

Freedom as Ego-Nihilism

The deconstructive art of self-awareness

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Abstract

Making sense of ourselves can be a daunting task, one that is at the crux of ontological inquiry. In combination with Freudian psychoanalysis and the work of certain existentialist philosophers, General Semantics provides us with important tools for examining scientifically how we know ourselves, how we come into being in the world as a particular “self,” and how we can achieve a higher state of freedom by deconstructing our socially and culturally constructed identities. By representing the individual self within a mathematical matrix, it is possible to raise one’s awareness of the elements of identity that constrain our freedom and limit our sense-of-self, thus providing the opportunity to live a more genuinely free existence.

Introduction

Who am I? This is the question at the heart of this paper. Many philosophers have placed this fundamental ontological issue at the center of inquiry, but the focus on an understanding of identity is especially explicit and relevant in the philosophy of existentialism as articulated by Heidegger, Camus, and Sartre. These constructions, while robust and informative, may lack a pragmatic utility. (1) By recasting the

ontological question of identity through the frame of General Semantics, the potential exists to develop a richer and more liberated *sense-of-self*. Indeed, this ontological question is in a sense the question that lies at the heart of General Semantics, for the nature of our answer drives all of our interactions as human beings.

Early in his book, *The Art of Awareness*, J. Samuel Bois cites a critical statement of purpose from Korzybski as articulate in *Manhood of Humanity*:

I hope to show that by mathematical philosophy, by rigorously scientific thinking, we can arrive at the true conception of what a human being really is, and, in thus discovering the characteristic nature of man, we come to the secret and source of ethics. (2)

In other words, Korzybski's view of the field of inquiry he created had at its heart a systematic methodology of isolating those elements of *Being* that structure the "self" or "consciousness." Without such a methodology, we are without the tools necessary to gain genuine insight into the "how" and "why" of human action. There are at least two key concepts in Korzybski's system that we should contemplate to acquire at least the minimal tools of inquiry as they apply specifically to ascertaining the nature of the "self": *abstracting* and *time-binding*.

Before we address those concepts, however, we would like to make more explicit what we mean by the "self" (at least for the purposes of this paper) by looking at the work of Sigmund Freud. In the context of Korzybski's statement above, it appears to us that Freud's concept of "ego" best captures what we are pursuing as "what a human being really is" as it pertains to an individual's (or even a society's) efforts to direct action. Freud argues that "in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes" that he calls the "ego," which "controls the approaches to motility – that is, to the discharge of excitations to the external world." (3) By looking through the window of

Freud's concept of "ego," we see the "self" as a particular form of consciousness that facilitates and inhibits specific actions and forms the basis for the "ethics" that were the objective of Korzybski's inquiry.

Abstraction, Time-Binding and the Construction of the Self

We have arrived at a point where we must ask ourselves: *What is this ego? What is its nature? How does it come into being?* The answer to these questions is found in the General Semantics concepts of *abstraction* and *time-binding*. As Korzybski said, "The Map is not the territory." Our understanding of a thing is not the thing itself. We can only ever experience a part of a thing at any one time due to our physical, mental, and temporal limitations. In his discussion of the abstracting process in relation to a simple pencil, Korzybski explains how we deal with these limitations:

Continually we invent extra-neural means which reveal new characteristics and finer detail. Nor is this process ever completed. No one can ever acquire a "complete" acquaintance with even so simple an object as a pencil. The chemistry, the physics, the uses of the varieties, offer fields of acquaintance that can be extended indefinitely. Nature is inexhaustible; the events have infinite numbers of possibilities in nature. (4)

What we end up with, then, are abstractions, or mental "maps" that cover those parts of the territory we have been able to experience, process, catalogue, retain, etc. Those subjectively constructed maps then serve as our guide as we attempt to navigate the objective realm of obdurate reality.

