

WHEN DOES CONSCIOUSNESS OF ABSTRACTING MATTER THE MOST?

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I KNOW OF NO GREATER way for us to honor Alfred Korzybski as a time-binder and the originator of general semantics than to surpass him. If, standing here on his shoulders, we cannot see farther, then he was no giant.

In a few moments I'll tell you of a barrier that blocks our view even from that high perch, a barrier we must pierce in the continuing development of general semantics.

But first I want to take one minute to tell you about two general semanticists who were all wet. Years ago, when I was executive secretary of the Society, one of our members, who later became a director, David M. Burrell, a lawyer from Freeport, Illinois, invited me early in the season to his summer place in Wisconsin. The sink in the first floor bathroom drained very slowly. Dave knew what to do. He got a pipe wrench, went under the sink, and removed the elbow pipe that served as a trap. He handed it up carefully to me, since it was filled with muck and slop. "Where should I dump it?" said I. "In the sink," said he.

You have the picture? Burrell is on the floor under the sink with the pipe removed. MacNeal is above the sink with the slop-filled trap. What did I do? What else? I emptied it into the sink. Behold. Two sloppy general semanticists.

How could two general semanticists, the executive secretary of the Society and a lawyer, make such a dumb mistake? How could they deliberately disassemble the territory, the sink, and then deliberately act as if it were in working order? What happened to their vaunted consciousness of abstracting in this case?

I needn't explain to this audience what is meant by consciousness of abstracting. But please take a moment to run your left thumb over the fingers of your right hand. Go ahead. Concentrate on the silent level experiences.

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You are exploring the structure of your right hand from the point of view of your left thumb. Anything I say about that structure, any rule of thumb I could utter, would be just mapping. And as we know, the map is not the territory.

Acting with at least subliminal awareness of that difference is what constitutes consciousness of abstracting. Such subliminal awareness is supposed to permit general semanticists to sit down comfortably in a "chair" but catch themselves without falling if the chair breaks. Shouldn't consciousness of abstracting, then, apply with even greater force to deliberately disassembled sinks?

About this time, in the late 1940s, I began to explore those abstractions we call "value judgments" as *parts of decisions*. I defined a decision as "the acceptance (or rejection) of a course of action to be taken." That is, for me, the granddaddy of all value judgments, the act of accepting (or rejecting) a course of action.

The value judgment may also include reasons. For example, "I decided to empty the pipe in the sink because Dave said to," reports an act of deciding ("I decided"), a course of action ("to empty the pipe in the sink"), and a reason, ("because Dave said to").

Often, however, we recognize a decision but we don't know the reasons. Now, not being a psychiatrist, and not wishing to go beyond the evidence, I refused to speculate about "hidden" reasons. This refusal was a momentous bit of luck; for it confined me to examples containing all three parts: a course of action, an act of deciding, and a reason or reasons.

This led me to ask three structural questions. First: How does the course of action relate to the reason? Second: Do these relationships form regular patterns? Third: If so, what effect do these patterns have on the abstracting practices of deciders? I'll return to these questions shortly.

You might think that leading general semanticists have few embarrassments with decisions. My experience says it isn't so.

I'm a director of both the Institute and the Society and I would like to remain in those posts, so I'll reach back for an example to a time when the great early gs'ers sat on those boards.

Consider the decision made at a meeting of the Society's board concerning a resolution drafted to ease the requirements of chapter affiliation.

The Society's president (whom I'll not name) misread both the proposed regulation and its intent. He entertained an amendment that reversed the proposal. All efforts to resolve the misunderstanding foundered. I remember Dr. Irving Lee's suggesting that everybody might listen more carefully. No way! After an hour's wrangling, the amendment was approved.

The next day the Society's president reviewed the announcement the board had directed me to send to all groups wishing to form chapters. Imagine his distress when he realized that the wording, which he now read carefully for the first time, was, indeed, the opposite of what he intended.

And so I learned that general semanticists, even formal groupings of our foremost luminaries, booted decisions. I had company.

The common factor I sensed in such experiences was something blocking an appreciation of the *consequences* of the actions being accepted. Burrell and I failed to anticipate the sink slop splash. The Society's board misjudged their regulation's prime effect. Something barred the view.

