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GENERAL SEMANTICS AND AUTHORITARIANISM

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When I first encountered general semantics many decades ago, it was a revelation to me; it has been an inspiration ever since. Over the years, however, I have increasingly sought to find for myself a psychological cohesiveness to its concepts and techniques.

To say that general semantics is a non-Aristotelian system, as Korzybski named it, is not revealing to people who know little of Aristotle. If the system is non-A, what is it? (“Is” in this case is not a verb of identity but rather leads to a sufficient overall characterization.) General semantics is described as being based on science, and this makes it more accessible; but, still, I think that most people don’t fully appreciate what that means. They think of science as something born of white lab coats, test tubes, and microscopes, resulting in technology.

As science, one could say that general semantics is essentially inductive; that might be even more meaningful and would be in keeping with its non-A motivations. Aristotle was known as “The Father of Rhetoric.” We might call Korzybski the “Father of the Art of Evaluation.” The term “evaluation” relates

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to the purpose of general semantics. Still, that does not evoke a basic psychological underpinning for me. Anyone can evaluate; but what makes some do it well and others badly?

The cognitive basis I have come up with is open-mindedness. General semantics is not driven by metaphysics, but by perceived realities; and it is the spirit of open-mindedness which undergirds it.

Open-mindedness is the mind-set that unifies non-allness, self-reflexiveness, time-binding, and the idea of “etc.” To use indexing implies that one recognizes other-ness in situations and people; the same is true for the dating technique. Open-mindedness means the acceptance of alternatives to anything, and by implication, the existence of sub-sets to generalizations.

The question that has long bothered me: what makes some people open-minded, and some closed-minded?

To say that parental upbringing is the cause would be too facile and unrevealing. The same can be said about ascribing the source to the circumstances surrounding one’s upbringing. Poverty during childhood, for instance, can lead some to have empathy for the poor, and others to be grasping and self-involved in their determination to compensate for their poverty; that is, to be extensional or intensional.

It seems reasonable to suppose, however, that the interaction between the way parents handle their children’s upbringing and the circumstances they grew up with must nourish the seeds for how we evaluate. One attitude that parents and other mentors are apt to engage in is authoritarianism. To me, this is a powerful, credible source for closed-mindedness.

Authoritarianism is built into a major contribution of Aristotle’s, the syllogism. In that form of logic, one is presented with the major premise, which one is supposed to accept on faith as truth applicable to a general situation. The middle statement, the minor premise, refers to a particular example of that generalization, leading to the conclusion that the minor premise must agree with the major one. This process is deductive and prescriptive.

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Laws, of course, follow this logic; e.g., crime must be punished, murder is a crime, therefore murder must be punished. The irony is that the major premise here has been established inductively, from experience. In the classic syllogism, all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal, the major premise, however deductively proffered, has itself been inductively arrived at by eons of human observation. So one cannot be too dogmatic about
the dangers of syllogistic reasoning. Rather, one must examine the validity of
the major premise. This, the inductive building up of evidence, is the contribu-
tion of science. Hence, science strives to be authoritative, but not authoritarian.

An understanding of the roots of authoritarianism was developed by a mam-
mmoth study sponsored by the American Jewish Committee at the end of World
War II. The organization wanted to find out how it was that the German people,
who had such a history of cultural achievements, could have succumbed to
Hitler and Nazism. The conclusions of the study, by Theodore Adorno, et al,
developed a model that conformed to its title, *The Authoritarian Personality*.

The authors found that if children are brought up to blindly obey parents,
teachers, clergy, and other mentors they fail to develop the ability to think for
themselves. *Their cognitive pattern is to trust the source of information rather
than the information itself*; they fail to use their own thinking powers to evalu-
ate the latter. These people need certainty; they cannot cope with ambiguity or
probability. As they grow to adulthood, their knee-jerk reliance exclusively on
their “higher” authorities leaves them with intellectual discomfort at the unfa-
familiar. Hence, xenophobia, even paranoia develops. The “other” is perceived
as a threat.

There’s also another psychological dimension that develops. An adolescent’s
human tendency is to do things for himself, to explore, to rebel against his or
her elders. The realization that one is not allowed to do so leads to resentment,
even hatred, against the parents or others in authority. But children know that
they are not supposed to hate their parents. So how do they expiate these feel-
ings? They take them out on others, those feared, unknown people or groups
whom they have been taught to reject. This leads to stereotyping and
scapegoating.

For a parent to be instinctively authoritarian may be the easiest response to
child-rearing; but there are more weighty aspects. This style was prevalent in
Europe, and certainly so during the Victorian era, when children were supposed
to “be seen and not heard.” It was popular to hear, “Yours not to question why,
yours but to do and die.” Our current generation is not that far in time or rela-
tionship from this background.

One of the authors who worked on *The Authoritarian Personality*, Milton
Rokeach, published a subsequent study entitled *The Open and Closed Mind*.
Rokeach realized that authoritarianism existed on the left side of the political
spectrum as well as on the right. His description of a “belief hierarchy” is per-
tinent to the structural differential. Rokeach’s hierarchy includes beliefs at the
most basic levels (and inculcated at the earliest ages). Korzybski discusses
unexamined assumptions and the confusion of orders of abstraction.
Rokeach distinguished between people who are rigid and those who are dogmatic. Each is one side of a coin. Those who are rigid have difficulty analyzing information; those who are dogmatic have trouble synthesizing new information. To the extent that any degree of authoritarianism has influenced one’s thinking habits, this suggests that the fear of accepting new facts that characterizes dogmatism would lead to elementalism. The failure to see the need for indexing, dating, and the separation of the verbal level from abstractions would characterize rigidity.

The model of personality given above is only one of many, but to me it has credibility. It cannot be taken in a doctrinaire manner, however. People can be authoritarian to different degrees, for different aspects of life, and at different times. (One set of my German grandparents and great-grandparents were martinet in demanding obedience from their children, yet they motivated them to pursue intellectual matters.)

I submit that an essential dynamic underlying the world’s trouble spots is the lack of open-mindedness, and in many cases an authoritarian attitude on the part of political leaders, as well as an acceptance by the general populace of this attitude. Assuming that the authoritarian personality model is a valid representation of a source of thinking that fails to seek or accept alternatives or fails to connect abstractions that have been inculcated as “holy writ” with the verbal or reality levels, what good does it do to know this? What can be done about it?

I feel that it helps to have a deeper understanding of the causes of things, to start with. Having such understanding helps us to try to prevent these patterns from developing — in the home, in school, in religious and other organizations. Perhaps, combining this understanding with the corrective and prescriptive knowledge of general semantics will enhance our effectiveness in using the discipline.

REFERENCES
