ETHICS OF TIME-BINDING

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Popular orthodoxy about ‘human nature’ for the past hundred years has, by virtue of a naive, elementalistic ‘materialism,’ defined man as a ‘selfish animal,’ engaged in a struggle in which the ‘fittest’ survive. Had society been differently constituted at the time this definition gained its wide currency, fittest might not have been defined as it was. We might, for example, have pointed to the timidity and speed of the deer, and defined fitness to survive as superior rapidity in running away from our enemies; we might have pointed to the earthworm or the mole, and defined it as the ability to keep out of sight and out of the way; we might have pointed to the guinea pig or the oyster, and defined it as the power to propagate our kind faster than our enemies could eat us up. As it turned out, however, we pointed to the cunning of the ape and the ferocity of the tiger, and defined fitness to survive as the possession of such qualities as characterize the more spectacular beasts of prey. Philosophers dreaming of an Übermensch, financiers worshiping their ‘titans of business,’ and the populace cheering their gladiators — alike taking pleasure in the resemblance of the more prominent of their fellow men to the least pleasant members of the animal kingdom — felt that in the phrase “survival of the fittest” they had found scientific sanction for their most predatory inclinations.
It is entertaining and not altogether uninstructive to speculate on what our ideals would have been had we defined *fitness to survive* in other ways: if instead of beasts of prey, we had chosen other animals for our models. Emulating pigs has been, of course, one such ideal energetically pursued since time immemorial, although rarely with full social approval. It will be remembered that in the *Odyssey* Circe gave ingenious and practical encouragement to those who had inclinations in this direction; Homer, however, did not appear to approve of the results. In Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* we have the picture of a non-human world such as would be designed for us by those who would have us emulate the social ants. The world, under the management of a super-brain-trust, is as well-integrated, smooth, and efficient as an ant-colony, and, as Huxley eloquently shows, just about as meaningless. I am not aware that anyone has yet suggested emulating the guinea pig in order to survive by sheer force of procreation: it would seem that here is a wide open field for people interested in developing other sub-human systems of conduct.

I do not mean to be as frivolous as I may sound. It cannot be too sharply emphasized that any talk about human “survival of the fittest” that ignores the distinctive mechanism, not shared by other creatures, by which man survives, falls inevitably into the error of interpreting the term *fittest* in an animal, rather than human, sense. If we leave unexamined what we mean by *fitness to survive*, there is no limit to the sub-human systems that can be devised: we can emulate lobsters, dogs, sparrows, parakeets, giraffes, opossums, or skunks, because they have all obviously survived in one way or another. All such systems, including our present dog-eat-dog economic system, would have one fundamental weakness in common — that of lacking, as Korzybski would say, a *dimension*. A solid may in some respects have the characteristics of a plane, but it cannot be dealt with in a two-dimensional, plane geometry. Similarly, although a human being in some respects resembles animals, he cannot be dealt with purely by means of zoological analogies. Man has an extra dimension.

This extra dimension not shared by animals is, of course, what we are accustomed to calling the ‘higher,’ ‘intellectual,’ or ‘spiritual,’ ‘faculties’ of man. ‘Philosophy’ through the centuries has been hung up on the dilemma of attributing this ‘spiritual’ aspect of man to super-natural origin, and thereby relinquishing all claim to being able to affect it by other than magical means, or of denying its existence altogether against the evidence of inner conviction to the contrary. Korzybski’s contribution to the solution of this ancient ‘philosophical’ problem develops out of facts familiar to every student of linguistics. Linguistics has pointed out, in contrasting the signalling systems of animals with the language systems of human beings, the fact that the principal feature of the latter is the enormously greater precision of interaction and cooperation obtain-
able among individuals within the species. When, as Bloomfield observes in *Language*, “we tell someone, for instance, the address of a house he has never seen, we are doing something which no animal can do.” Language is at once the product of human society and that which makes society possible. Korzybski calls attention to the fact that human beings, able to give precision to their reports and instructions, able to relay them over long periods of time, both orally and in writing, are able to increase their control over their environments from generation to generation. With this mechanism of language, we can accumulate knowledge over centuries and guide our present actions in the light of a past as far back as tradition or historical research can discover; we can also direct our efforts toward a future as distant as our imaginations can envisage. *Time*, says Korzybski, is the *human dimension*. Animals have no history beyond their own memories, no future beyond a day or a season. Man, however, is the *time-binder*.

