

ETHICS:

A GENERAL SEMANTICS

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Introduction

ISSUES SUCH AS abortion, euthanasia, informed consent, and genetic control have become more pressing as the technology of medicine has achieved greater effectiveness and power. In response to this, the field of medical ethics has evolved. As new developments occur in science, technology, and social life, we can expect more ethical problems to arise, with us as the "guinea pigs." What can we derive from applying general semantics (g.s.) to these issues?

Little of an explicit nature has been written about ethics in the g.s. literature. Korzybski considered 'moralizing', as such, useless ([1933] 1994, p.296). He believed that internalizing an

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extensional (roughly, a 'fact'-based) orientation would necessarily lead to more 'ethical' behavior. How might this happen? What ethical assumptions lie at the heart of the g.s. system? How might applying g.s. lead to more useful, more ethical behavior?

In this article, based on the more extensive analysis of my doctoral work (Kodish 1996), I will first briefly define the fields of ethics and g.s., then will discuss some of the ethical principles underlying g.s., and finally will suggest some ways in which the principles and methods of g.s. can be applied to so-called ethical problem-solving.

Ethics and G.S.

Every discipline has its own burning questions. These questions help define it and lead its practitioners in their search for understanding. What burning questions define the field of ethics? I suggest this as a major defining question for the field of ethics: *How 'should' I (we) behave?* And so I'll define ethics in the following practical way: the art of deciding what we as individuals and in society 'should' do when faced with competing values, circumstances, consequences, etc.

G.s., too, has its burning questions. I suggest *this* as a major one: *How do we know what we know?* Here, I view knowledge in the broadest possible sense to involve *all* aspects of our semantic, or evaluational, reactions (so-called 'thinking', 'feeling', 'acting', etc.) including verbal and non-verbal levels of experience. Following Korzybski and others, I define g.s. as a scientific, and thus up-to-date and open-ended, *applied epistemology* or theory of knowledge (Pula 1994, p.xvii).

Some Ethical Assumptions of G.S.

As an *applied* epistemology, intended for *practical, personal, everyday* use, g.s. involves a "theory of values" (Korzybski [1933] 1994, p.xxxiv). It is grounded upon certain values, principles, assumptions, etc., that clearly have ethical implications. Let's look at some of them.

Time-Binding

The notion of time-binding provides the basis upon which the system of g.s. has been built. Time-binding consists of the characteristic human ability to use language and other symbols to transmit information across time. This allows for the formation of cultures and the ability to study cultures. It gives each individual the potential to profit from his or her own experiences and other people's experiences. Through time-binding, each generation potentially can start where the last generation left off.

The value of cooperation seems vital to us as time-binders. We build on what others have said and done, as others will build upon what we say and do. Seeing ourselves as time-binders, potential contributors to the future wealth or illth of humanity, can thus give us a sense of responsibility towards others.

In *Levels of Knowing and Existence: Studies in General Semantics*, Harry Weinberg wrote:

... Any form of thought, activity, custom, type of government, or theory is good to the degree that it fosters the development of effective time-binders; conversely, it is bad to the degree that it does not Because the nervous system of all men are essentially the same, any custom which warps the functioning of the nervous system is bad, even if it is accepted by that society, for *in the long run* it will lead to its destruction. (p.158) ... Inherent, then, in our concept of the effective time-binder is an attitude, an ethical judgment, a moral precept as strong as any of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not knowingly warp the functioning of any nervous system." Or stated positively, "So act as to make thyself a better time-binder; so act as to enable others to use their time-binding capacities more effectively." (1959, p.159)

We can ask what ecologist Garrett Hardin has called "the time-binding question 'And then what?' ..." (1982, p.155). Asking "What then?" we can begin to consider short-term, long-

term, intended and unintended consequences of our actions. Viewing ourselves as time-binders we can ask "What kind of future do we want to project? How can we behave to encourage that future?" (Kodish and Kodish, 1993, p.150).

Scientific Methods

Another basic theme provides ethical underpinnings to g.s.: the promotion of scientific methods of problem-solving. G.s. teacher Wendell Johnson contended that, "Korzybski's greatest contribution to our thinking was this proposition, that the scientific method be taken out of the laboratory and be put to use in everyday life" (1972, pp.33-34).