In *Science and Sanity* Korzybski said:

In general semantics we do not "preach" "morality" or "ethics" *as such*, but we train students in consciousness of abstracting, consciousness of the multiordinal mechanisms of evaluation, *relational* orientations, etc. . . . and then as a result "morality," "ethics" . . . etc., follow automatically. (1)

Can you realize how slow that made me feel? I still fumbled simple decisions.

Fortunately for me, Korzybski fingered elementalism, our splitting verbally what cannot otherwise be split, as a serious structural flaw in language. He said:

In a non-aristotelian system we do not use elementalistic terminology to represent facts which are non-elementalistic. We use terms like "semantic reaction," "psychosomatic," "space-time," etc., which eliminate the verbally implied splits, and consequent misvaluations. (2)

Given this guidance, I was startled to see that decisions reek of elementalisms.

Take the split between "action" and "consequences." Does not that split imply, following Korzybski, that one can have an "action" without having its "consequences"? Of course it does. Doesn't every action verb and every action noun permit us to think about actions without considering their consequences? Can't we, if we like, eat, drink, drive, vote, swear, and have sex without considering the consequences? Of course, we not only can; we often do.

I'm not moralizing. I just point out that the structure of English and the few other languages of which I've any acquaintance permits us — nay, practically requires us — to consider actions and consequences separately.

I believe that the verb forms in some languages force their speakers to recognize that actions have effects, for example by requiring speakers to specify whether effects have run their course. But I don't speak any such language.

How, then, could I fight this pervasive and pernicious elementalism?

A friend proposed the term "alternaquence." (3) It's a marvelous word. Lexically, it merely combines "alternative" with "consequence." But what a profound difference in meaning! If you ask me what my alternaquences are, that sticks me with the responsibility for what follows, doesn't it? "Well, Ed, what are your alternaquences?" Do you hear it? There's no place to hide.

Korzybski wrote, "a single structurally important new term might lead to the re-postulation of the whole structure of language in a given field." (4)

Well, I dare you to think of your choices as alternaquences for three days running. Your decision making might never look the same. You could convince yourself that choices come only in whole alternaquences and forever remain subliminally aware of the folly of splitting them up.

Do not dismiss this elementalism at the root of most decisions. Remember what Korzybski said about our field:

Curiously enough, the principles involved are often childishly simple, often "generally known," to the point that on several occasions some older scientists felt "offended" that such "obvious" principles should be so emphasized. Yet my experience, without any exception, was that no matter how much these simple principles were approved of verbally, *in no case* were they *fully applied in practice*. (5)

The main semantic difficulty . . . consists in breaking the old structural linguistic habits. . . . (6)

We habitually form the abstractions we call decisions in the molds our language gives; that is, in elementalisms. For example, if I like to smoke pot, I can choose to smoke pot because I like it. That's enough reason. I don't have to think about any pot-smoking alternaquence. *I could*, but I don't have to, and linguistically it's easier not to.

Do you recall my first structural question? "How does the course of action relate to the reason?" In the pot case just mentioned we have an action chosen for the reason that the action itself is liked. The action could also have been rejected as disliked. Either way, I call the relationship the "absolute" pattern of decision making. It's absolute in the sense that we don't relate the choice to anything else, certainly not to consequences. The absolute pattern is useful in matters of personal taste and style, foods, hobbies, sleepwear, and the like, provided consequences don't matter.

Another elementalistic way we relate actions to reasons is in the "responsive" pattern. Take, for example, the statement, "I agreed, because he is my husband." You might hear in this example an outmoded sexism, an unliberated woman. What I hear, besides, is a decider tying an action to a situation as an appropriate response. The situation is "my husband," and the action is "I agreed."

The responsive pattern has its place in matters of standardization, habit formation, and precise coordination. Orchestral music, contracts, and everything some people do before their second cup of coffee in the morning depend on it. They get up because their alarm goes off, they eat breakfast because it is morning, they go to work because it is Monday, they answer the phone because it rings, they break because it's break time, and so on. They can do these things semi-automatically or very deliberately. Either way, they make decisions by recognizing and responding to situations for which they have habits or rules.

