ALFRED KORZYBSKI: HIS CONTRIBUTIONS AND THEIR HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT*

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Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski (1879-1950) came to the United States when he was thirty-six years old, during the First World War. Except for a year in the army in Canada, he lived in this country the second half of his life. Here he formulated and taught his life-work, which he called "the first non-Aristotelian system," with "general semantics" as its modus operandi.

In his first book, Manhood of Humanity, he gave a new definition of man.[1] After twelve years of study and writing, working out the development of the theory, he completed his second book, Science and Sanity, in which he laid a foundation for a science of man, and a positive theory of sanity based on the orientations of modern science and physico-mathematical methods.[2] He established and directed the Institute of General Semantics, now located in Lakeville, Connecticut, which continues to carry on his work.

Science and Sanity has been evaluated by some as "one of the ten most influential books of the twentieth century," by others as "among the least read and most criticized books." Other reactions ranged from regarding it as "a work of an inestimable and many-sided value," and "taken as a whole, beyond all comparison the most momentous single contribution that has ever been made to our knowledge and understanding of what is essential and distinctive in the nature of man," to "nothing new."

"The man comes before his work," Korzybski said. A few biographical details may help in understanding his aims, and reveal influences which determined the direction and form of his work.

Alfred Korzybski was born in Warsaw in 1879, the son of Wladyslaw Korzybski and Helena Rzewuska. His father was an engineer with the rank of General in the Ministry of Communication, a lover of mathematics and physics, and a pioneer in new methods of agriculture.

In Warsaw he lived with his parents and sister at 66 Wilcza Street and in the country nearby on the family estate. While he was growing up he learned to speak four languages, a fact which proved helpful to him in his later work. For half of each day there was a French governess, for the other half a German governess. Russian was taught in the schools and Polish at home. He did not learn English until he came to America.

At his father's urging, he was trained as a chemical engineer at the Polytechnic Institute in Warsaw. But privately he developed an interest in law, mathematics, and physics instead, then found, too late, that he could not enter a university to pursue a career in such fields because his previous curriculum in a science-oriented secondary school did not include certain prerequisites such as Greek, Latin, etc. This was an intense disappointment and frustration to him. In the meantime he read constantly in the subjects of his special interests, including the philosophies of the day and in history, history of cultures and of science,

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*Reprinted from The Polish Review, Volume XIII, Number 2, Spring 1968.

[1] Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering, E. P. Dutton, New York, 1921; 2nd ed., 1950, Institute of General Semantics, Lakeville, Connecticut, Distributors.

[2] Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics, International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co., 1933; 4th ed., 1958, Institute of General Semantics, Distributors.

comparative religions, the literatures of Poland, Russia, France and Germany. At one time he taught mathematics, physics, French and German at a "gymnasium" in Warsaw.

Traveling as an eclectic scholar in Germany and Italy, he spent the major portion of this time in Rome and its university. He became friends with some of the Cardinals and others connected with the Vatican during the time of Pope Leo XIII. It was there, in his early twenties, before the Cardinals and the General of the Jesuits, that he made his first and only speech before coming to this country — on "The Relationship of the Polish Youth toward the Clergy, and the Clergy toward Polish Youth," criticizing the clergy for their treatment of Polish youths.

When he returned from Rome he was shocked with the realization that his former playmate, the gardener's son, as well as all the other peasants, could neither read nor write, yet their labor had for generations earned the money for the education and the freedom to travel of their landowners. He built a small schoolhouse for the peasants on the country estate, for which he was sentenced to Siberia by the Russian government, but his father managed to have the sentence suspended.

At the outbreak of the First World War Korzybski immediately volunteered in Warsaw for service in the Second Russian Army, and was assigned to a special Cavalry Detachment of the General Staff Intelligence Department on the battlefields. In July, 1915 he was ordered "At the Disposal of the Minister of War," and sent to Petrograd, and in December of that year he was sent to Canada and the United States as an Artillery Expert. He served in various capacities here in the Russian Army until it collapsed, then lectured for the United States government. Later he became Secretary of the French-Polish Military Commission, and Recruiting Officer for Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

These years of strain and suffering moved him to try to understand how such a world-wide catastrophe could happen, and with the Armistice he had no relief from his relentlessly prodding "why?." In November 1918 he met Mira Edgerly, a native of Illinois and a portrait painter on ivory of renown in this country, France and England. Recognizing in each other an intense concern for humanity, they immediately felt a mutual attraction. They were married two months later.

