

INTRODUCTION TO THE KORZYBSKI MEMORIAL LECTURE OF JOOST A.M. MEERLOO, MD  
Harvard Club, New York City, 28 April 1964

Allen Walker Read

I feel that it is an honor to introduce Dr. Meerloo, for he is one of the most eminent speakers that we have had in the thirteen-year history of the Korzybski Memorial Lectures. If I were to give you Dr. Meerloo's achievements at full length, I'm sure it would embarrass him, for he is truly a modest man. But in these cataclysmic times of the past three decades, he has been thrown into situations where the melodramatic and the heroic have been thrust upon him. At the opening of World War II, he was living in The Hague, in the Netherlands; and in addition to his private practice as a psychoanalyst he served as psychiatric consultant to the government agencies and to the Royal Court.

Living under the tension of the impending invasion of Holland, he thought deeply about what was happening in human psychology, and two books resulted in 1940, Homo Militans, the Psychology of War and Peace in Man, and The Psychology of Pain and Sorrow, both published at The Hague. For the next two years he had to treat the victims of Nazi mental torture, and he developed the outlook that enabled him to analyze totalitarian procedures. Even then he knew how 'brain-washing' would work. The Nazis put him in prison in 1942, but he escaped to England and became a colonel in the Netherlands Army-in-Exile and chief of the Psychological Department. After the war, back in Holland, he became High Commissioner for Welfare in the Netherlands Government.

Since coming to this country in 1946, he has had a private practice, held many academic posts, and has lectured widely. The books that he has written by now number more than eighteen and his articles more than three hundred.

If I were to list the honors that have come to him, it would take me a long time. But you are not so much interested in the honors, I think, as in Dr. Meerloo as a person. He has studied mankind in an amazingly wide variety of its aspects. In any subject that he tackles, he comes up with fresh and startling insights. At the height of the 'rock and roll' craze a few years ago, he developed the hypothesis that its deep, primitive attraction springs from the following source: when the child is still in the womb, it hears a double heart beat, its own and that of its mother. This syncopation of two rhythms against each other is remembered by the nervous system, and certain forms of jazz therefore create a deep response.

Because I am a lexicographer, I have been much interested that Dr. Meerloo coined the word menticide, probably a permanent addition to the language. It refers to the killing of the mind, which many nefarious forces lead to these days.

One of his critics has called him, I think rightly, the 'passionate spokesman for the democratic practice of life.' But I would call him not only 'passionate', but 'compassionate'. Dr. Meerloo is above all a humanitarian with deep concern for human sanity in all its aspects.

Dr. Meerloo is an original thinker who does not follow anyone else's terminology. In these Korzybski lectures we have not chosen speakers who are direct students of Korzybski's work, but those who are working in their own way along non-aristotelian lines. Dr. Meerloo has a special talent for taking figures of speech and working out their implications.

In his address this evening he will speak on the subject, 'Mental Contagion and Emotional Infection.'

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JOOST A.M. MEERLOO was born at The Hague in the Netherlands in 1903. His MD degree from the University of Leyden was awarded in 1927, and in 1932 he received the PhD degree from the University of Utrecht. He was deeply involved with the tragic events in Holland during the war years. For his services in behalf of his country in Holland and with the Army-in-Exile he was decorated in 1943 by the Netherlands Government with the Distinguished Service Cross.

In 1946 Dr. Meerloo came to New York, and is now an American citizen. Besides having a private practice, he is Associate Professor of

Psychiatry at the New York School of Psychiatry and Lecturer in Political Psychology at the New School for Social Research.

He was appointed a Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association and the Royal Society of Medicine (England), and is a member of numerous professional organizations in the United States and abroad. In 1961 he received a peace award from the American Association for Social Psychiatry for his 'unselfish concern and dedication to the welfare and preservation of mankind.' In 1963 he was elected an Honorary Trustee of

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# Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture 1964

## MENTAL CONTAGION AND EMOTIONAL INFECTION

Joost A.M. Meerloo, MD  
New York, New York

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In unfolding his time-binding principle Korzybski explained that this principle is essentially the reason why each new generation has the opportunity to begin where the older generation leaves off. History and time are condensed in various ways. We find this condensation in the chemical structure of the genes, the so-called carriers of heredity in which the history of biological adaptation and learning is conserved, while words, symbols, myths and traditions are endowed with the evolution of man's subjective experiences and deducted abstractions.

Where does a speaker begin? Where, in the vast conglomerate of inner and outer experiences, lies the subject of tonight's lecture?

It is an honor indeed to be asked to give a lecture in memory of a great pioneer. However, transcending the joy and honor which I feel tonight is the awareness of the responsibility to define the modest place of this paper within the great opus Korzybski left behind.

