ALDOUS HUXLEY AND GENERAL SEMANTICS

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Aldous Huxley, the author of the classic novel *Brave New World* and nearly 50 other fiction and nonfiction books, was an admirer of general semantics (GS), as can be seen from the following excerpts of two letters that he wrote in 1938:

> Letter to T.S. Eliot (July 12, 1938): "I've just been reading a very remarkable book which, if you don't already know it, I venture to recommend, in spite of its 800 pages—Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, which is by far the best thing on 'semantics' and the relationship between words and things, ever produced."[1] Letter to Julian Huxley (July 22, 1938): "Have you read *Science and Sanity*? If not I think you should—in spite of the fact that the author is maddening and his book 800 pp long. For he does seem to have said things about 'Semantics'—the relationship of words to things and events—which are of the highest importance. And incidentally he seems to have read practically everything."[2]

Twenty-five years later, Huxley's enthusiasm for general semantics had not waned. In a 1963 commentary titled "A Philosopher's Visionary Prediction," Huxley asserted that "a man who knows how symbols are related to experience, and who practices the kind of linguistic self-control taught by the exponents of General Semantics, is unlikely to take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, practical wisdom and political argument."[3]

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Language

In his writings, Huxley made many perceptive comments on language and its effects that mirror GS teachings. For example, in his novel *After Many a Summer*, Huxley shows that we don't have enough kinds of words to describe nuances of experience by having one of the characters say: "We don't even make the simple Greek distinction between *erao* and *philo*, *eros* and *agape*. With us everything is just love, whether it's self-sacrificing or possessive, whether it's friendship or lust or homicidal lunacy."[4]

Huxley makes a related point on the inadequacy of language in *Along the Road: Notes and Essays of a Tourist*: "We create our own difficulties by employing an inadequate language to describe facts. Thus, to take one example, we are constantly giving the same name to more than one thing, and more than one name to the same thing. The results, when we come to argue, are deplorable."[5]

Huxley understood that people often react more strongly to symbols than to actual physical dangers that threaten them; e.g., in his essay "Writers and Readers," he observes that: "The hatred we feel at the sight of our enemies is often less intense than the hatred we feel when we read a curse or an invective."[6] (From a GS perspective, such an overreaction to words might be described as confusing the map with the territory.)

Delayed reactions are an important part of the teachings of general semantics, as they allow us time to get our emotions under control so we can evaluate and respond to people and situations more effectively. Huxley also saw value in delayed reactions, as is shown in the following quotation from *Words and Their Meanings*: "To learn to use words correctly is to learn among other things, the art of foregoing immediate excitements and immediate personal triumphs. Much self-control and great disinterestedness are needed by those who would realize the ideal of never misusing language."[7]

Huxley believed that high-level abstractions, words like "nation," "state," "freedom," and "unity," numb people to concrete realities, which can further the aims of unprincipled leaders. That point is illustrated by Eustace Barnack, a primary character in Huxley's novel *Time Must Have a Stop*, who says that under the name of "idealism," politically ambitious men "drape over the will-to-power" and make their ambition "look respectable."[8]

Anthony Beavis, the main character in *Eyeless in Gaza*, also talks about the hypnotic quality of certain words when he writes in his diary, "There ought to be some way of dry-cleaning and disinfecting words. Love, purity, goodness, spirit—a pile of dirty linen waiting for the laundress."[9] (Had Beavis studied

general semantics, he would have realized that meaning is not just contained in words. It is also found in those using words and the context in which such words are being used.)

Huxley, like Korzybski, thought war and the language of war were repugnant. He condemned euphemisms like "war of attrition" that deflect people from thinking about "the particular realities of mangled flesh and putrefying corpses."[10] He noted when we use abstract terms in discussing war, such as using words like "infantry" and "enemy," we become entangled in glib generalities and forget there are real individuals involved. Huxley also observed that personifying opposing armies or countries allows one to conceive of war as a conflict between individuals and that when people write about war, they do it as if it were waged exclusively by generals and not by the privates in their armies—e.g., "[General] Rennenkampf had pressed back von Schubert."[11]

In *Words and Their Meanings*, Huxley further speaks about the personification of abstract terms. He states that: "Nations are spoken of as though they were persons having thoughts, feelings, a will and even a sex, which for some curious reason, is always female.... [But there is also] the pseudo-person called 'Society.' Society has a will, thoughts and feelings but, unlike the Nation, no sex."[12] (The personification of words and the effect that process has on human thinking and behavior is a key concern in general semantics, best expressed by the GS maxim "the word is not the thing, the map is not the territory.")