In groping for basic causes for our devastating human conflicts, Korzybski came to the deep questions he asked of himself: "What is life?" "Forms of life differ, but how?" With his engineering outlook he was led to classify all forms of life in terms of what they do. Plants, he said, have the ability to transform energy from the sun into organic chemical energy. He called them the "chemistry-binding class of life." Animals have this capacity, but also are able to move about from one place to another. He called them the "space-binding class of life." Humans, together with these abilities, have a unique capacity which no other form of life has shown: They can use the accumulated achievements inherited from past generations, build upon them, and pass them on to the next generation. In doing so, they can begin where the former generation left off. He called this the "time-binding" capacity, which gave to man a different living dimension. He developed these formulations, with their depth of implication for human living, in his first book, Manhood of Humanity: The Science and Art of Human Engineering, published in 1921.

This definition of man as a "time-binding class of life" placed him within nature, not partly animal and partly supernatural, and gave him stature and dignity. The time-binding energy, Korzybski emphasized, was basically healthy and constructive. It functions autonomously if not obstructed. The progress men can achieve in the course of a generation grows at an ever-increasing exponential rate in any given field if it is not hindered by the creeds or mores of a society, or by other influences.

But there are two widely different laws of progress; they represent different rates of growth. Advancement in scientific fields and technological power has bounded ahead in a rapidly increasing geometrical progression, while progress in social fields has lagged behind, hampered by traditions and habits of bygone days. The great disparity in the rates of progress has created imbalances which result periodically in social cataclysms.

When men are no longer hindered by outdated creeds about their own nature, when they are not prevented from living in accord with the natural laws of human life, they will live in freedom to exercise their time-binding energies unobstructed. Humanity will then grow from its childhood to manhood. "I have no doubt," Korzybski wrote in 1921, "that that conception (of the human class of life) is to be the base, the guide, the source of light, of a new civilization."

Throughout this first book, and in his later work, Korzybski sought to follow the orientation of mathematics. His father had given him the feel of the calculus when he was five, and this had made a deep impression. Some of his reasons for a mathematical approach were that he desired to be clear, that mathematics is independent of hopes and selfishness and passions — it is impersonal. At that time he called his work "Human Engineering."

His good friend and mentor, Cassius Jackson Keyser, Adrain Professor of Mathematics at Columbia University, had given him invaluable editorial

aid when his knowledge of the English language was new and limited. Keyser had laid aside work on his own book to help Korzybski, whose manuscript he considered urgent. Keyser's work in mathematical philosophy greatly influenced Korzybski, and during the following years as he developed his theory, it was one of the main foundation stones. In their writings in the early 1920's they both brought each other's work to public attention.

"If there is to be a science of human engineering," Korzybski wrote at that time, "it must be mathematical in spirit and in method and if we do not possess methods to apply mathematical thinking to human affairs, such methods must be discovered."[3]

The mathematical discoveries of the fifty to seventy-five years prior to 1920 impressed him with the power of rigorous thought and revealed some processes of how it works. With the publication in 1854 of George Boole's The Laws of Thought, an internal revolution was started in logic and in mathematics. In this new scientific period it was to become clear to many that all man can know is a joint phenomenon of the observer and the observed. Keyser had formulated the principle of "fate and freedom": we have
56 the freedom (in accord with the laws of thought) to choose our assumptions, but once chosen, the consequences follow with a "logical fate." Since we are usually not aware of our silent assumptions, hidden in our language and underlying our actions, we must investigate our assumptions to ascertain whether they are based on facts.

In 1923 Korzybski wrote a rough outline of the principles on which the foundation of his future work, "the science and art of human engineering," would rest.[4] His main aim at that time was to give the practical applications of some of the great formulations of certain well known authors: Alfred Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Henri Poincare, Cassius J. Keyser, and Albert Einstein. The importance of correct symbolism appeared increasingly urgent as the need loomed larger for revising all our doctrines, bringing symbolism into accord with facts. This concern was expressed later in his formulation of structural similarity between language and what it represents. He concluded that mathematics is the only language which at present has a structure similar to that of the world and the human nervous system.

Korzybski was convinced that the new developments in logic and mathematics would demand scientific knowledge of human nature, and would make it imperative to adjust human beliefs, institutions, doctrines and conduct to what was discovered about the laws of human nature. The "brotherhood of man" he believed can be accomplished only and exclusively by the "brotherhood of doctrines." When we investigate, many doctrines which still persist will be found to retard human progress, knowledge and happiness. The danger lies in that the majority of mankind is unaware of the doctrines which govern them.