Korzybski says a good deal in *Science and Sanity* about the importance of terms. No better illustration of their importance can be found than this term, *time-binding*. ‘Mind,’ ‘intellect,’ ‘spirit,’ ‘idealism,’ ‘imagination,’ ‘insight,’ ‘inventiveness,’ ‘vision,’ ‘foresight,’ etc., — all which we, in intuitive acknowledgment of their importance, have called the ‘higher faculties’ are embraced in this term, which gives at once a functional description of the mechanism of human survival and a prescription as to how that mechanism should operate. Without, for instance, the knowledge that we have of agriculture accumulated over time by means of our symbolic apparatus, the human race could not even feed itself. Man’s tools, his machines, his textiles, his shelter, his social organizations, are alike products of cumulative endeavor: organized cooperation between the living and the dead. The prescriptive implications of *time-binding* arise inevitably out of the description: the greater the area of cooperation between the living and the dead in the interests of those yet unborn, the better; the more people embraced in the cooperative enterprise, the better. For this we have the testimony of history, which shows that practically every great civilization is the result of the interplay of two or more primitive cultures; we have, too, the recent testimony of science, which shows that the freer the interchange of information, the more rapid the progress. The logical outcome of *time-binding*, generally acknowledged as the characteristic mechanism of human survival, would be, as Korzybski says in *Manhood of Humanity*, complete cooperation the world over, complete freedom in the interchange of information, a minimum waste of effort through the duplication of scientific or industrial effort, the maximum employment of our means of communication. In such a world no human group would be completely isolated from the products of the *time-binding* energies of the rest of the human race; and no group would be
unable to contribute, in whatever small way, to the great human store of knowledge and experience which lies at the disposal of all.

Let us examine again the machinery by which time-binding operates. Mainly it operates through the use of symbols — language. We have learned the principle that there is no necessary connection between a symbol and that which is symbolized. The importance of this principle can hardly be exaggerated. The flexibility of the map-territory relationship means that a territory can be mapped in many ways, and that no map says all about the territory. This principle, sufficiently disseminated, would demolish for once and all the dogmatists at all levels of private and public discussion who, ignorant of the characteristics left out in any verbal formulation, know ‘all about’ this and ‘all about’ that. Furthermore, this principle relegates into limbo with the voodoomen and the witch-doctors those ‘thinkers’ and ‘philosophers’ who, unaffected either by scientific orientations since Einstein or by modern linguistic research in languages outside the Indo-European family, rejoice in the blissful conviction that their verbal categories and associational patterns — the outcome of their habituation in three or four dialects of Indo-European — are “universal laws of thought” adequate to represent a dynamic universe.

Maps can also be made that have no territory to correspond to them: these may be made in error, or they may be outright lies. But also, maps can consciously be made of territories that do not exist in order that we may, by keeping these maps before us, bring corresponding territories into existence. Such ‘blueprinting’ of the future could not be done if maps were not independent of the territories they stand for. That is to say, we could not set up for ourselves what we call ‘plans,’ ‘aspirations,’ ‘ideals,’ or ‘goals’ without these maps of territories-to-be. The same freedom and flexibility of our symbolic systems that make lies and mistakes possible also make ideals possible. One of the basic reasons that human beings can think in terms of distant futures, as well as in terms of the distant past (maps of territories that no longer exist) is the independence of the symbol from that which is symbolized. To a dog, the expression hamburger today is meaningful, if you produce the hamburger; but hamburger tomorrow is a totally meaningless noise. What better evidence is there of the animalistic character of some of the activities of our profit system than the fact that the exploiters of our natural resources, for instance, responded all too readily to the words profits today, but acted as if there were no meaning whatever in the words devastation tomorrow? (The profits today boys are still at it — acting as if the words the triumph of Nazism tomorrow were again a meaningless noise.)

What shall we say, then, from the time-binding point of view, of a politico-economic mess such as we live in at the present? A system in which an animalistically interpreted “survival of the fittest” is regarded as a fundamental
premise? A system in which, therefore, as Thorstein Veblen pointed out, predation by violence or by fraud is an accepted and entirely respectable method of getting along in the world, both for individuals and nations? A system in which the destruction of goods and the withholding of productive energies are engaged in as a matter of course, in spite of malnutrition and need among millions? A system in which, the liberating influences of capitalism having all but ceased to operate, international cartels, nations, smaller business associations, and even labor leaders, taking advantage of the necessary interdependence of human beings in an industrialized world, have sought to create scarcities, to throttle competing goods and services, and to erect what Thurman Arnold has called “economic toll-bridges” in order that the few might profit at the expense of the many? A system that creates, as a result of its very structure, cleavages and hostilities between individuals and groups, the result of a universal fear that if we do not take economic advantage of others, others will take advantage of us? A system that is compelled to undergo periodic upheaval and collapse: strikes, panics, depressions, wars, and revolutions, because the institutions it creates are structurally at variance with the way in which human time-binding energies operate? A system that is now compelling half the peoples on earth to employ their talents, not to promote further time-binding, but to subjugate and destroy the peoples of neighboring nations with whom they should be pooling their intellectual and material resources toward the cooperative solution of their problems? On what can we build our convictions in fighting against this worse than savage state of affairs?