Some deciders carry this so far that they take almost no responsibility for

consequences. If such people work for you and you ask them why they did some troublesome thing, they may tell you it was because you asked them to. And you probably did. You just never figured they would follow your instructions literally in the face of counterindicative consequences. That is, counterindicative to you, because you cared about the consequences. But the responsive decider's care is to connect action to a situation as a response to it.

A third way we separate actions from consequences is in the "goal-directed" pattern. We abstract one desired consequence from the whole alternance and establish it as our target, or goal. We then seek an action to take us there or in that direction.

The goal-directed pattern strongly focuses our energy and resources. Its other name is "problem solving." Enterprises of every kind depend on it. However, the goal-directed pattern has not only "effects" but also—in terms that reveal the barrier to forecasting consequences—"side effects" and "unintended effects."

For example, we focus on industrial efficiency, which we achieve in part by dumping wastes in the nearest stream. This action pollutes the stream. Fish die. Humans gag. So we set up a new goal, to clean up the environment. This raises costs at the factory and exports jobs to Korea and Singapore. This leads to a new goal, to reduce imports, and so on, perhaps ad infinitum.

That goals hypnotize and blind us cannot be denied. I recall once on an airplane wanting to cool my boiling hot paper cup of coffee in a hurry. I started to blow on it, but then had a better idea. I held the cup up to the air jet above my seat. Presto. An instant shower of cool coffee.

Why couldn't I see that coming? Why couldn't we see that prohibition would promote bootlegging and racketeering? Why couldn't we see that minimum wage laws would increase teenage unemployment?

Why, for that matter, can't we see that almost every rule and goal reduces our ability to anticipate consequences?

The patterns of decision making just described provide three answers to my first structural question, "How does the course of action relate to the reason?": 1) as an elementalistic action chosen as liked for itself, 2) as an elementalistic action chosen as fitting a situation, and 3) as an elementalistic action chosen as a means of reaching a desired elementalistic consequence.

These three formulas also answer my second structural question, namely, "Do these relationships form regular patterns?" The answer is yes.

And now, we can ask the third structural question: What effect do these three patterns have on the abstracting practices of deciders? The answer, the devastatingly discouraging answer, is: these three elementalistic patterns of decision making encourage our ability to disassociate actions from consequences and to believe contrary to and in spite of clear evidence that actions have no consequences, or no consequences we can be held responsible for,

or no consequences worth considering in the same breath with the one specific desired consequence we have elevated to the status of a goal.

In short, these elementalistic decisional patterns choke off our appreciation of consequences. The absolute and responsive patterns make forecasts irrelevant. The goal-directed pattern dismisses or downgrades all consequences except the one desired.

These elementalistic patterns give rise to the forecasting barrier. Loaded up with elementalistic tastes, rules, and goals by which to choose our actions, no wonder we fail to forecast consequences. Where would we get the practice?

Indeed, few people regard forecasting as normal. Most associate it with oddballs willing to be wrong, comical TV weathermen, and crazy economists.

The forecasting barrier functions almost continuously but invisibly. To see it, just ask people to estimate outcomes and watch them scurry behind it with such answers as "I wouldn't know," "There's no way to be sure," "I have no idea," and "It varies."

Even standing on Korzybski's shoulders, if we scrutinize decisions elementalistically, the forecasting barrier blocks our view.

To make matters worse, the three elementalistic patterns all have immense vocabularies. When these words enter a conversation, they insidiously install their decision-making pattern as that conversation's semantic framework.

Thus, if you ask someone "What's the problem," you are injecting the goal-directed pattern. In that framework, we interpret the question as saying:

1. There is some desired state (goal).
2. Something is blocking the way.
3. What is it?
4. Overcome it.

If the desired state is peace and quiet, then the question "What's the problem?" means "Why are you making so much noise? Stop it." If the desired state is drinkable coffee, then the question means "What's wrong with the coffee?"—"It's too hot."—"So cool it." This formula is standard. The word "problem" in almost any context calls for a goal-directed approach. "The pollution problem." "The unemployment problem." "The nuclear problem."

The vast vocabulary of the responsive pattern covers every situation for which there is an expected response and vice versa. Thus, "guilty" calls up "punish" and "punish" calls up "guilty." "Sink" calls up "in here, please."

