

1. *Introduction*

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER you folks experienced this — how could I? — but when I grew up in Smalltown, U.S.A., I heard bore after bore saying to one another, "Well, you just can't change human nature." Shaking of heads, in wonderment, out of respect for the presence of one of the eternal verities: "Yup. Thas ri." They offered this observation as a blazing insight, as an explanation for various distressing happenings, as a semi-sanctimonious explanation for conflicts with the local mores or laws, etc.

Then along came that old tease, Alfred Korzybski, who said, "We *need not* blind ourselves with the old dogma that 'human nature cannot be changed,' for we find that it *can be changed*. We must begin to realize our potentialities as humans, then we may approach the future with some hope. We may feel with Galileo, as he stamped his foot on the

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ground after recanting the Copernican theory before the Holy Inquisition, '*Eppur si muove!*' The evolution of our human development may be retarded, but it cannot be stopped." (1; p. xxiii) He repeated that assertion in almost the same words in the conclusion to "What I Believe," reprinted in reference (2; p. lxiii). In the latter version, however, he added a proviso after his first sentence: "[if we know how]."

2. *A Centenary Celebration*

A friend and advisor of mine in the Department of Philosophy at the Universidad de Costa Rica, Dr. Luis Camacho Naranjo, invited me to give an address before the (quite small) Philosophical Society of that university in the fall of 1979, which I did. (3) We had just passed the exact date of Korzybski's centenary (on July 3), but I took this occasion for my modest contribution to the celebration of that event. In addition to the usual recitation of the biographical details of his extraordinary life, plus optimistic aspects of past and potential developments of general semantics and the various organizations that support the field, I tried to offer something a little novel.

Despite the obvious importance of the matter of "human nature," *changing* "human nature," and *how* to change it... Korzybski had not collected his views on these issues into one convenient place. So I tried to do so, and to include the fruits of this search in my presentation. The steps involved: (1) Write the material in English; (2) Translate to Spanish; (3) Have typed by bi-lingual secretary who unfortunately knew more English than Spanish, from a philological point of view; (4) Edit, removing obvious goofs; (5) Have re-typed. I felt reasonably proud of the final version.

When the evening came (why did I get myself into this?), I read from the manuscript, always a thrilling way to present material. Probably in places the intonation contours conveyed a less-than-complete understanding of some nuances by the reader. At the end, inviting questions, only one professor wanted more information: "What relevance did Kor-

zybski's thought have for the class struggle?" A spirited discussion ensued, at the completion of which we all felt that the others needed some serious counseling, and, as we say in Texas, nobody should try to operate any heavy machinery. Some days later I forwarded a copy of the address to Dr. Allen Walker Read, who eventually replied that he did not read Spanish.

I have continued to feel that Korzybski's views on the matter of changing "human nature" have some importance; I want to share them with you.

3. *How to Do It*

I assume that we do not need to belabor the point as to whether we should at least *try* to change what we generally regard as "human nature." At this point please allow me to invite attention to the *quotes* that encase the terms "human" and "nature." This amounts to a serious issue: the *quotes* say, "Watch out! These words belong to the group of high order abstractions that may stimulate very different semantic processes in different people" (due to their multiordinality (1; p. 14)). The material given below includes the results of continuing to reflect on these issues, and hence goes rather beyond that given in reference (3).

Korzybski's suggestions, or directions, or his recipe, for changing "human nature" fall into four general categories: (i) Stop copying animals; (ii) Become conscious of abstracting; (iii) Eliminate identifications in our semantic processes; and (iv) Change the [semantic] structure of our language. Let us take them up one by one.

Stop copying animals. We need to make two main points here. The first consists of Korzybski's time-binding definition of humanity. (2) This will help us to understand more clearly what we have to deal with. In 1921 Alfred Korzybski presented us with what he called a *functional* definition of "humanity," basing it on unique human capabilities, rather than on reasoning which proceeds from, as he put it, either a zoologi-

cal basis ("an animal plus something") or a mythological basis ("an angel minus something"). (2; p. 86ff)

After first observing that plants combine the minerals, moisture, sunlight, etc., in their immediate environment to make it possible for them to live, Korzybski characterized them as belonging to a *chemistry-binding* class of life. Animals, having an ability to enhance their possibilities of survival by moving about, he allocated to a *space-binding* class of life. Finally, Korzybski recognized the unique ability of humans to act over various periods of time through the use of symbols, and hence he assigned humans to a *time-binding* class of life.