By drawing on systems theory, Bois contributed a helpful refinement to explain the nature of the abstracting process. As von Bertalanffy suggested, an individual is not a "passive receiver of stimuli coming from the external world, but in a very concrete sense *creates* his universe." (5) This process generates an almost constant succession of "semantic transactions" with the environment around us. (6) A semantic transaction

involves our whole selves as we move through space and time. Thus, the “self” as a “semantic transactor” is only properly understood as “a thinking, feeling, self-moving, electrochemical organism in continuous transaction with a space-time environment.” (7)

As we contemplate Bois’ description of the abstracting process, we must remember, as Korzybski explained, that even the object itself must be considered an abstraction, as we can only ever understand it incompletely. We move eventually from this first object-tied order of abstraction as we apply language to our experience, eventually moving all the way to “multiordinal terms” like “problem,” “property,” or “relation” that are highly ambiguous and have a “definite meaning, or one value, only and exclusively in a given context, when the order of abstraction can be definitely indicated.” (8)

As *time-binders*, we continue to organize lower-level abstractions within the categorical framework of higher-order abstractions, both as individuals and as social collectivities. Seen from this perspective, culture becomes both an *input* into the formation of individual identity as we respond to the efforts to modify our behavior in socially acceptable ways, as well as an *output* of social interaction as we share our abstractions with others within the framework of a given symbol system. *Time-binding*, therefore, leads to the formation of the “self” within a particular cultural environment.

Freud’s conceptualization of the ego is remarkably consistent with a General Semantics perspective, incorporating implicitly both abstraction and time-binding, as discussed above. As Freud suggested, the ego is a representation of the external world or “reality” and “is formed to a great extent out of identifications.” (9) In other words, the

ego results from the time-binding of a vast sequence of abstractions as we engage in an endless stream of semantic transactions in our space-time environments.

As Freud's work demonstrated, not only does the ego result from our abstractions of experience, it also works to constrain future actions:

the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world...the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavors to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id. For the ego, perception plays the part which in the id falls to instinct. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions. (10)

The ego, therefore, becomes the basis for understanding the "self" as it pertains to systematically attempting to ascertain the basis for human action and reaction.

Time-binding also plays an important role in understanding the ego because it is formed on the basis of learnings derived through social interaction across time. In a certain sense, the "self" emerges as we incorporate the rules of social conduct (which must be higher-order abstractions) through semantic transactions with others in a particular social context. From a General Semantic perspective, Freud's concept of ego could be seen as a sort of identity glove box in the car of the self. In it we place a variety of identity maps that guide us as we navigate the territory of the social landscape.

A Mathematical Representation of Identity

The determination to construct a representation of identity mathematically is not without its consequences. As with any abstraction, some insight is gained while other valid aspects of understanding are lost or obfuscated. The utility of a mathematical construction of identity may rest with its ability to provide us with a narrower delineation of the underlying structure of identity. This mathematical construction, as an abstraction,

is capable of being symbolically deconstructed through ego-nihilism, and eventually reconstructed as a more liberated *sense-of-self*. However, this reconstructed and liberated *sense-of-self* is predicated on an awareness of both the freedom and the responsibility associated with the self-construction of one's identity. (11)

Heidegger explains, "mathematics is not more rigorous than historiology, but only narrower, because the existential foundations relevant for it lie within a narrower range." (12) According to Korzybski, "the semantic definition of number is given in terms of relations, and so number and measurement become the most potent factors for supplying us with information about structure, which we know already gives the only content of knowledge." (13) In the spirit of Korzybski's desire to apply a "mathematical philosophy" to understanding human character, we have attempted to represent the nature of identity within a mathematical framework as it emerges through our semantic transactions with others in a specific social context. This particular mathematical framework of identity is based initially on matrix algebra. The equivocal term *identity matrix*, which is used within the field of matrix algebra, provides the starting point for this construction.

Within the confines of matrix algebra an identity matrix is a square matrix which consists of all zero values except for those elements along the main diagonal, which are all equal to one. (14) The graphic presentation of this construct, accounting for extension, is presented as figure 1.