It is my belief that society can ultimately be reorganized in a way consistent with man’s time-binding nature. It is also my belief that the principles upon which such reorganization can be based are already in existence and familiar to everyone — namely, the principles of democracy. Democracy, thoroughly developed and energetically carried forward in the main areas of human life, would be a form of social organization entirely consonant with the fullest realization of man’s time-binding energies. Democracy, in other words, refusing to define human beings as “selfish animals” clawing each other for survival, refusing to define them as sheep or cattle, to be herded around by ‘supermen,’ insists upon treating human beings as human beings. To illustrate specifically, what is freedom of speech but the political recognition of Korzybski’s principle that no statement ever says all about anything, and that more remains to be said about every problem? Freedom of speech also recognizes that in order that we may make fullest use of our powers of communication, the basic instruments of time-binding, we must always permit even the humblest of people to speak freely, for they may have something to say that is important for us all to know. Universal education, another democratic principle, is the recognition of an-
other principle of time-binding, eloquently developed by Korzybski in the *Manhood of Humanity*: namely, that the accumulated product of our time-binding energies — the science and wisdom of the world — are not the property of a few, but the right of all. The democratic doctrine of racial equality is but another way of saying that all human beings share, in greater or less degree, the requisite type of nervous system that makes possible the symbolic process, and therefore makes them all potentially able to share in the cooperative process of governing our destinies through the pooling of knowledge. The democratic doctrine of religious neutrality is tacit recognition of the fact that questions about “God” and the “hereafter,” being incapable of solution in ways that can be agreed upon to the satisfactions of Christians, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Jews alike, had best be left to individual discretion and not be permitted to stand in the way of practical agreements about things that need to be done for the general weal. Authoritarianism, going on the principle that most men are cattle, secures social control first by force, and secondly — and here authoritarianism pays unconscious tribute to the intelligence of all men — by cutting off the time-binding process, that is, by cutting off communications by means of censorship or the denial of education to the masses. Democracy, on the other hand, secures social control by mutual agreement, arrived at through our use of that distinctive human instrument, language.

In so far, however, as our semantic reaction systems are still crippled by superstitions, by dogmas, by identifications, by confusion of levels of abstraction, and by the habitual ignoring of contexts — in other words, in so far as we remain pathologically susceptible to slogans, shibboleths, and “headline thinking,” our democratic processes of free discussion and free exchange of ‘fact’ and ‘opinion’ will do us little good. So long as we condemn, on the basis of signal reactions, all plans called “New Deal proposals,” all candidates called Republicans, all schemes to which anyone applies the label Socialist, all people to whom such words as Jew, Catholic, or labor leader, or capitalist, etc., can be applied — so long as such automatic responses remain embedded in our nervous systems, our democratic practices of discussion and debate will be blocked and rendered futile. In so far as we are so lacking in imagination, that is, so attached to our customary symbolic representations, that we cannot think of economic problems except as “economic problems,” of religious problems except as “religious problems,” of crime except as “crime,” of relief except as “relief,” etc., we can never escape the vicious circles we verbally create for ourselves that render progress impossible. Instead of arriving at agreements, we become involved in nonsense arguments, quarrels, and bitterness that tend ultimately to cast doubt upon the democratic process itself.
He who studies, teaches, and applies general semantics, then, by revealing some of the fundamental mechanisms of disagreement, doubt, quarrels, and frustration, by understanding those facts about human language and the human nervous system that force the uncertain relationships between words and things deeply into his consciousness, by conveying a sense of the possibilities that are open to the human race through the overthrow of the “tyranny of words” and the tyranny of mis-educated semantic functionings, is doing more than contributing to the education, adjustment, and wellbeing of the small group of students, friends, or colleagues who may come under his influence. He is helping to make possible the conditions under which not democracy alone, but civilization, can survive.

From Papers from the Second American Congress for General Semantics, August 1-2, 1941, Denver, Colorado. Dr. Hayakawa was Assistant Professor of English, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, Illinois. He authored Language in Action, a Book of the Month selection in 1941, which he later expanded in Language in Thought and Action. He edited ETC from its inception in 1943 until 1970.

S.I. (“Don”) Hayakawa’s inscription to Charlotte Schuchardt inside his Language in Action