Huxley maintains that: "Our dependence on language is such that, for most of us, words no longer stand for things—rather things stand for words, and objects are treated as so many illustrations of our verbalized abstractions. No language is completely true to the inner and outer world, to which it is supposed to refer. Most languages, indeed, are so untrue to given reality that it has become necessary to supplement them with the special languages of mathematics. Thus, the world is unquestionably a continuum; there are in reality no separate substantial things, there are only merging events and interacting processes in space-time. But our languages (at any rate of those of the Indo-European stock) do not permit us to speak about the world as a continuum, and whenever we want to discuss this aspect of reality, we must use such special ad hoc languages as the calculus."[13]

Continuing in the aforementioned vein, Huxley contends that: "Thought is crude, matter unimaginably subtle. Words are few and can only be arranged in certain conventionally fixed ways; the counterpoint of unique events is infinitely wide and their succession infinitely long. That the purified language of science,

or even the richer purified language of literature should ever be adequate to the givenness [sic] of the world and of our experience is, in the very nature of things, impossible."[14] (A practitioner of general semantics might put the argument this way: no matter how much one says there is always an etc.)

Huxley, like Korzybski, was aware that language mediates how we think about the world and ourselves in it. In a letter to Julian Huxley (June 25, 1943), he contends that we must develop the habit of "analyzing the language [we] not only use, but swim in, like fishes in the sea."[15] The idea behind this metaphor is that the languages we have been taught influence our descriptions. To have people consider that idea, Huxley thought it would be wise to train individuals in the "art of dissociating ideas," i.e., training people to be able to analyze the difference between the abstractions of language and the essence of reality.[16]

Huxley held the view that there is much value in understanding the nonverbal world of human existence but that world does not get its due because our education system is primarily focused on the verbal realm. In the *Doors of Perception*, he writes that: "In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions. There is always money for, there are always doctorates in, the learned foolery of research into what, for scholars, is the most important problem: Who influenced whom to say what when? Even in this age of technology the verbal humanities are honored. The non-verbal humanities, the arts of being directly aware of the given facts of our existence, are almost completely ignored."[17]

S.I. Hayakawa, one of the great popularizers of general semantics, wrote about the importance of the nonverbal realm to general semantics. In an *ETC* article on GS definitions, he argued that: "General semantics is ultimately a nonverbal discipline of silence, of dissolving away the encrusted verbalizations and abstractions, dogmas and creeds which envelop most of us like layers of barnacles."[18]

Hayakawa used a Huxley citation in the first edition of his bestselling book *Language in Thought and Action*, a volume that brought many of the ideas of general semantics to a broader public. The citation was from *Words and Their Meanings*, a Huxley monograph published in 1940 that has in it examples of GS formulations that have to do with dating, map/territory relations, delayed reactions, the dangers of using high-level abstractions, and the power of words to mold human thought. The citation reads thusly:

> A great deal of attention has been paid ... to the technical languages in which men of science do their specialized thinking.... But the colloquial usages of everyday speech, the literary and philosophical dialects in which men do their

> thinking about the problems of morals, politics, religion and psychology—these have been strangely neglected. We talk about "mere matters of words" in a tone which implies that we regard words as things beneath the notice of a serious-minded person.
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> This is a most unfortunate attitude. For the fact is that words play an enormous part in our lives and are therefore deserving of the closest study. The old idea that words possess magical powers is false, but its falsity is the distortion of a very important truth. Words do have a magical effect—but not in the way that magicians supposed, and not on the objects they were trying to influence. Words are magical in the way they affect the minds of those who use them. A mere matter of words, we say contemptuously, forgetting that words have power to mold men's thinking, to canalize their feeling, and to direct their willing and acting. Conduct and character are largely determined by the nature of the words we currently use to discuss ourselves and the world around us.[19]

