

where a space-time j.n.d.* serves as a 'boundary' beyond which we get carried irreversibly into disintegrative flux. (General Semantics Bulletin, 41-42-43, p. 188.)

We must be patient. Death will come soon enough.

IS THERE A PLACE FOR "MYSTICISM" AND
"OCCULTISM" IN GENERAL SEMANTICS?

A POSITION PAPER PROPOSING
A DOZEN POSITIONS

by Allen Walker Read
Columbia University

The following propositions are presented as valid, entailed by Alfred Korzybski's formulations of general semantics.

PROPOSITION 1: The formulation of "non-elementalism" is fundamental in Korzybski's general semantics. Therefore we cannot make any split between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural.' All phenomena fall into one domain of existence, and it is preferable to call this 'natural' rather than 'supernatural.'

PROPOSITION 2: In principle, everything is 'knowable.' As Korzybski wrote (S. & S., p. 109): "By definition, there cannot be any unknowable." There is an interesting, large area of strange phenomena, unexplained happenings, as collected by Charles Fort ("fortean") or studied as "anomalistics" (the term of Roger Westcott, Drew University).

PROPOSITION 3: The relation of an individual to his, her, or its environment is based on sensory equipment. As Willard Quine states in the American Scholar, 50 (1980-81), 43: "All we know or ever hope to know about things--what things there are and how they are--we owe to the triggering of our nerve endings, our sensory receptors. That is where the information gets fed in. . . . Natural science is where we learn that there is no possible mechanism for clairvoyance or telepathy, no avenue of information about external objects except through physical forces that emanate from those objects and impinge on our sensory surfaces."

PROPOSITION 4: It can be established that a high percentage of examples of the 'occult' consists of hoaxing and false claims based on trickery (e.g., the bending of spoons by Uri Geller); then another layer consists of self-deception; but a small residue may have to be left

as 'unexplained.' Every intelligent person should try to have a low 'gullibility index.'

PROPOSITION 5: People differ in the degree of the sensitivity of their sensory equipment, and it is difficult to overestimate the subtlety of the cues that can be picked up. Human beings may share the ability of migratory birds that return to a particular nest thousands of miles away or of a house cat that can make its way home over two hundred miles. The so-called 'psychics,' apart from the outrightly fraudulent and the self-deceived, should be studied carefully.

PROPOSITION 6: The phenomena commonly called 'paranormal' must be subjected to fiercely skeptical scrutiny (the mode of all sound science), and the probabilities of acceptance, never made final, must be continually re-investigated. However fierce, this skepticism must not be an "allness" skepticism, but directed at individual items, one by one.

PROPOSITION 7: It is important to have an open, receptive attitude to new formulations, seriously presented. Accepted views among 'establishment' scientists or members of the medical profession, even by a strong consensus, may be wrong. A new formulation like Rupert Sheldrake's "morphogenetic fields" or "morphic resonance" needs close attention. (See Brain/Mind, August 3, 1981).

PROPOSITION 8: There is nothing 'mystical,' in its usual sense, about music or the other arts. In the following passage, the word mysticism is used unwisely (N.Y. Times, Feb. 28, 1982, Sect. 2, p. 1): "Music occupies an embattled position somewhere between science and mysticism and is always having to defend itself against being overrun from one side or the other."

PROPOSITION 9: The 'guru' relationship is unhealthy. Sound teaching (while involving the intellect/emotions as a unified whole) should foster an independence and freedom of the individual to think for himself and to question the teachings of the teacher.

PROPOSITION 10: The denial of the alleged 'supernatural' in no way interferes with a "sense of wonder," for the findings of science outstrip the hallucinations of any medieval saint. As Carl Sagan says in Cosmos (1980), p. xii: ". . . the universe has a reeling and ecstatic grandeur" yet "is accessible to human understanding." A strong joy in living, infused with ecstasy, rapture, and "peak experiences," is possible and

*Just noticeable difference.

desirable, without any pathological states brought on by a disordered physiological system, alcohol or other drugs. The 'mystical experience' associated with some forms of religion can be achieved without abrogation of a strict scientific outlook.

PROPOSITION 11: The word GOD is not needed in any explanation of human or non-human affairs. All sentences in which the word GOD is used in first-order usage are either invalid or obfuscatory, in the same way that all calculations in which zero is multiplied result in zero.

PROPOSITION 12: There is no place for 'mysticism' or 'occultism' in general semantics; but all genuine phenomena that are purportedly described by those labels must be placed in a framework that accords with sound scientific investigation, such as Korzybski's formulations.

SERIOUS MOMENTS AT THE SEMINAR, 1982

