing" can be seen as inhabited by a purposeful spirit. The spirit of boulders wants to rest undisturbed. The spirit of smoke wants to rise to the sky. The spirit of water wants to flow down to rejoin the mother sea.

This teleological bias has been purged from physical science and most biological science. Evolution, for example, does not depend on any "purpose" of individual organisms to survive. Those best suited to survive under local conditions do so and pass their genes along in greater numbers than those who perish. What an amoeba "wants," even whether it "wants" anything, is beside the point.

But never fear. Goal-directed explanations are alive and well in social science. The trouble is they are too well. Some human behavior is goal-directed — perhaps twenty percent of the decisions made in the basic patterns. But if we trusted the perspectives of most social scientists today, we would view decision making in general as predominantly — or entirely — goal-directed.

Many social scientists who use the goal-directed model realize its limitations. (33) Some salvage it by grafting aspects of responsive, absolute, and originative patterns to the main stem, thus forming a tangled bush. (34) Such theoretical complications — epicycles on epicycles — failed once to preserve the view that the sun and planets revolved around the earth. They will ultimately fail to preserve goal-directedness as the necessary central force of human decision making. The simpler view is that we relate reasons to actions in various ways. That is, we have a multiple choice of decision-making patterns.

**Transformations**

If, in spite of my request, you have been translating my examples into other patterns of your choice, congratulations. You have discovered that you can make such transformations. For instance, the example, "It was a red light, so I stopped" could become "I stopped at the red light to avoid an accident." "I just like beer" could become "I drink beer to give myself pleasure."

Would it be unkind of me to point out that such transformations require jettisoning the evidence given in my examples? If utterances are not evidence of semantic practices, where are we to look? Rearranging that evidence to suit our preconceptions hardly fosters sound scientific inquiry.
Now, let me surprise you, if I can. Much as we deplore rationalization, this ability of ours to transform decisions from one pattern to another, if used properly, has great social utility.

Such transformations, for example, are a necessary process in building and maintaining acceptable decision-making systems. Investigation of an airplane accident may find that a vital structural member cracked and ultimately failed catastrophically under stress. Our interest centers on preventing reoccurrence, a goal-directed concern. Yet our remedy uses the responsive pattern. "Every ten take-off and landing cycles, inspect the engine-wing bolts for hairline fractures." Decision making now focuses on the situation (counting landing cycles) and appropriate action (inspections). We have transformed our goal-directed concern into a responsive rule.

Do not underestimate this process. Whole bodies of law have been built over time through similar responsive transformations.

**Compound Patterns**

The astute reader may have noticed that I jumped from level number two — basic patterns — to take up transformation, a fourth-level process in the five-level scheme of decision-making structures. I will now back up and fill in briefly with level number three — compound patterns.

Compound patterns of decision making link more than one reason to a course of action. Different varieties of compound patterns form the link in different ways.

Uniform patterns merely multiply concurring reasons in the same pattern. ("I do what she says because she’s the boss and because she knows more about it than I do.") (35) Multiform patterns add concurring reasons in other patterns. ("Besides, I enjoy cooperating and I want to get ahead.") Sequential patterns use different patterns in turn, for example to narrow progressively the course of action. ("I needed a typewriter to do my job. I got this one because I liked the touch.")

As we all know, however, multiple reasons invite trouble. Responsive, goal-directed, absolute, and originative patterns generate potentially incompatible reasons for action in the form of rules, goals, likes, dislikes, and preferences. Reaching a decision by weighting these reasons falls into the scorecard pattern. The scorecard pattern thus demotes potentially self-sufficient value judgments to competing "values" of various lesser degrees of importance. Because circumstances change, the scores in one decision cannot be relied upon for future decisions. The relative weights assigned to comfort and decorum, for example, change with the setting.

General semanticists will recognize that value judgments at work
in live decisions have different structural implications from disengaged "values," which some presume to freeze for later reference. The former appears only in context. The latter can be discussed out of context. ("Which is the greater good, honor or truth?" "Which is really more important, wine or spark plugs?")

Other Processes

Now, back to level number four, processes.