Huxley, like Korzybski (who in *Science and Sanity* investigated numerous areas including anthropology, biology, education, logic, mathematics, neurology, physics, and physiology), took all knowledge for his province and believed in the importance of going beyond narrow academic categories to get closer to "living reality." An indication of this can be seen in the following excerpt from a letter he wrote in 1949 to Ludwig van Bartalanffy (the father of systems theory): "You are one of those stratifically [sic] placed thinkers whose knowledge in many fields permits them to strike at the joints between the various academic disciplines—biology, physiology, literature, and the like—and to penetrate to the quick of the living reality in a way which the specialist, however learned and gifted, can never do. If I had been able to go through with the biological and medical education, which was interrupted in my youth by a period of near blindness, this is what I should have liked to become—a fully gratified striker at the joints between the separate armour-plates of organized knowledge."[20]

In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley talks about an advantage and disadvantage of human linguistic tradition that corresponds to the GS notions of *time-binding* and *the map is not the territory*. Specifically, he says: "Every individual is at once the beneficiary and the victim of the linguistic tradition into which he has been born—the beneficiary inasmuch as language gives access to the accumulated records of other people's experience, the victim in so far as it confirms him in the belief that reduced awareness is the only awareness and as it bedevils his sense of reality, so that he is all too apt to take his concepts for data, his words for actual things."[21]

Science and Perception

Wendell Johnson, the author of the GS classic *People in Quandaries*, said: "General semantics may be regarded as a systematic attempt to formulate the general method of science in such a way that it might be applied not only in a few restricted areas of human experience, but generally in daily life."[22] Huxley also valued the general method of science. Milton Birnbaum, the author of *Aldous Huxley's Quest for Values*, notes that: "Although Huxley never embraced science as a satisfactory way to gauge the nature of 'ultimate reality,' he always favored the methodology of science in the attainment of a knowledge and mastery of the material universe. He criticized D.H. Lawrence because Lawrence never 'looked through a microscope.'"[23]

Science and Sanity, the source book of general semantics, pays homage to the scientific method and its usefulness in solving problems of everyday living. Korzybski believed the techniques of science had led to great advances for humanity and wanted those techniques to also advance relations among human beings. He prized the *extensional approach* (a concern with facts and observations) that characterizes science and had at one time considered labeling his system Human Engineering.

Huxley also saw merit in science. In *Along the Road*, he expresses great disappointment in his failure to become a scientist: "If I could be born again and choose what I should be in my next existence, I should desire to be a man of science … even if I could be Shakespeare, I think I should still choose to be Faraday."[24]

June Deery, the author of *Aldous Huxley and the Mysticism of Science*, writes that: "Huxley was one of the few literary artists to explicitly and repeatedly refer to scientific ideas in his writing. There is not a book in which he does not make some reference to science. Yet this aspect of Huxley's writing has received far less critical attention than one might expect. Being the grandson of T.H. Huxley, the evolutionist, and the brother to Julian Huxley, another biologist, Aldous Huxley could hardly fail to take note of science. Indeed, at school he intended to focus on science in order to qualify as a doctor and perhaps take up medical research."[25]

Huxley believed that the scientific discoveries made by physicists in the first part of the twentieth century had altered our view of reality and the way we think about the world. Absolutes had been overturned, axioms were upended, and much of what was known in science was shown to be fundamentally inexact, with the result that nothing was certain, Huxley surmised, except change.[26] A character in the novel *Time Must Have a Stop*, which is set in the

early nineteen-thirties, argues that the most noteworthy events of the twentieth century have been scientific not political.

A twentieth-century event that general semanticists consider noteworthy is Korzybski's invention of the structural differential, which shows how the abstracting processes of the human nervous system works and how the human nervous system and language are insufficient to allow people to perceive what is actually going on in the world. Huxley likewise thought that human limitations prevent us from seeing the world in a clear and objective way. Deery notes that: "[Huxley] understood that twentieth-century subatomic investigations had forced the recognition that measurement involves some form of interaction between the measuring instrument and the object under observation, and that there are limits to this kind of observation, as formalized in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle (introduced in 1927)."[27]

Korzybski spoke about the organism-as-a-whole-in-an-environment, which involves the nonelementalistic notion that individuals function as "totalities" within environments; sensing-thinking-feeling-moving-doing within an environment forms an inseparable whole. Huxley also talked about the multidimensional nature of human functioning, putting it this way: "Every human being is a multiple amphibian, the inhabitant, simultaneously or by turns, of multiple [metaphorical] worlds."[28]