Johnson wrote that a scientific approach "... reduces essentially to three questions What do you mean? ... How do you know? and What then?" (p.37). "I have discovered," he said, "that these three are about the most liberating questions you can imagine" (p.37).

Science is not value-neutral. Some current philosophers of science have begun to acknowledge a basic value of scientific inquiry that Korzybski upheld: that if we wish to live, it is better to know than not to know. This relates to the notion of the "natural order of abstracting," which involves what Korzybski called an "extensional orientation" towards living; i.e., giving primary value to non-verbal happenings and 'facts', with the ability to use verbal higher-order abstractions as needed.

Conditionality

Conditionality is a basic goal of g.s. training. Our actions exist on a continuum. At one pole we have unconditional or signal reactions: automatic, habitual, and absolutistic. Here we identify, i.e., we treat two or more individual people, situations, or times as exactly 'the same' in all respects. In this way we ignore important differences among them. With an unconditional or signal approach, we orient ourselves primarily by our static 'perceptual' and 'conceptual' maps. In

doing so we can easily end up with hardening of the categories: responding to new circumstances in terms of old and stereotyped (unconditional) behavior patterns.

At the opposite pole, conditional or symbol reactions depend upon *not* identifying each circumstance with others in this way. Thus we recognize the individuality of different people, situations, times, etc. With a conditional approach, we continually update our 'perceptual' and 'conceptual' maps in response to the changing territories they represent. Evaluational and behavioral flexibility results.

This emphasis on conditionality brings a g.s. orientation in line with the situation ethics of Joseph Fletcher (1966), which stresses flexible guidelines rather than absolute rules of ethics.

G.s. provides tools for bringing a conditional, situational approach into everyday living. These give us ways of 'thinking', speaking, and reacting more suitably to changing conditions. For example, dating our evaluations reminds us of changes occurring over time. Indexing our terms and statements makes them as specific and descriptive as possible and so more likely to reflect the individuality of people and events.

Abstracting

In g.s., abstracting refers to an individual's nervous system process of mapping or constructing his or her experience and representing it in words and other symbols. From a g.s. perspective, attributing value to anything remains a human activity resulting from the abstracting processes of each of us. Values, as such, do not exist as absolute givens outside of us. *We assign value* to objects, people, animals, fetuses, life-support systems, etc., as well as to higher-order abstractions such as principles, beliefs, so-called values, etc. The consequences of assigning values can be studied and we can modify these values accordingly. This does not result in the negation of all values. Instead, flexible values and principles

result whereby we can encompass more of the complexities of human life than allowed by absolutistic approaches to ethics.

Multi-Valued Orientation

Such flexibility involves remembering the general semantist's emphasis on a multi-valued orientation: *not* either/or — *rather*, both/and. The conditional or situational decision-maker remains aware that different viewpoints can exist in a situation. Degrees of agreement may exist in a dispute. A particular action may have a number of consequences with varying degrees of 'goodness' and 'badness'.

Logical Fate

Logical fate was the term Korzybski used for the notion that assumptions determine behavior. Ultimately, preferences and values function as basic assumptions by which each individual lives her or his life. At bottom, our value assumptions may not agree with those of others. Different people will function with differing, sometimes contradictory, value assumptions. Conflict may not be avoidable.

Yet, if we desire agreement where possible, it seems important to understand these value differences as clearly as possible.

Ethical Implications of Other Formulations

In g.s., elementalism refers to the verbalistic splitting up of what is not so divided in whatever we talk about. If we elementalistically split ethics from other concerns, we err. If ethics involves making decisions among competing values, circumstances, consequences, etc., then ethical considerations of some sort, either trivial or serious, permeate every aspect of living. I suggest that ethical considerations permeate every aspect of g.s. as well. I invite you to consider some of the other formulations of g.s. What values do they presuppose? What ethical implications do they lead to?

How Can G.S. Contribute to Ethical Decision-Making?

Finally, I'd like to present one important g.s. tool for use in our discussions of medical ethics issues — the distinction between two kinds of statements: statements of fact and statements of inference.