However, it is possible (perhaps likely) that one's *dominant identity* is non-exhaustive within its context. As an example, in the case of the child/parent relationship this relationship may be dominant but not exhaustive in its own context. Understood in this way, that one is a *child* may have ramifications for one's concept of self in relation to one's spouse, children, superiors, etc. In this way, it is possible for *identity-blending* to occur. Mathematically *identity-blending* could be represented by non-zero correlation values between one's constructed self and relationships outside of the initial strict pairings (i.e., there will be non-zero correlation values off the main diagonal of the matrix). A notional extension of this concept is presented as figure 3.

Figure 3: Complex Matrix of Constructed Identity:

		In Relationship to One's: (In Context)									
		Parents	Spouse	Children	Superiors	Subordinates	Peers	Friends	Acquaintances	...	Enemies
Who one is : (Constructed Self)	Child	1	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	...	0.0
	Spouse	0.5	1	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.2	...	0.0
	Parent	0.8	0.9	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.2	...	0.0
	Subordinate	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	0.0
	Superior	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	0.0
	Peer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.0	0.0	...	0.0
	Friend	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.0	...	0.0
	Acquaintance	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	...	0.0
	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
	Enemy	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	1

Through dealing with existents in this fashion, identity is constructed in relation to others. (15) One's concept of self is tied to, and to some extent defined by, others. According to the general systems theorist Hanson, one must understand the impact of "nonentities in the form of inactions." (16) This is perhaps useful from an existential perspective. In an ego-nihilistic construction, focused on the importance of deconstructing identity as a potential path toward freedom, it is through the interaction of the complex matrix of constructed identity and the existential vector of nonexistents that

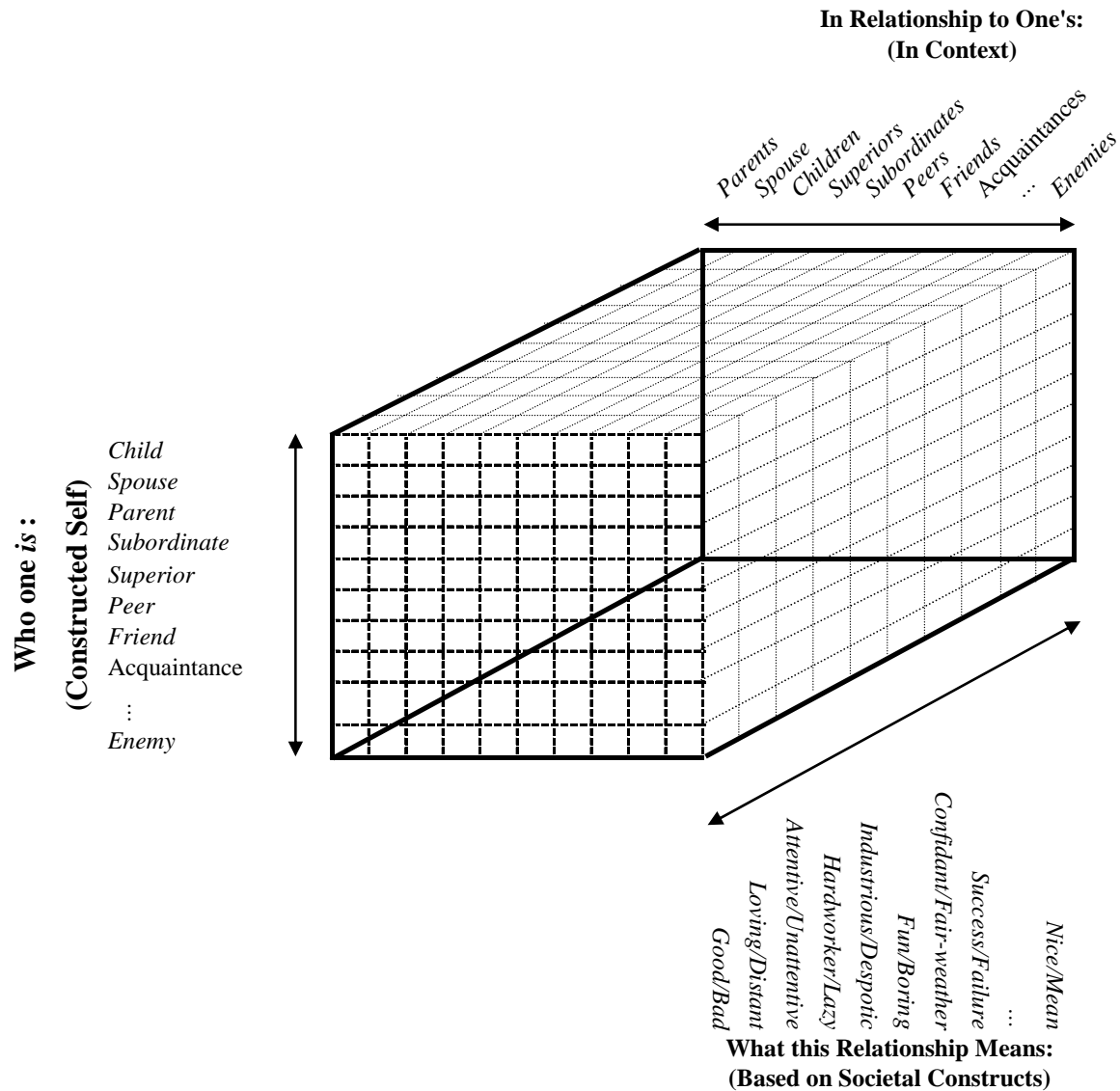
one may liberate one's concept of self (figure 4). In regard to the construction of self, once one begins to appreciate that nothing is given, anything is possible.