Huxley was saddened that his fellow writers in the literary world did not take science more into account in their work. In *Literature and Science*, Huxley's detailed look into the dichotomy of the "two cultures," he surveyed "modern writers" and concluded that: "From their writings you would be hard put to it to infer the simplest historical fact that they are the contemporaries of Einstein and Heisenberg, of computers, electron microscopes and the discovery of the molecular basis of heredity, of Operationalism, Diamat [dialectical materialism], and Emergent Evolution."[29] Deery amplifies this point, noting: "Huxley thought it was the literary artist's cultural responsibility to maintain a dialogue between literature and science and disseminate scientific ideas to a lay audience or at the very least draw their attention to the importance of such ideas."[30]

Conclusion

General semantics posits that human beings are a time-binding class of life one-quarter inch of cortex removed from animals. Huxley also observed key distinctions between humans and animals. He said: "Thanks to language and culture, human behavior can be incomparably more intelligent and desirable than the behavior of animals whose brains are too small to accommodate the number of neurons necessary for the invention of language and transmitted knowledge."[31]

Huxley took a great interest in science and the power of words to "mould man's thinking, to canalize their feeling, [and] to direct their willing and acting."[32] He believed that "deprived of words we should be like dogs and monkeys,"[33] and that "words and the meaning of words are not matters merely for the academic amusements of linguists and logicians, or for the aesthetic delight of poets; they are matters of the profoundest ethical significance to every human being."[34]

In trying to facilitate a saner world, Huxley, like Korzybski, wanted people to be aware of the limitations of language and the importance of science. He also, like Korzbyski, wanted people to be mindful about the complexity of the world, thoughtful in their communications with each other, and appreciative of the fact that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies.

Notes

1. Sexton, J. ed., (2007). *Selected letters of Aldous Huxley*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 353.
2. Smith, G. ed., (1969). *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 436.
3. Huxley, A. (1963, November). A Philosopher's Visionary Prediction, *in Playboy*, 175.
4. Huxley, A. (1959). *After many a summer*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 132.
5. Huxley, A. (1925). *Along the road: Notes and essays of a tourist*. London, UK: George H. Doran, 133.
6. Huxley, A. (1937). Writers and Readers. In *The olive tree: and other essays*. New York and London: Harper, 41.
7. Huxley, A. (1940). *Words and their meanings*. Los Angeles, CA: The Ward Ritchie Press, 28.
8. Huxley, A. (1944). *Time must have a stop*. New York and London: Harper, 55.
9. Huxley, A. (1954). *Eyeless in Gaza*. New York, NY: Bantam, 10.
10. Huxley, A. (1933). *Texts and pretexts: An anthology with commentaries*. New York and London: Harper, 171.
11. Huxley, A. (1947). *The olive tree and other essays.* London: Chatto & Windus, 88.
12. Ibid., 18.
13. Huxley, A. (2002). The oddest science. In R. S. Baker and J. Sexton (Eds.). *Aldous Huxley complete essays: Volume 6, 1956–1963*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 81.

14. Huxley, A. (2002). Literature and science. In R. S. Baker and J. Sexton (Eds.). *Aldous Huxley complete essays: Volume 6, 1956–1963*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 151–152.
15. Baker, R. S. (2002). Introduction. In R. S. Baker and J. Sexton (Eds.). *Aldous Huxley complete essays: Volume 6, 1956–1963*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, xiv.
16. Birnbaum, M. (1971). *Aldous Huxley's quest for values*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 92.
17. Huxley, A. (1954). *The doors of perception*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 76.
18. Wanderer, R. (2007). General semantics: A compendium of definitions. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, 63, no. 3, 196.
19. Huxley, A. (1944). *Words and their meanings*. Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 8–9.
20. Sexton *Selected letters*. 407.
21. Huxley *The doors of perception*. 23.
22. Wanderer *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. 194.
23. Birnbaum *Aldous Huxley's quest for values*. 177.
24. Huxley *Along the road*. 223.
25. Deery, J (1996). *Aldous Huxley and the mysticism of science*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 18.
26. Huxley, A. *Olive tree*. 299.
27. Deery *Aldous Huxley and the mysticism of science*. 64.
28. Huxley, A. (1972). Human potentialities. In Huxley, J (Ed.). *The humanist frame*. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 419.
29. Huxley, A. (1963). *Literature and science*. London, UK: Chatto and Windus, 51.
30. Deery *Aldous Huxley and the mysticism of science*. 25.
31. Huxley, P., 175.
32. Huxley, A. *Words and their meanings, front inside cover*.
33. Ibid., 13.
34. Ibid., 28.