We can readily see the major consequences that result from the time-binding definition of humanity: (i) Important ethical implications stem from the clear-cut dimensional discrimination between animals and humans. (ii) Emphasis becomes focused on the importance of the symbolic means whereby each generation can potentially begin where the preceding one left off, without the need to re-invent every "wheel." These "symbolic means" include speech, writing systems, mathematical, musical, and dance notations, etc. (iii) In order to operate effectively, time-binding requires a high degree of structural correspondence between language processes and the non-language processes described, which Korzybski went on to explore in his subsequent work. (1, 4) The preceding discussion of time-binding came largely from reference (5; p. 2).

The other point we must make here consists of a psychophysiological one, relating to the great complexity and potential of the human cortex, and involving the different degrees of conditionality associated with humans and with animals. Korzybski offered the following "structural observations": "1) That reactions in animals and humans exhibit *different degrees of conditionality*; 2) That the signals and symbols may have *different orders*, indicating superimposition of stimuli; 3) That animals cannot extend their responses to signals of higher order indefinitely; 4) That humans can extend

their semantic responses to higher order symbols indefinitely, and in fact, have done so through language which is always connected with *some* response, be it only repression or some other neurotic or psychotic manifestations." (1; p. 333f)

In other words, after some point you may have trouble teaching that dog (young *or* old) additional tricks, but we humans retain a potentially unlimited conditional ability to respond differently, and more appropriately, in response to new situations. Thus the difference between an animalistic *signal* reaction and the contrasting humanistic, conditional *symbol* reaction. (1; p. 334, etc.) This material provides the psychophysiological basis for suggesting that we *can* change "human nature." Of course some harsh "educational" practices could interfere with our conditionality: knowing about the possibilities helps us to prevent precisely this kind of "dead level abstracting," as Wendell Johnson put it. (6; p. 270ff)

Become conscious of abstracting. Korzybski's second directive takes us to the heart of his non-Aristotelian system, for he stated that, "The consciousness of abstracting, or the remembering that we abstract in different orders with omission of characteristics, depends on the denial of the 'is' of identity and is connected with limitations or 'non-allness,' so characteristic of the new non-systems. [He referred here to the non-Euclidean geometries and non-Newtonian physics.] The consciousness of abstracting eliminates *automatically* identification or 'confusion of orders of abstractions,' both applying to the semantic confusion on all levels." (1; p. 471)

He tied this issue into our present concerns in the following way: "The consciousness of abstracting, which involves, among others, the full instinctive semantic realization of non-identity and the stratification of human knowledge, and so the multiordinality of the most important terms we use solves these weighty and complex problems [produced by semantic blockages] because it gives us structural methods for semantic evaluation, for orientation, and for handling them. By passing to higher orders, these states which involve inhibition or negative excitation become reversed.

Some of them on higher levels become culturally important; and some of them become morbid. Now consciousness of abstracting in all cases gives us the semantic *freedom* of all levels and so helps *evaluation* and selection, thus removing the possibility of remaining animalistically fixed or blocked on any one level. Here we find the mechanism of the 'change of human nature.'" (1; p. 441)

Eliminate identifications in our semantic processes. Let no one minimize the difficulty, and some would say the near impossibility, of accomplishing this aim. It may amount to an impossibility for many of us, especially for those who do not understand why all the shouting, or who do not even try to do something about it. Nevertheless, we must realize that this way lie greater "sanity," greater creativity, inner tranquillity, etc. Identification has many roots that may entwine us without our even realizing it.

Suppose I ask you to visualize my holding in my hand a bright yellow, perfect lemon. After cutting it in half, I bite deep into it, and suck the lemon juice. If, as a consequence of this described demonstration, you feel a slight (or more) amount of saliva in your mouth, you have *identified* organismically the words (structures on the symbolic level) with concentrated citric acid (a structure on the silent levels).

In Korzybski's terms, we will begin here in accordance with the natural order, and present his view on identifying silent level happenings with structures on the symbolic level. Subsequently (in the next section) we will address these issues with a focus more specifically on the symbolic level.