Thus the word "sink," as I discovered long ago in Wisconsin, acts as a behavioral lever in the responsive pattern. It isn't just a name.

A more general name I've learned to distrust is "values." (7) What, after all, are "values"? Is honesty a value? Good tailoring? Toasted marshmallows? Or is "values" just a shorthand way of referring to the elementalistic tastes, rules, and goals of which the speaker approves?

Some people believe we have some kind of value chart inside of us. The logic here seems to be that a decision can't be made without values and these values must be inside us. As closely as I can determine, "values" in this sense

means fixed elementalistic circuits. But what about the context? I like pizza. I like hot showers. I presume both could be called "values." However, I've no use for pizzas in a hot shower. What I choose depends on the context. That all contexts have been worked out beforehand inside of me is incredible. I run into new contexts every day. Like this one.

That brings me back to alternaquences, and decisions based on alternaquences. As you remember, alternaquences unite actions and consequences conceptually in the way they exist "out there." The alternaquential world is the one where you can't have your cake and eat it too, where the piper gets paid, and where the tree bends the way the twig's inclined.

A choice between alternaquences, without using elementalistic likes, dislikes, responsive rules, or goals, is what I call the "originative" pattern of decision making. I get two extreme reactions to this definition.

People at one extreme are pleased to hear about the originative pattern, because they say *they* make decisions that way, but they feared it wasn't all right. They thought you had to follow a rule or pursue a goal. In choosing by preference for alternaquences, they thought they were doing something wrong. I tell them not to worry.

At the other extreme a few people tell me the originative pattern is impossible. They say it's not possible because there's no way to choose between alternaquences without using likes, dislikes, rules, and goals. They are so caught in elementalistic patterns that they can't even imagine choosing whole alternaquences.

One example I've used in such cases with some success is that of seeing two movies. Assume you have seen two different movies, and I ask you to decide which movie's sequel you would rather see, the sequel to the first movie or the sequel to the second movie. That's all there is to it. I don't tell you anything more about the movies or about the sequels or about any basis you might have for deciding. I think you can imagine that you would be able to prefer living through one sequel to living through the other. It's what you might call an imaginary preview.

That's how originative deciders can choose between alternaquences. They do it by comparing imaginary previews until that generates a preference. They need not like or dislike any alternaquence, nor take any alternaquence as a goal, nor comply with any rule about what fits the situation. Yet they choose.

Those who do choose originatively develop powers of forecasting, of imagining alternaquences, that far outreach the skills of other deciders. They do it simply by asking "and then?" "And then the slop goes into the sink and down the drain and into the pipe, and then? Aha! Oh no we won't!"

We general semanticists use many devices to extensionalize our abstractions: indexing, dating, quotation marks, hyphens, and the "etc." I urge we add a new extensional device, the "and then?" The "and then?" helps cure decisional elementalism. The "and then?" reminds us to convert elementalistic actions into alternaquences.

I need to distinguish here between first-order and second-order decisional actions. By first-order actions, I mean the ordinary actions we take in decisions, like getting up, eating, buying cars, fighting wars, and the like. By second-order actions, I mean only those that relate to the methods we use in making decisions, like choosing to use the absolute, responsive, goal-directed, or originative patterns.

Given this rough definition, I believe general semantics, at this stage, has little to say about first-order actions. However, I think general semantics has a great deal to say about second-order actions that tell us what approaches we should use in making decisions.

I see no "values" at the first-order level that general semanticists must necessarily adopt. To go to the heart of the matter, consider "survival." I see no necessity for adopting survival as a fixed goal, not for myself, not for the human race, not even for planet earth. Being able to imagine alternaquences does very nicely, thank you. (8)

Indeed, I fear the actions of those whose loyalty to elementalistic values, principles, habits, goals, and rules blocks their view of consequences. General Brock Chisholm, M.D., first director of the World Health Organization, didn't go far enough when he blamed irrational human aggression on "morality." (9) He should have put it in general semantics terms and blamed war on elementalistic "values."

The way to make sensible decisions is to use Korzybskian decision-making approaches. Exalting elementalistic values—even "love" and "peace"—doesn't work. Do we need more than two thousand years of proof?

