

ISHMAEL AND GENERAL SEMANTICS THEORY

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I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Ishmael," I said, "you're really confusing me."

"Good. That's progress. I must make you stumble over your cultural taboos. I know of no other way to break down the way you've been conditioned to respond to words. When you hear the word gang, you've been conditioned to think, 'Bad — must not think about.' When you hear the word cult, you've been conditioned to think, 'Bad — must not think about.' When you hear the word tribe, you've been conditioned to think, 'Good — okay to think about.'"

"What am I supposed to think about when I hear the words gang and cult?"

"You can start by thinking, 'The word is not the thing.' You can start by thinking, 'The thing does not become bad by being called a bad name.' You can start by thinking, 'The fact that this thing has been called a bad name doesn't mean I can't think about it.'"

(Quinn, 1997, p.213)

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NEVER BEFORE have I recommended a book in the way that I recommend Quinn's novel, *Ishmael*.

To anyone who earnestly desires that today's children may have the possibility and opportunity to grow to maturity, and eventually to see their own grandchildren grow to maturity, I say: Within seven days of learning of the existence of this book, READ IT.

What on earth could elicit so passionate, so "un-cool" a recommendation as that?

By way of answer, first, let me summarize the story. Then I'll re-examine *Ishmael* from a general semantics point of view, taking into account recent developments in general semantics theory which pertain to human survival.

Quinn's novel presents a first-person narrative — in my opinion, a spoken narrative. We never learn the name of the narrator, and we learn nothing whatsoever about his audience. When the narrative opens, the narrator has just read an ad in the CLASSIFIED section of the newspaper. The ad says, "TEACHER seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person." (p.4)

The narrator proceeds to have a temper-tantrum:

... I choked and cursed and spat and threw the paper to the floor. Since even that didn't seem to be quite enough, I snatched it up, marched into the kitchen, and shoved it into the trash. (p.3)

Probably in response to a question, the narrator explains this outrageous behavior by saying that, a couple of decades ago, he had spent several years looking for,

... someone out there with an unknown wisdom who could dispel my disillusionment and bewilderment: a teacher. (p.5)

He never found one, and eventually, concluding that no such critter exists, gave up and went on about his life as best he could;

... but something died inside of me — something that I'd always sort of liked and admired. (p.6)

And now this CHARLATAN advertises in the *newspaper* — and of course,

... by noon two hundred mooncalfs, softheads, boobies, ninnyhammers, noodleheads, gawkies, and assorted oafs and thickwits would doubtless be lined up at the address given ... (p.4)

Somehow the narrator overcomes his resistances and goes to the address given. He sees no sign of any other respondent to the ad; and he finds and accepts a teacher. The teacher calls himself Ishmael, and the text even gives an account of how he comes to use that name. Almost the entire remainder of the text consists of the dialogue between these two characters, with an occasional "I said," "He said," etc.

Ishmael says that his teaching concerns the topic of *captivity*. He shows the relevance of this usage of the term *captivity* to the topic of *saving the world* succinctly:

Ishmael thought for a moment. "Among the people of your culture, which want to destroy the world?"

"Which *want* to destroy it? As far as I know, no one specifically *wants* to destroy the world."

"And yet you do destroy it, each of you. Each of you contributes daily to the destruction of the world."

"Yes, that's so."

"Why don't you stop?"

I shrugged. "Frankly, we don't know how."

"You're captives of a civilizational system that more or less compels you to go on destroying the world in order to live."

"Yes, that's the way it seems."

"So. You are captives — and you have made a captive of the world itself. That's what's at stake, isn't it? — your captivity and the captivity of the world." (p.25)

In pursuit of the topic of *captivity*, Ishmael defines three terms: (a) By *story* (myth), he means a scenario which interrelates humanity, the world, and the gods so as to account for "how things came to be this way." (b) By *to enact* (a story), he means living so as to make the story a reality (striving to make it come true). (c) By *culture*, he means a people enacting a story. (p.41) Ishmael argues that a people enacting a story can, and sometimes do, keep themselves unaware of the story they enact.

Let me express that *unawareness* in Gestalt terms: When we humans sense, feel, and/or move, this occurs as if by the forming of a Gestalt — a structure made up of a *figure of focal interest* against a (back)ground more or less *empty* of interest. Thus when we examine the story we enact in such a way that we complete our Gestalt; that means we come to "see" our own story as figure against a background of other stories which we take seriously (regard as both possible to enact and legitimate to enact). But we can also arrange to conceal or ignore the story we enact. To manage this, we must somehow block the process of figure/ground formation. Thereafter, we cannot "see" the story we enact — cannot apprehend it as even existing at all. And once having accomplished that, we have made ourselves into captives of our story.