In ethical disputes, statements about values, 'feelings', etc., can easily involve my confusing inferences with statements of fact. This occurs, for example, when I make a so-called value judgment of the form "x 'is' 'bad', 'evil', 'unnatural', 'immoral', 'unethical', etc." or that "y 'is' 'good', 'virtuous', 'moral', etc."

Statements like these have the superficial appearance of descriptive reports, statements of fact. However, statements like these will more likely involve inferences. Statements of inference go beyond a given set of facts. We must make inferences if we wish to draw conclusions, make decisions, etc. However, if made uncritically by confusing inferences with descriptive statements of fact, inferences can mislead us.

If I say "abortion is murder" my statement reads like a descriptive statement about abortion. But it says more about me and my personal values than it does about abortion. In making this statement, I incorrectly project or allocate to abortion what more accurately pertains to myself. This kind of uncritical inference provides the basis for many forms of absolutistic ethics.

I may more accurately take responsibility for my own value judgments by saying that "*I find x good,*" "*I consider y unethical,*" "*I prefer z,*" etc. I can thus turn an uncritical inference into a statement of fact about my own values and preferences. It also seems more accurate to eschew terms like 'evil', 'unnatural', etc., that project the source of my judgments outside of myself.

Rather than elementalistically dichotomizing 'fact' and 'value', as some philosophers have done, I would recognize as more accurate that in saying "I prefer or value y over x" I

make a statement *both* of 'fact' and 'value'. I can consider it a 'fact' that "I prefer or value y to x."

In discussions on medical and other ethical issues, I encourage you to turn statements about your own values, preferences, etc., from uncritical inferences into descriptive statements about yourself.

Each of us abstracts differently. Each of us starts from more or less differing assumptions. Some conflict will occur. As we look for agreement, we do well to remember to give up the search for complete agreement. However, let us seek what agreement we can by uncovering and clarifying our own values and helping others to uncover and clarify theirs.

Taking ownership of your own values provides an important first step to examining and possibly revising your values. To do this you can follow a principle well stated by g.s.-inspired author, Robert Anton Wilson: "*Make your demands explicit ... and then you and the other guy can negotiate meaningfully*" (1986, p.32).

Recognizing the distinction between fact and inference statements also allows us to see how we can get to judgments or inferences about what we 'should' or 'ought' to do from a given set of facts, which, as I have argued here also includes our values.

This appears to violate the famous "is-ought distinction" which many philosophers attribute to Hume. The is-ought distinction involves the notion that "... judgments that one ought to do something, cannot be derived logically from judgments that such and such is the case" (O'Hear 1985, p.256).

It seems useful to remember the distinction between statements of fact and ought statements or injunctions which function as inferences. As implied by Hume's distinction, to say that "These apples 'are' bitter" doesn't automatically lead to "You shouldn't eat any of these apples!"

However, we can get to some conclusions about what we 'should' do by a form of ethical reasoning that George Smith has called a practical syllogism (1979, p.294). In this kind of

argument, factual statements connect with an injunction by means of a conditional if-then statement, based on a value that someone holds: "If you don't want to get sick, you must not eat bitter apples."

The complete practical syllogism reads as follows: These apples 'are' bitter. Bitter apples can make you sick. If you don't want to get sick, you must not eat bitter apples. You (I) don't want to get sick. So don't eat any of these apples!

Thus from statements of facts (which include value-facts as I have described them) we can infer what we 'should' do. Paul Kurtz has called such ethical reasoning "act-duction" (pp.297-298). He explains that "... we infer the actions that are most appropriate — we act-duce — given the valuation base at hand. On the basis of this, some choices may thus be said to be more reasonable in the situation than others" (p.298).

Just as from a g.s. perspective we need to take responsibility for our values as *our* values, we also need to take responsibility for our ethical inferences as *our* inferences. Different individuals presented with a particular set of circumstances and their own particular values may arrive at different ethical inferences. Remaining conscious of abstracting, let us strive for agreement when we can reach it, yet understand that we can't always achieve agreement.

I invite you to remember this as you seek ethical solutions using the tools and formulations of general semantics.

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