I often hear people talk as if it were necessary to obtain agreement on "values" before there can be agreement on actions. Why? How far should an elementalistic horse have to pull a non-elementalistic wagon? It's often easier to get agreement on actions than on elementalistic values to govern actions. I accept, if I may use a very old adage, that actions speak louder than words. I have seen too often how words divide us.

I'm reminded of two marvelous moments in literature that provide stark contrasts between ways for getting along with each other. One is in Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. (10) You will recall that the fox suggests to the little prince that they establish ties.

The little prince asks the fox how this is to be done. "You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you will sit down at a little distance from me—like that—in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day . . ."

Donn Byrne's *Messer Marco Polo* (11) shows another approach. Marco is recounting the life of Jesus to the Chinese court with ever increasing effect:

. . . and he told them of the betrayal by Judas with a kiss . . . and the Great Khan snicked his dagger in and out of the sheath. . . .

And he told them of the crucifixion between two thieves, and a great oath ripped from the beard of Kubla Khan . . .

“And on the third day He arose from the dead . . . ?”

And a great shout came from the throat of Kubla Khan . . .

“He showed himself to the Roman Pilate in all His power and majesty—”

“No,” said Marco . . .

“Then He showed himself to the thousands who had seen him die . . . !”

“No,” said Marco . . .

“Who saw Him, then?”

“His twelve Apostles and they in a little room!”

And Kubla Khan . . . said no more. There was a moment’s murmur of wonder among the assembly, and then silence. And Marco . . . was aware . . . of the great politeness of the Chinese people. . . .

Thus, even those who wish to agree on principles might have standards of belief too different to allow them to agree. Nevertheless, Marco Polo rose in the Khan’s service, prospered, and eventually went home.

And now, my most important point.

The time when consciousness of abstracting matters the most is in making decisions. Apart from decisions, we have no deliberate effect upon our world. Apart from decisions, everything is academic.

Korzybski wrote:

My aim is . . . to analyse different structural and linguistic semantic issues underlying all human activities, and so to produce material which may help mankind to *select* their lot *consciously*. (12, emphasis in original)

Through Korzybskian analysis, we find structural and linguistic semantic issues that affect all decisions. We find a pervasive elementalistic flaw in our language that disrupts our view of alternaquences. We find three elementalistic decision-making patterns that provide endless room for the arguments of blind men describing elephants.

Because of inculcated elementalisms, we mistakenly exalt “values,” elementalistic values that form decisional blockages, petrified likes, dislikes, rules, and goals, not one of which corresponds to an alternaquence, our actual unit of choice.

To visualize our units of choice, we must pierce the forecasting barrier to obtain satisfactory previews of alternaquences. We must raise consciousness of abstracting to the level where we instantly recognize “values” as elementalisms, as false-to-fact abstractions, as parts of the barrier. We must use general semantics to combat the elementalistic frameworks that now restrict its decisional influence.

Nobody’s elementalistic approach to decisions is correct.

Let us work to develop understanding in terms of actions embedded in alternaquences. Let us come to regard all elementalistic explanations of action as folklore and cease all arguments about whose folklore is the best. Let elementalistic values go. Let them fade away.

And now, just before I, too, fade away, catch my flung bouquet. I toss this task to you as general semanticists, because you have the courage to be different, you have the courage to lead the way, and you have the only discipline broad enough to handle such difficult, culturally embedded, semantic issues. Understand me, then, when I wish all of you, from the bottom of my heart, happy alternaquences.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics* (1933), 3d ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Country Life Press, 1948), p. xvi.
2. *Ibid.*, p. xxxv.
3. For more details, see Edward MacNeal, "Semantics and Decision Making," *Et cetera*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer, 1983, pp. 165-66, but please correct the last word on the first line of the poem to "dispense."
4. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 539.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 379.
7. Edward MacNeal, "The Flaw," *Et cetera*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Fall, 1984.
8. The thanks were addressed to the preceding speaker, Dr. Anatol Rapoport, who had vividly described the horror of nuclear war.
9. G.B. Chisholm, *The Psychiatry of Enduring Peace and Social Progress*, offprinted from *Psychiatry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, February, 1946.
10. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (1943) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).
11. Donn Byrne, *Messer Marco Polo* (1921) (New York: Penguin, 1946).
12. Korzybski, *op. cit.*, p. 273.