In another year he had formulated in rough outline what he called "a general theory of time-binding" (dropping the name "human engineering" because of the way others used it).[5] It was based mainly on the mathematical foundations mentioned earlier, but also influenced by wide reading in the fields of scientific method, mathematics, mathematical philosophy, logic, the theories of relativity, the newer physics, psychiatry, biology, neurology, psychology, etc. He carried on an extensive correspondence with the leaders of the exciting new developments in these fields.

For two years, in 1925 and 1926, Korzybski studied psychiatry at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D. C. There, working under the guidance of Dr. William Alanson White, the Superintendent, he shared with Dr. White his study of mathematical methods as applied to psychiatry. He was given the opportunity to observe the patients, attend meetings of the medical staff and participate in the programs of the psychiatric societies in Washington.[6]

"How does time-binding work? " he asked himself. Language seemed to the main means of transmission. Hence the need for our language to correspond with what we were learning about the world. The old ways of speaking did not fit any more.

New and structurally different theories in biology and physiology were produced in the tropism theory (Jacques Loeb), and in the dynamic gradients formulations of Charles Child; W. E. Ritter and others were establishing that the organism must be considered "as-a-whole." The famous experiments of the physiologist Ralph Lillie showed that rhythmicity in life could not be explained by purely physical nor purely chemical means, but that it is more satisfactorily explained when treated as a physico-electro-chemical structural occurrence. There was grow-

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[3] "Fate and Freedom," The Mathematics Teacher, Vol. XVI, No. 5, May, 1923, pp. 274-290. Reprinted in The Language of Wisdom and Folly, Irving J. Lee, Ed., Harper & Bros., New York, 1949, p. 342.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Time-Binding: The General Theory," First Paper. Presented in abstract before the International Mathematical Congress, August, 1924, Toronto, Canada.

[6] "Time-Binding: The General Theory," Second Paper. Presented before the Washington Society for Nervous and Mental Diseases, June 25, 1925, and the Washington Psychopathological Society, March 13, 1926. Both "Time-Binding" Papers published together by Institute of General Semantics, 1954.

ing recognition of the importance of colloidal science as it affects biology, psychiatry and other sciences. These outlooks, so commonplace today but new in the 1920's necessitated breaking down the old compartmentalized barriers which split one scientific study from another, and demanded the formulation of new studies in terms of the "organism-as-a-whole-in-its-environment," with the recognition that "everything" is affected by "everything else."

Einstein's revolutionary work in physics was one of the pillars on which Korzybski's new theory was built. Indeed, in his "humanizing" of the theory, generalizing it to human behavior with its implications for changed relationships, he emphasized what a tremendous structural linguistic achievement Einstein's theories were.

That the observer himself is an integral part of whatever he observes, that an observation cannot be "pure," but must be a relation between the observed, and the observer's instruments, his language structure, his physiology, his habits of perception, the environmental conditions, etc., would have deep ramifications not only in scientific research but also in our daily lives.

Korzybski was in close touch with the physicist Percy Bridgman and with leading mathematicians in this country such as Eric Temple Bell, R. D. Carmichael, and E. V. Huntington, besides Cassius Keyser. He sought their evaluations of his work as his theory developed.

As new works appeared in different fields, dramatically breaking fresh ground, Korzybski saw that their approaches were somehow related in their underlying assumptions. He was faced with the necessity of searching out those assumptions and analyzing their structure, and the new structure of the language in which they were expressed (e.g. "space-time" instead of separate "space" and "time"). In unravelling the underlying structures, he found them to be aspects of one larger system embracing the new trends. "If we must label this system, "Korzybski wrote in 1926, "non-Aristotelian probably would be the most appropriate."

The Aristotelian, Euclidean, and Newtonian systems were expressions of a structurally similar world view. The first science to break the traditional "structural ring" was geometry. When Gauss, Bolyai, Lobatchevsky, and Riemann formulated non-Euclidean geometries it shook and freed the mathematical and scientific world, for now there was not only the one unique Euclidean geometry, but indefinitely many possible non-Euclidean geometries. Following these, non-Newtonian systems were built with Einstein's theories and the quantum.

Looking back over the development of this phase of his work, Korzybski wrote, "As soon as this new non-Aristotelian system was definitely formulated, a most curious, natural, and yet unexpected result became apparent; namely, that the three new systems, the non-A, non-E, and the non-N have also one underlying structure and metaphysics.... All these three new systems have been produced independently. They express between them the structural and semantic urge and longing of all modern science."[7] The new trilogy was more general than the old, and included the Aristotelian-Euclidean-Newtonian trilogy as a special case.