In addition to the responsive transformation, so important in law and all standardized procedures, decisions are often transformed from other patterns into the goal-directed pattern (goal setting) and the absolute pattern (taste setting). For example, goals may be chosen in the responsive pattern (revenge, restitution), and tastes may be set in the goal-directed pattern. ("If I learn to like music, art, and antiques, I'll improve my standing with my new associates.")

The casting of decisions into numbers in whole or in part involves the quantitative process. The process adds precision without changing the patterns. ("Take two tablets three times a day with meals. If the pain persists for two days, consult your physician before continuing use.") Quantification fosters common standards of value (money, lives saved, games won) and is essential to pricing and statistical decision analysis (e.g., decision trees).

The allocative process concerns how the resources used or created by one decision affect other decisions. The process links different decisions of a single decider or decision unit. ("If we buy the painting, we won't have the money to fix up the kitchen.") Used with skill, the allocative process improves the efficiency of the linked set of decisions.

The fourth and last group of processes relates the courses of action in a proposal or decision to another decider's decision. These are the interpersonal processes.

In the simplest interpersonal process, the propositional, one decider proposes action to another. Then comes a group of mutual processes (conflicting, competitive, and cooperative). Next come the reciprocal processes, such as economic exchange. Finally, in the organizational processes new decision units (couples, companies, governments) are created and staffed. These new decision units may then create still further decision units (children, committees, trade associations, councils of governments) so that there are many more decision units than people.
The fifth level of decision-making structure consists of self-reinforcing networks of regularly interacting proposals and decisions — that is, systems.

The archetype of such systems is a legal system. I have already noted how the responsive transformation permits decisions in any pattern to be translated into responsive rules. This process lets rules change to reflect concerns that gain enough support in any pattern as a result of actual practice, changed beliefs, or circumstances.

However, law would not be a self-reinforcing system without a secondary set of responsive rules controlling the enactment, maintenance, and revision of the primary rules. The primary rules may be thought of as all the rules except the rules about rules. The primary rules derive from custom, constitutions, and statutes, from rulemaking under delegated authority, from publicly enforceable private acts (contracts, trusts, and wills), and from adjudicative precedents.

Secondary rules govern how these primary rules are to be changed (created, modified, and eliminated), how the authority to make such changes may be delegated, how valid rules can be recognized, how disputes about applying the rules are to be adjudicated, what sanctions and remedies may be imposed, who is to enforce them, and, finally, how these rules about rules may themselves be changed.

The structure of legal systems, then, consists of self-reflexive sets of responsive rules. Similar, but less well-developed, responsive structures support company production procedures and internal family rules.

Indeed, such self-reflexive responsive structures provide the backbone for most decision-making systems, be they games, business firms, market transactions, educational institutions, government agencies, or military establishments.

Note that responsive decisions in themselves relate actions to situations without attention to consequences. How's that for a structural feature? No wonder most of our decision-making systems are so terribly difficult to update.

However, while a doubly responsive structure provides the backbone for these systems, decisions in other patterns may command more attention. Thus business firms appear to function primarily as goal-directed money-making decision units. Decision analysts often treat executive decisions as being in the goal-directed pattern constrained by responsive rules. A given decision may certainly feel like that to the individual. For the system to continue, however, the conventions — and not just the limits — provided by
the responsive rules are indispensable, both when goals are in force and when they are being revised. We might better speak of goal-directed decisions supported, or enabled, by self-reinforcing responsive systems. Without the doubly responsive backbone, there would be no system to direct. Building a responsive system is like building a home so that one has a place in which to do other things.

Some systems, such as markets and education, permit a broad range of decisions in all patterns. Absolute delights, originative concern for alternaquences, as well as responsive, goal-directed, and compound patterns are supported by such systems.

Governments also function as doubly responsive systems enabling other patterns to function on a broad scale. Indeed, governments set responsive rules determining what sorts of systems will be allowed to function in other sectors.