Figure 4: Liberated Construct of Self through Ego Nihilism:

Who one is : (Constructed Self)	In Relationship to One's: (In Context)										Existential Vector	Who one is : (Through Ego-nihilism)	In Relationship to One's: (In Context)									
	Parents	Spouse	Children	Superiors	Subordinates	Peers	Friends	Acquaintances	...	Enemies			Nonexistents	Parents	Spouse	Children	Superiors	Subordinates	Peers	Friends	Acquaintances	...	Enemies
Child	1	0.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.0	...	0.0	0	Child	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Spouse	0.5	1	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.2	...	0.0	0	Spouse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Parent	0.8	0.9	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.2	...	0.0	0	Parent	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Subordinate	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	0.0	0	Subordinate	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Superior	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	0.0	0	Superior	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Peer	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.0	0.0	...	0.0	0	Peer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Friend	0.2	0.5	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	0.0	...	0.0	0	Friend	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
Acquaintance	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1	...	0.0	0	Acquaintance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	0	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Enemy	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	...	1	0	Enemy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	...	0

The model as constructed reflects a very narrow definition of identity construction, and therefore a very limited construction of ego-nihilism. It is important to understand and appreciate that while identity is partially constructed through personal interactions, it is not completely constructed through this process. As we suggested before, identity construction occurs also on a cultural level. Through this cultural identity construction, one's personal relationships have social *meaning(s)*. In order to account for the important dimension of culture in identity construction, and by extension ego-nihilism, the matrix of constructed identity may be remodeled as a socially constructed identity cube (figure 5).