A key step in retraining the nervous systems of persons embedded in an Aristotelian culture consists in eliminating identification in so far as possible from their semantic processes, and particularly the identification of the silent levels (i.e., the event and object levels) with the symbolic level. From an educational point of view, Korzybski made the following suggestions: "In the older days, all 'wisdom' was taught to us by purely 'intellectual,' 'verbal,' classical Aristotelian and elementalistic methods. We had no simple psycho-

physiological method of *complete* generality, which could be taught in a non-elementalistic way affecting *all* nerve centers. It is known how difficult it is to 'change human nature,' which simply means that the older verbal educational methods could not properly affect the lower centers. It seems that the first step in developing a method to accomplish these ends is to use the Structural Differential, without which it is practically impossible to teach 'silence on the objective level' and 'delayed action' and to train through *all* centers in non-identity, 'stratification,' natural order, and so in appropriate semantic reactions." (1; p. 446)

Continuing to present material on the non-Aristotelian training of children, Korzybski suggested that, "Once the child is thoroughly aware of the absence of identity between words and objects, we may attempt the expanding of the notion 'object' to the 'objective levels.' Such training requires persistence, even though it seems fundamentally simple. We demonstrate and explain that action, actual bodily performance, and all objective happenings, *are not* words. At a later stage we explain that a toothache, or demonstrate that the actual pain of a prick, etc., *are not* words, and belong to the *objective un-speakable levels*. Still later, we enlarge this notion to cover all ordinary objects, all actions, functions, performances, processes going on outside our skin, and also all immediate feelings, 'emotions,' 'moods,' etc., going on inside our skins which also *are not* words. We enlarge the 'silence' to all happenings on the objective levels and the animalistic, 'human nature' begins to be 'changed' into quite a different *human* nature." (1; p. 477)

I regret that it seems necessary in this paper to include the lengthy quotations from *Science and Sanity* given above. However, the need to do so proceeds from the unfortunate circumstance that for far too long the insights and proposals of Korzybski remained on the back shelves of somebody else's library, while watered down versions of tiny aspects of his system received great prominence. And, whether we like it or not, the pallid material often received short shrift, quite

appropriately, from some in the scientific and academic communities, with the blame for the inadequacies remaining as a present for Korzybski!

Change the [semantic] structure of our language. This student of Korzybski's feels it necessary to emphasize "semantic" in the name of this section. While some linguists, such as the late Uriel Weinreich and I, reject an elementalistic split between syntax and semantics, most linguists would tend to become so syntactically energized (without the emphasis on "semantics") that they might miss the whole point of the discussion. Korzybski expected that sometime soon after the publication of his major work that "we will discover more about the dependence of 'human nature' on the structure of our languages, doctrines, institutions, 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.' " (1; p. 547) Some 15 years and World War II later, he stated in his seminars that he believed that his most important personal contribution consisted of developing the *extensional devices* which, he asserted, made it possible to "change the structure of language without changing the language itself." More specifically, he wished to change the Aristotelian, elementalistic, allness-filled, two-valued, etc., language whose semantic structure hearkened back to much earlier times, to a non-Aristotelian one. To this noble end, he suggested that we apply the following devices: (a) Dates; (b) Indexes; (c) Chain-indexes; (d) Etc.; (e) Quotes; and (f) Hyphens. Various popular texts have provided excellent material on those devices, in particular Wendell Johnson's *People in Quandaries*. (6)

In more recent years, some of Korzybski's students have come to regard the application of E-Prime (English without any form of the verb *to be*) as a particularly valuable addition to the other extensional devices. (7) This proceeds from an understanding of Korzybski's important statement: "The subject-predicate form, the 'is' of identity, and the elementalism of the Aristotelian system are perhaps the main semantic

factors in need of revision, as they are found to be the foundation of the insufficiency of this system and represent the mechanism of semantic disturbances, making general adjustment and sanity impossible." (1; p. 371) Oddly enough, some of Korzybski's supposedly most dedicated students seem unable to understand the preceding sentence. E-Prime offers a straightforward way to do away completely with the first two problems and helps significantly in dealing with the third, but nevertheless some heel-draggers show no enthusiasm for making the E-Prime revision.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

There you have my road map for how to get from here to a variety of desirable goals. If you want to go backward, and some perversely nearly always do, start with E-Prime as a first step, and just stop using forms of *to be* in your writing and speech. Use the other extensional devices as much as possible. Work on yourself to try to stamp out identifications, remaining silent on the silent levels. Check yourself for unconditional responses when greater conditionality might produce greater payoffs: have experiences and someone else's dicta set limits on how you can perceive the world about you and how you react to it? Once, one of Korzybski's "senior grade" students said to him that, "Together we can change the world!" She told me that he replied, "Well, we might change *you* a little." If you really have an interest in changing "human nature," perhaps it would work best if you begin with yourself. Good luck! Let me know how you and the world turn out!

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