Apropos of our culture, the currently dominant world culture, Ishmael asserts, "[It has] a single, perfectly unified story. You just have to think mythologically. ... I'm talking about your culture's mythology, of course. I thought that was obvious." (p.45) The narrator readily agrees that other cultures may enact myths, but he has particular difficulty finding this

discussion relevant to his own culture, since he believes that he lives in a society entirely myth-free. (Even Joseph Campbell believed that we have no myth — and lamented its lack.)

Having provided that much by way of background, Ishmael and his pupil undertake to disclose, to unconceal, the usually unnoticed, unacknowledged myth which underlies the currently dominant world culture, throughout both East and West.

In the course of their exploring, Ishmael and his pupil do disclose the myth they sought. They express it in terms of a combination of well-established insights from biology, ecology, ethology, anthropology, archaeology, etc., and of mythological imagery. They put these pieces together into a story which does in fact interrelate humanity, the world, and the gods and does account for "how things came to be this way." Few, I believe, would doubt the originality of their accomplishment (Quinn's accomplishment) — nor its accuracy. In Quinn's hands, Ishmael and his pupil reveal to readers the story which we living humans, members of the currently dominant world culture (East and West), do appear to enact — and do appear to live as captives of. The myth they frame explains what we observe.

Furthermore, they show that those who enact that story (and, unfortunately, that includes both you and me) thereby put themselves at war with life on planet Earth. This point comes through clearly and convincingly. Ishmael and his pupil make it plain that what we do to our environment, that progressively makes the planet less and less habitable, does not happen by accident or mistake. Instead, it occurs as the direct result of living the way we live. By enacting the story we enact, we commit our full forces, as individuals and as a culture or a collection of cultures, to the pursuit of species suicide and extinction. Whether we SAY we do so, or not.

Still further, Ishmael and his pupil examine a contrasting myth — a well-tested story, so structured that those who enact it ally themselves with life on the planet, and make themselves-and-the-biosphere richer, more diverse, more

inter-related, ecologically more stable. Ishmael argues that this myth had its origins back at least three million years ago, among the first humans on planet Earth. Over that entire span, it has evolved with the various human populations, and has survived the pragmatic test of providing a basis for sustainable, viable ways of living on this planet, for the tens or hundreds of thousands of human groups which have arisen here. Today the people who enact this alternative myth make up only a tiny fraction of the current human population. They belong to the few thousands of small, more or less independent cultural groups still extant outside the currently dominant world culture. But their myth still works. Ours does not. In only the roughly 10,000 years since the first beginnings of our own culture, we have brought ourselves to the edge of species suicide and extinction, and the whole biosphere to the edge of catastrophic collapse.

By disclosing these two contrasting stories, our narrator and his teacher make it possible for us readers to complete our own cultural Gestalt, and so to perceive the myth underlying our currently dominant world culture and some of the consequences of enacting it. In the process, Ishmael and his pupil demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt that our relentless drive towards species suicide and extinction does not have its basis in anything generically human; but rather, it follows *only* from *our* myth — it does not occur at all in cultures which enact that other myth.

Ishmael's manner of teaching, in one sense, makes the whole narrative possible, and believable. On first glance, readers might regard it as Socratic dialogue. But the tone differs from that of Socrates. The wily old Greek rarely if ever set out to prove anything so crude as, "You don't know as much as Socrates does." Instead, he addresses the proposition, "You don't know as much as you THOUGHT you did." For his adversaries, a dialogue with Socrates must have felt like put-down after put-down — and I contend, it feels something like that even to modern-day readers. In contrast, Ishmael does not treat his pupil as an adversary; and he has a

very different message: "You know this material — Mother Culture has been whispering it into your ear during practically every waking moment of your life. You know it — DIG!" Again and again, the pupil denies knowing it, then digs, and comes up with the treasure. The experience of reading *Ishmael* (and re-reading and studying it) seems deeply affirming. It also disturbs me profoundly — and increases its impact by coming through as so "Right on!"

The climax of Quinn's novel comes when Ishmael's pupil enunciates a new vision of the destiny of man. I have no intention of spoiling your fun by telling you just what he said; but I can legitimately show a bit of the reaction of the two characters to this vision. The pupil says,

"This is what we need. Not just stopping things. Not just less of things. People need something positive to work for. They need a vision of something that ... I don't know. Something that ..."

"I think what you're groping for is that people need more than to be scolded, more than to be made to feel stupid and guilty. They need more than a vision of doom. They need a vision of the world and of themselves that inspires them."

"Yes. Definitely. Stopping pollution is not inspiring. Sorting your trash is not inspiring. But this ... thinking of ourselves in a new way, thinking of the world in a new way ... This ..."