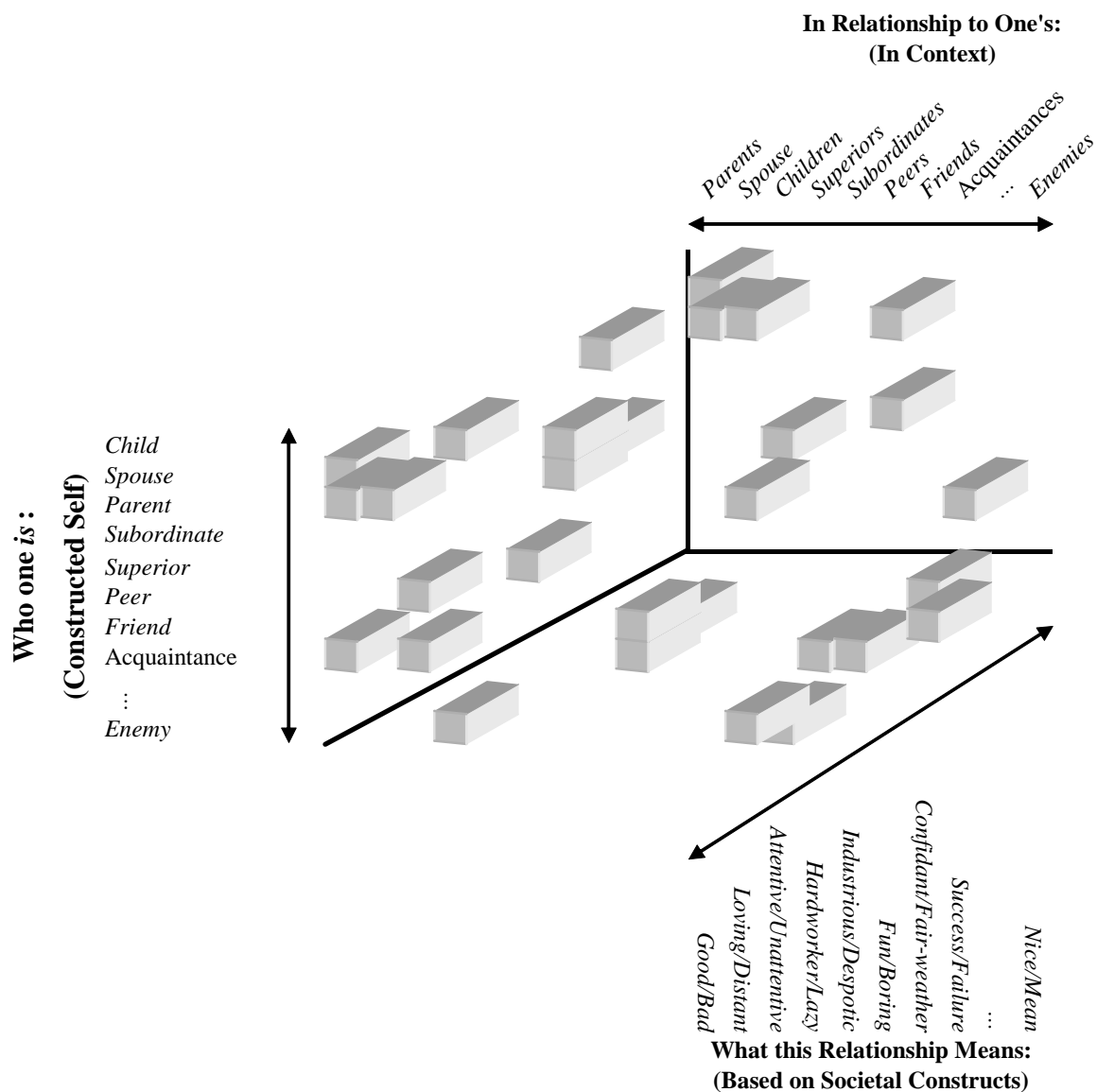
Figure 5: Socially Constructed Identity Cube:



While the relationships are interpersonal, the societal *meaning(s)* of these relationships are culturally constructed. An individual's socially constructed identity is not as *solid* as the identity cube (figure 5) may lead one to believe. It may be the case that the *identity bricks* contained in one's identity-cube-space are more accurately modeled as a loose confederation of existents, suspended without the support of the entire structure (figure 6). In this case, only part of the possible interrelationship between a

person and one's context is made manifest in a socially constructed meaning context. As an example, one is typically not considered, at the same time and by the same person, to be both a *good* and *bad* parent. The process of ego-nihilism used here would be similar in theory, but more complex graphically, to that described for the more simple construction (figure 4).