Korzybski had profound admiration for the work of Aristotle. He believed that the "non-Aristotelians" would carry forward the aims of Aristotle in modern times with the epistemological and scientific knowledge of the twentieth century.

To mention only a few of the characteristics of these contrasting metaphysics, it may be said that the Aristotelian included subject-predicate verbal structures, static, additive, linear, two-valued orientations. The non-Aristotelian may be characterized by relational methods, and dynamic, non-linear, functional, flexible, many-valued orientations.

Central to Korzybski's theory was his formulation of "consciousness of abstracting," to be achieved by developing an active awareness that a symbol is not to be considered the same in value as the non-verbal happening or person that it represents; that whatever we may say about a happening (or a person) can never cover "all;" that we can abstract in higher and higher orders. Such awareness of our use of language and our reactions to language, involving our total functioning — including our every-day decisions, hopes and fears — is vital to our well-being.

After the first draft of Science and Sanity was written, in which he set forth his new theory, Korzybski attended the Mathematical Congress of Slavic Countries at Warsaw in September, 1929. He had been impressed by the work of the Polish mathematicians, especially by the restricted semantic school represented by Leon Chwistek and his pupils, which was characterized mostly by the semantic approach. Up to this time he had called his work the "general theory of time-binding." By 1931 he decided to choose the term "general semantics" for his work. In later years, as the term "semantics" became more popular and became confused in public usage with "general semantics," he was to regret that he coined that name, and used it for his work.

As a background for his selection, he had become acquainted with the work of Michel Breal, who introduced the term "semantique" into literature in

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[7] Science and Sanity, p. 91.

1883.[8] In his use, the term referred to a branch of philology. A few years later Lady Welby formulated a theory having to do with "signification," which she called "significs." Korzybski was also influenced by the use of the term "semantic" by certain Polish logicians. He selected the term "general semantics" for his theory for historical continuity. As he described his selection in 1948:

> The term "General Semantics" seemed most appropriate to me because of the derivation from the Greek semainein, "to mean," "to signify." A theory of evaluation seemed to follow naturally in an evolutionary sense from 1) "meaning" to 2) "signification" to 3) evaluation, if we take into account the individual, not divorcing him from his reactions, nor from his neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic environments. Thus we allocate him in a plenum of some values, no matter what, and a plenum of language, which may be used to inform, or misinform by commission and/or
58 omission, deceiving the individual himself and/or others. With such problems, without exception, the individual has to cope to be human at all. That's what I learned from the theory of time-binding and what I tried to convey to others through General Semantics and psychobiological non-aristotelian considerations.[9]

[8] The word first appeared in an article in the annual of a society for Greek studies. It received wider attention later through the publication of Breal's book, Essai de semantique: science des significations, Paris, 1897, translated into English in 1900 under the title, Semantics: Studies in the science of meaning.

[9] "Author's Note" in Selections From Science and Sanity, Institute of General Semantics, Distributors, 1948, p. viii.

Science and Sanity was published in 1933, and for the next seventeen years Korzybski devoted himself with great energy to teaching in his seminars (usually about forty hours each in duration), to lecturing, writing articles, and directing the Institute which he founded. He strongly emphasized that the principles must be applied, not merely talked about, and that they must be tested empirically. They would then, eventually, be manifested in our behavior, so that we would act more in accord with our potentialities as fully "human" persons.

Applications of his theory have been made in many professional fields — in medicine and psychiatry, law, engineering, architecture, etc. — in business and industry, international relations, as well as personal inter-relationships, and in education at college, secondary and elementary levels. Besides his own writings, a large bibliography of books and articles have been written by others about his work, and it is being taught in many schools and colleges.

His formulations are still not accepted by some; others, while accepting "intellectually," have not followed through more deeply. The principles require self-discipline and perseverance before hindering habits of years' duration can be given up. The generality and simplicity of the theory are often deceptive. In action we learn the discrepancy between principle and behavior and realize the inner transformation needed to bring them together. Although this is often difficult for adults, it is less so for children, who can still see with fresh eyes, and it was one of Korzybski's strongest hopes to bring his work to educators. For it is a methodology that lies at the heart of Korzybski's contributions, to help us to see more clearly and so to evaluate more appropriately. With our vision less distorted by pre-judgements, we can become more open to continual growth.