Implications

The responsive pattern, then, plays a fundamental role in social decision systems. Yet the responsive pattern requires in itself no consideration of alternatives and no consideration of consequences. (Eighteen-year-old males must register for the draft. Persons with income must pay rule-determined taxes.) And, unfortunately, the responsive pattern fosters feelings of both righteousness and guilt. ("Did I do the right thing in that situation?")

Most of the direction given to such responsive systems takes the form of goal-directed efforts to change their direction. The goal-directed pattern in itself requires no consideration of independent events (situations or contexts), no consideration of alternatives, and no consideration of consequences other than the goal itself. ("I've got to have a car; I'll steal one if I must.") These attributes contribute to such possibilities as useless wars and ruinous strikes. Further, the goal-directed pattern fosters feelings of both success and failure. ("Did I make it this time?")

Thus, our fundamental social institutions require responsive systems and promote goal-directed decisions. Both patterns say "Value judgments first, facts last." These are structural difficulties on a grand scale.

Nor does the clash of competing groups clamoring to install their own responsive rules and goals on all of us cure these structural difficulties. "Right this wrong." "Fight that disease." "Resist those enemies." "Save this world." "Join our special paradise." Who can form a coherent consideration of alternaquences in the hubbub and shove of the throng at a bazaar?

The absolute pattern plays a large role for individuals, but offers little for our institutions. We can all make personal choices based
simply on what we enjoy or dislike. However, not since the days of
absolute monarchs have the bare likes and dislikes of individuals had
legally enforceable influence over others. Autocracy has dwindled
and institutionalized absolute patterns have retreated to their final
strongholds — the worlds of fashion and taste.

The originative pattern — choosing on the basis of preference for
alternatives without reference to rules, goals, likes, or dislikes —
has a larger potential for institutions. Only the originative pattern
says unambiguously “Facts first.” The originative pattern can be
used at the highest level, delegating the assembly of alternatives
(options planning) while preserving the final choice for the execu-
tive. But public acceptance of such decision making is only begin-
ning. An agency devoted to neutral statements of alternatives —
one that provided probabilistic forecasts like the weather bureau, but
for major national or worldwide policy decisions — has not yet
appeared. Indeed, even a structurally correct formulation of an
alternative-with-its-consequences — a term like “alternance” —
struggles for its semantic place in the sun.

Whither?

It is time to look at the whole of decision making and social
organization with a Korzybskian eye.

From a [non-aristotelian] point of view, a new era of human
development seems possible, in which, by mere structural analysis and
a linguistic revision, we will discover disregarded semantic mechanisms
operating in all of us, which can be easily influenced and controlled;
and we will discover, also, that at least a great deal of prevention can be
accomplished. (p. 547)

Decision-making patterns and processes display such semantic
mechanisms. Would not a better understanding of them based on
Korzybskian methods give us more power to adjust decision-making
options?

It seems, also, that we will discover more about the dependence of
“human nature” on the structure of our languages, doctrines, institu-
tions [etc.], and will conclude that for adjustment, stability [etc.], we
must adjust these man-made and man-invented semantic and other
conditions in conformity with that newly discovered “human nature.”
(p. 547)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

*Language in Thought and Action* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,
1963).


5. Korzybski, op. cit., p. 453. Note that all quotations followed by a page reference are also from Science and Sanity, 3d ed.

6. Ibid., pp. 554-557.


17. The correct splits would be alter(other)/natus(born) and con(with/sequens(following). That's one thing eight years of Latin did for me. By similar logic, the short name for helicopters should be “pters,” since the original—in this case Greek—terms were helico(screw) and pter(wing.)

18. Reference to this 1950 seminar’s concern with decision-making methods is noted briefly by John Friedmann, Retracking America (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1981), p. 4.


20. The answers are: 5, originative; 6, goal-directed; 7, absolute; 8, responsive.


22. The answers are: A, goal-directed; B, originative; C, responsive; D, absolute.

23. The patterns are: 1, responsive; 2, absolute; 3, goal-directed; 4, originative.


35. The example immediately preceding footnote 35 contains two responsive reasons. The next example contains an absolute followed by a goal-directed reason. The last example in the paragraph shows a goal-directed reason followed by an absolute reason.