I let it go. What the hell, he knew what I was trying to say. (pp.243-4)

In order to complete my task with this text, I must deal with the overall logical structure of Ishmael's (Quinn's) argument. Ishmael repeatedly attributes to us as members of the currently dominant world culture the unquestioning attitude that we already possess "The One Right Way To Live." This conviction has supported the central actions of the members of our culture over the course of some 10,000 years. These actions have included (a) practicing a style of agriculture

which treats the entire biosphere as a human possession, containing two and only two classes of creatures: those USEFUL to humans (as food, or otherwise), which we cultivate; and UNNECESSARY organisms, which we exterminate; (b) annihilating or absorbing any and all human neighbors not of our culture; (c) waging war on neighboring tribes within our overall culture, a process which ends up institutionalizing conquest and domination.

For us to perpetrate such acts, we must blindly believe that we possess "The One Right Way To Live"; and that belief then requires us to impose our way of living on others. But, logically speaking, what does this "One Right Way" phrase mean? To answer that question, I summarize some recent developments in epistemology and general semantics.

In his *Science and Sanity*, Korzybski (1933) discloses a fundamental theoretical error encoded in human knowledge (within the currently dominant world culture) up to that date. He traces this error to the logical construct of **identity** (or the binary relation of **identical with**). In effect, Korzybski makes a quick tour of the universe, seeking to answer questions such as, "In a dynamically-changing cosmos which has human observers in it, when and where may we LEGITIMATELY use the logical construct of *identity*? When and where does the notion of *entire and absolute agreement or negation of difference* prove valid? Under what circumstances does it apply?" His considered opinion: Never, and nowhere. Under no circumstances does *identity*, taken in that sense, survive scrutiny.

Let's consider that conclusion in one application. In a cosmos assumed to undergo dynamic change and to have dynamically-changing human observers in it, the notion of *identity* implies that someone compares at least two 'entities' in some way; and it requires, or assumes, that the results of this comparing will indicate that the 'entities' compared show *entire and absolute agreement or negation of difference*. This immediately leads to several related difficulties:

(a) The notion of *comparing* (two 'entities') implies making measurements of some kind.

(i) *Difficulties concerning WHO makes the judgment of "absolute agreement or negation of difference"*: For humans to make a measurement TAKES A WHILE, and leaves them fundamentally altered. By hypothesis, the process requires them to use their sensori-motor apparatus, brains, etc. Consequently, this process implicates the imagery of "taking in new material," or "need and satisfaction": Before the "while" in question, our humans intended to make a measurement, and have not yet done it and "taken in" the result; after the "while," they intended to make a measurement, and HAVE done it and have "taken in" the result. Hence at the end of the "while," they now "include" or "consist of" new material — the results of the measurement. How can an altered observer back up the judgment that nothing has altered?

(ii) *Difficulties concerning "the 'entities' we compare"*: In a cosmos assumed to undergo dynamic change, we human observers may not assume that, over the "while" required to make the measurement, the 'entity' we set out to measure remains unchanged. For example, consider *mass*: In principle, even a lump of platinum, or of borosilicate glass, has a vapor pressure. Depending on the scale, and the purpose, of the measurements, we may IGNORE these specified and unspecified changes; but we must not DENY that they occur.

(b) In a dynamically-changing cosmos with human observers in it, the processes by which we *measure* can at best deliver some kind of approximation, within statistical limits of error. No process of *measuring* — e.g., even in what many people regard as the "trivial" case, in which we do a given

determination over and over again on one 'entity' — can deliver results in principle capable of showing *entire and absolute agreement or negation of difference*. And if no process of *measuring* a single 'entity' can show it as unchanged and unchanging ("identical with itself"), then in principle no process of *comparing two 'entities'* can show them as displaying "absolute sameness in all respects or negation of difference."

These remarks do not exhaust the list of difficulties which follow from the construct of *logical identity*.

Having declared the construct of *identity* intrinsically incapable of surviving scrutiny (at least, in a cosmos regarded as dynamic and as having human observers in it), Korzybski then makes an outrageous suggestion: Since it never holds, he says, let's not RELY on this construct. Korzybski proposes that we **reject identity** — disallow it as a valid "relation."

As students of general semantics already know, Korzybski begins the job of eliminating the pervasive error which he discloses. He generates what he calls a **non-aristotelian system**, and eventually, he proposes **premises** for it: three **undefined terms** (*structure, order, and relations*); and three **non-aristotelian postulates** (*Non-identity, Non-allness, and Self-reflexiveness*). (Korzybski, 1941) To put his postulates into ordinary English, Korzybski utilizes the '**map**'-'**territory**' analogy, which expresses a distinction similar to the distinction between **Name** and **Thing Named**.