Figure 6: Identity Bricks within the Socially Constructed Identity Cube:



The modeling of socially constructed identity through the use of *identity bricks* is helpful in that an individual may limit one's analysis to certain parts of constructed identity. Ego-nihilism may be applied first to those identity bricks that are less central to the core identity of an individual. Once this process of deconstruction is applied on the *periphery identities* of the individual, one may deconstruct those aspects that are more to the core of who one *is*, existentially. The potential exists, through ego-nihilism, to deconstruct the socially constructed meaning(s) associated with one's relationships, and by extension, transcend oneself and be free to exist as a "being-for-itself." (17)

Freedom as Ego-Nihilism

One hauntingly simple question may form *a* nexus of both human misery and glory -- "who am I?" At its core this question represents the central ontological challenge taken on by philosophers in general and existentialists in particular. Seldom, however, do the responses to this challenge rise to the task by providing us with a discernable, pragmatic means of navigating the territory of "self" within the context of a particular society, and individual set of circumstances. How we answer the question of our very existence is not an esoteric curiosity, rather it is the very foundation of how we move through the world in commerce with others. It is the basis of love and hate, peace and war, happiness and despair. As Skinner suggested, "the question is not whether a man can know himself but what he knows when he does so." (18) In many ways, the question, "who am I?" presupposes that there is a unique, valid, and verifiable answer to the question. This might not be the case. Further the framing of the question in this way may lead to "unsanity." (19)

Once thrown into existence (20), one immediately encounters both interpersonal relationships and societal norms. However, one continually decides, either consciously or subconsciously, either to accept or reject both the relationships and the corresponding expectations. Grounded in the General Semantic principles of abstraction and time-binding, the aim of ego-nihilism is to bring greater awareness to the dynamic and potentially arbitrary nature of *identity-as-a-given*. Through the process of ego-nihilism, in dealing with the existential vector, one has the opportunity to deconstruct the given, and reconstruct a liberated *sense-of-self*. Each action for the individual then has the potential to become a true premeditated, chosen course rather than an automatic reaction prescribed by socially constructed *self/other* dynamic. Only then can an individual break out of the cycle of “collusion,” as Laing has called it, in which “he has found an other to endorse his own false notion of himself and to give this appearance a semblance of reality.” (21)

The brief presentation of ego-nihilism developed here has potential ramifications for the fields of education, ethics, management, theology, etc. The question “who am I?” might be beneficially reframed “how do I want to be?” As we can then see, it is a very short distance to “how shall the world be?” It is our hope that this initial effort and subsequent work to develop the concept of ego-nihilism will make a small contribution to the challenge set before us by Korzybski to arrive at that “true conception of what a human being really is” and, by so doing, take us one step closer to the “secret and source of ethics.”

NOTES:

1. Rorty 1996 (1982)
2. Bois 1975 (1966), p.xxxi
3. Freud 1989 (1923), p.8
4. Korzybski 2000 (1933), p.375
5. Von Bertalanffy 2003 (1968), p.194, author's emphasis retained
6. Bois 1975 (1966)
7. Ibid, p.36
8. Korzybski 2000 (1933), p.433
9. Freud 1989 (1923), p.48
10. Ibid, pp.18-19
11. Sartre 1993 (1965)
12. Heidegger 1962 (1926), p.195
13. Korzybski 2000 (1933), p.47
14. Bronson 1991 (1970), p.24
15. Kearney 2003
16. Hanson 1995, p.47
17. Sartre 1993 (1965)
18. Skinner 1971, p.191
19. Korzybski 2000 (1933)
20. Sartre 1993 (1965)
21. Laing 1990 (1961), p.111

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