

• BOOK REVIEWS •

For a "Comfortable" Philosophy

LEVELS OF KNOWING AND EXISTENCE, by Harry Weinberg.
New York: Harper, 1959. 274 pp. \$4.50.

MUCH of our thinking is flat thinking. We compare ideas as if they were moving on a level that is the same for all of them. If two run in opposite directions on the same topic, they are like two trains heading toward each other on a single track; they are bound to collide. If they go at an angle to each other, clashes will be less frequent, but they remain unavoidable. The consequence is that if you want a philosophy of life that gives you peace of mind, you have to keep all your ideas, theories, and doctrines moving along parallel lines, all in one direction, which is for you the only right direction. You become a doctrinaire.

To offset this, Harry Weinberg proposes a system of thru-ways at different levels, so that sky-high theories and down-to-earth experiences may criss-cross our universe of discourse without ever colliding. Hence his title *Levels of Knowing and Existence*. For him *consciousness of abstracting* has become *consciousness of the difference between levels of abstraction*. "This consciousness makes it easier to avoid confusing and identifying different levels of abstraction, for as we have previously stated, *all patterns of misevaluation*, from the most trivial to the most serious, can be described in terms of the confusion and identification of different levels" (p. 76).

I italicized the words "all patterns of misevaluation" to show you how confident and ambitious our friend happens to be. He is ready to tackle any misevaluation, from the most trivial to the most serious. In fact he tackles many tough ones in his book and disposes of them by technical knockout.

Elsewhere he speaks of general semantics as a tool for analysing and understanding "almost every area of human endeavor" (p. xiv). I note a corrective "almost" here, but it does not impair his faith in the system. "Of course, there is the possibility that the system has inherent flaws, weaknesses, and contradictions which neither I nor its other vendors [sic] have discovered. I hope I have demonstrated that this is not true" (p. xiv).

How does this statement fit with Korzybski's own declaration that "one of the dangers into which the reader is liable to fall is to ascribe too much generality to the work, to forget the limitations and, perhaps, one-sidedness which underlie it."¹ Apparently Korzybski was not at all times an all-out "vendor" of his own system. This reminds me of what Freud once said to Theodor Reik: "You know, I am not a Freudian."

IT REMAINS that general semantics can be applied in many areas, and Weinberg gives us a telling demonstration of its range. I see his book as a strong competitor of other types of generalizations that appeal to a large audience in quest of a philosophy of life. He proposes a technique of self-levitation—in a metalinguistic helicopter, I would say—which gives more power to positive thinking, insures peace of mind and freedom from insecurity.

If you want to learn the art of semantic self-levitation, practice the art of distinguishing between facts and inferences. Our language makes no distinction between them. So, we assume that they belong to the same level of existence. They don't, and this fools us more often than we realize. "The confusion of inferential and factual knowledge is a causative factor in many accidents, needless quarrels, and misunderstandings ranging from the comic to the tragic. It is found in practically all forms of literature . . . this pattern of misevaluation has always been with us . . . We find it in the language and thought of the neurotic and psychotic" (p. 33).

Many applications follow that will provide interesting conversation pieces. For instance, "Is the desk still there when

¹ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, p. 143.

I leave the room?" "Are the laws of nature discovered or invented by man?" "What is it 'really'?" And, of course, the staple conundrum to introduce multiordinality, "Does the barber shave himself if he shaves every man in town who does not shave himself?"

Then we pass to what the author euphemistically calls "nontrivial" questions, to some fundamental puzzlements that have haunted man's thinking for ages: "Determinism versus free will," "Pleasure principle versus rationality and/or morality," "What is beauty, love, happiness?" "Times, time, and eternity," "Dying and being dead."

CHAPTER 8 is entitled *Semantitherapy*. I like the term. I like the way it is presented. "Semantitherapy, being a 'rational' approach, is primarily concerned with changing the patterns of behavior open to conscious control and change. We realize that unconscious factors play a large part in behavior, but they are not the only ones. By reducing the mis-evaluations open to conscious control, we lessen the stress upon the organism and thereby keep from 'stirring up' unconscious stimuli; i.e., we let sleeping cats lie. But there is also a positive aspect. By controlling the secondary symptoms, we keep them from reinforcing the primary ones and this in turn, over a long period of time, greatly reduces the potency of the unconscious patterns of mis-evaluation" (p. 178). If this does not induce some psychoanalyst to give it a try, I don't know what will.

From there we pass to a study of motivation with A. H. Maslow, of will training with A. A. Low, of religion with Eric Fromm and W. T. Stace, of mystic experience with William James, of Zen with D. T. Suzuki, and then, taking a sharp turning dive to a more mundane level, we land on the runway of our jet-age scientific invention, cybernetics. We end in a dance with Elsie, the synthetic turtle, and Elmer, her brother, jumping up and down from the first to the second level of complexity, where free will and purpose are almost within the reach of machines.

Do you want a "comfortable philosophy"? Then read

Levels of Knowing and Existence. You may share its author's belief that such a philosophy is possible provided it operates on all levels of abstraction (p. 3). If you don't share the belief, you will have enjoyed an interesting thought experiment.

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Man's Exile from Nature

NATURE, MAN AND WOMAN: A NEW APPROACH TO SEXUAL EXPERIENCE, by Alan W. Watts. New York: Pantheon Books, 1958. 209 pp. \$3.95.

IN HIS LAST four books and the monograph, *The Way of Liberation in Zen Buddhism*, Alan Watts has developed a single theme with diversity, power, and a surprisingly deft but light touch. The prefaces of two of his works maintain that it is not a "necessary virtue" for a philosopher to defend a consistent position. Nevertheless, Watts has one. Despite the differences among the contexts in which it is placed (the topics of his late works range from myth in Christianity to a systematic treatment of Zen), Watts' writing centers upon one thesis. Here is a sample statement of it from the book at hand:

There is much to suggest that when human beings acquired the powers of conscious attention and rational thought, they became so fascinated with these tools that they forgot all else, like chickens hypnotized with their beaks to a chalk line. Our total sensitivity became identified with these partial functions so that we lost the ability to feel nature from the inside, and, more, to feel the seamless unity of ourselves and the world.

Nature, Man and Woman is two short books in one. Part I summarizes and gives increased depth and sharpness of focus to ideas developed previously by the author. He discusses