I rework that analogy by positing a **designated observer** who observes **one-particular-organism-as-a-whole-dealing-with-its-environment-at-a-date**, and records what she/he observes. This designated observer explains what he/she observes by assuming that any living organism generates '**maps**' (perhaps non-verbal) of that '**territory**' composed of "what goes on in and around itself" — and then guides itself by these '**maps**,' in the process **putting the 'maps' to test**. (Hilgartner, Harrington & Bartter, 1991)

Now, when I take the role of Designated Observer, I find that any biological situation, like a good story, has a beginning, a middle, and an end or **outcome**. Provided our organ-

ism lives through the situation, it has opportunities to judge the 'maps' it started out with against the outcome — and opportunities to reject and discard any 'maps' which lead to outcomes more or less "unfavorable" from the point of view of the organism (or in logical terms, which appear **disconfirmed** by the outcome).

To state this point in logical language, I say that any organism, from bacterium to human, survives in the midst of its in-principle-unknown environment by acting like a **self-correcting system** — by acting in accord with the patterns described in (at least one version of) the logic of science.

These comments give me what I need to spell out the logical structure of the fundamental theoretical error encoded in (our subset of) human knowledge, as disclosed by Korzybski. Consider for a moment what would follow if I could generate a 'map' which represented the 'territory' *perfectly accurately, entirely completely, and entirely objectively* — a 'map' which stood in a perfect one-to-one relation with the 'territory'; or in short, a 'map' *identical with the 'territory.'*

Now, if I **COULD** generate a 'map' identical with the 'territory,' I would find myself possessed of **absolute certainty** (concerning a static universe devoid of human observers). In fact, I wouldn't have to conduct experiments; I wouldn't even have to **LOOK** at the 'territory' — I would just **KNOW** (as they say in Spanish) "for certain-sure!"

I hold that kind of *identity* as impossible to achieve. I feel so confident of this judgment that I choose, accept, and espouse the non-aristotelian premises of Korzybski (which posit a dynamically-changing cosmos with human observers in it) as my most fundamental presuppositions. In effect, I posit that any 'map' I may make remains intrinsically **inaccurate, incomplete, and self-referential**; and I insist on saying so at the level of my premises. However, any human — or any culture — can **PRETEND** to "absolute certainty," by the not-so-simple expedient of refusing to throw out the guesses which, upon testing, appear disconfirmed.

As a shorthand way of designating the class of guesses which pretend to "absolute certainty," I refer to them as consequences of **positing 'map'-'territory' identity**. By definition of the term *mistake*, a human — or a culture — that posits 'map'-'territory' identity engages in an archetypal example of "making a mistake."

Granted only that much logical machinery, this frame of reference can describe the structure of human behavior throughout its whole range of reliability, from that most likely to support individual and species survival in a sustainable and sustaining ecosystem (namely, that based on distinguishing between 'map' and 'territory' — making one's guesses, testing them, and living with the consequences), to that most likely to end in individual, social, and ecological collapse, species suicide and extinction (namely, that based on failing to distinguish between 'map' and 'territory' — clinging to one's unrevised guesses, no matter what).

In Quinn's novel, when Ishmael and his pupil disclose the myth enacted by the members of the currently dominant world culture — by us — they show that our story includes, and indeed, rests upon, the rigid belief that we have found "The One Right Way To Live." In light of these epistemological considerations, I suggest that that belief amounts to a special case of *failing to distinguish between 'map' and 'territory'* — a special case of the archetypal error of pretending to "absolute certainty."

Near the end of his last lesson with Ishmael, the narrator asks a crucial question:

"What do I do if I earnestly desire to save the world?"

Ishmael frowned at me ... for a long moment. "You want a program?"

"Of course I want a program."

"Then here is a program: The story of Genesis must be reversed. First, Cain must stop murdering Abel. This is essential if you're to survive. The [people of other cultures]

are the endangered species most critical to the world — not because they're humans but because they alone can show the destroyers of the world that there is no *one right way* to live. And then, of course, you must spit out the fruit of that forbidden tree. You must absolutely and forever relinquish the idea that you know who [and what] should live and who [and what] should die on this planet." (p.248)

After they discuss a couple of ways to do that, the narrator comes up with an objection.

"One thing I know people will say to me is 'Are you suggesting we go back to being hunter-gatherers?' "

"That of course is an inane idea," Ishmael said. "The [lifestyle of the peoples from other cultures] isn't about hunting and gathering, it's about letting the rest of the community live — and agriculturists can do that as well as hunter-gatherers." He paused and shook his head. "What I've been at pains to give you is a new paradigm of human history. The [lifestyle of people from other cultures] is not an antiquated thing that is 'back there' somewhere. Your task is not to reach back but to reach forward."

"But to what? We can't just walk away from our civilization the way the Hohokam did."

"That's certainly true. The Hohokam had another way of life waiting for them, but you must be inventive — if it's worthwhile to you. If you care to survive." He gave me a dull stare. "You're an inventive people, aren't you? You pride yourselves on that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then invent." (p.250)

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