My first encounter with the science of semantics and verbal meaning—which in its beginning was called 'significs'—took place in my native Holland some forty years ago, when I was a medical student. The movement in the Low Lands started when in 1897 the Dutch physician and author, Frederik Van Eeden, published his study on 'The Logical Basis of Mutual Relations' (5). Though he founded his work on the well known pioneering investigations of Bréal (3) and Lady Welby (18), he went his own way and formulated, already then, some semantic questions about official thinking which he called quasi-scientific abstractions and quasi-logical automatisms.

How surprised I was to find a flourishing science of general semantics and psycholinguistics, going far beyond our limited venture, when I settled in this country after the Second World War. Yet, tonight I am not going to rephrase my personal and limited understanding of that vast edifice founded by Korzybski and his students. My subject is mental contagion and emotional infection. What do I mean by that label? You will not find these words in the textbooks on psychol-

ogy, sociology, or psychiatry. Nevertheless, the concept is used in everyday vernacular. The newspapers write about ideological contamination or political infection, about epidemic criminality and the spreading of pathological habits. Psychologists speak about suggestion and the more inadvertent induction of behavior. The dissemination of violence is at this moment a special point of order. Psychiatrists mention infectious psychoses or the unconscious transfer of feelings, thoughts, and actions. Korzybski, in his introduction to *Science and Sanity*, writes about the concept of infectious identification (7).

All this is reason enough to look more closely at this subject of mental contagion or psychic contamination. Be aware that all these words are borrowed from the pathology of infectious diseases. Accordingly, we will unwittingly look for communicable units, for psychic germs going from one person to the other. Although the concept of mental contagion is still undefined, all the metaphors used up till now point at a hidden and inadvertent transfer of feeling, thinking, and action.

But before we start to look at the clinical facts I have to come back to my unanswered question: Where does all this fit into the science of general semantics, founded by the man in whose honor we have gathered here tonight? I have to go back to Spinoza who in his herkolological approach of 'omne determinatio est negatio' taught us that in order to learn to explore and define we have to be well aware of our limitations, that is to say, to be aware how bound we are by our suppositions and by our tools of research. We first have to walk around our subject in order to determine what distorts and inhibits our outlook. Like in a bowling game, we attempt many throws at our subject of observation hoping to hit the core of the problem in the end.

Let us tentatively accept that mental contagion intrudes into our feeling and thinking unobtrusively. Mental contagion comprises, as it were, the science of concealed communication of all that intrudes into our clear semantic thinking and troubles the higher

abstractions. I want to show that such psychic infection takes away the consciousness of abstracting and that it pushes us unwittingly back to a non-verbal level of relating. Just as minute neurophysiological occurrences—as for instance a small stroke—can change our ability to conceptualize, so are our verbal rationalizations and abstractions distorted by inadvertent environmental attitudes and suggestions. Indeed, we speak of the infectious psychological climate. Mental contagion dulls the awareness of the fact that we must continually go over and above the doctrinal compliance asked for by our environment. It coerces and distorts our endeavor to think clearly and it robs our mental apparatus from its highest aim, namely, to think in an unbiased way. A technician would say that we have to be on guard at all times for disturbing noises in our communication system. Mental contagion in the form of unobtrusive brainwashing can be a permanent intruder into our semantic endeavor and into our systems of orientation.

I now have to warn you that many people feel an unpleasant resistance against this subject. The idea that other people's emotions and thoughts can unexpectedly intrude into our thinking affects our illusion of psychic autonomy. We want to ward off such eerie concepts. Yet, when I go deeper into this subject you will become more familiar with what I have to relate. Remember that those who have become more acquainted with the concept of mental contagion are starting to build defenses against this unobtrusive influence and are thus able to better eliminate self-deception. It is the same with myths: those who accept myths for what they are will no longer be lured by them.

Allen Walker Read (14) gives a beautiful example of disturbing noises from Civil War days in this country. He tells us how the unexpected 'rebel-yell' of the Confederates completely demoralized the Yankees until they familiarized themselves with this weapon of psychological warfare. Yelling, of course, better not be part of a meeting to which we came in order to discuss philosophical and psychological subjects. But every lecture is a symbolic fight in which we mutually probe: Who has the strongest psychic impact? I want my ideas to measure themselves with yours. Instead of yelling, or fencing with steel, I use word symbols. Those symbols, traveling between you and me, are loaded with manifold meanings which everybody interprets in his own personal way, grasping parts of the semantic and emotional intention behind my sophisticated symbols and my gestural actions. Various additional little cues in my communication will decide whether my audience is going to accept or reject my presentation.

Let us now look at the clinical considerations to see if some general rules of mental contagion can be established.

### The Pattern of Interaction or Man's Horizontal Psychic Conditioning

Man exists through personal interaction. This is true even for a hermit who, in his own mind, lives at the center of a network of relationships. We know relatively little about this web of cross-relations that is continually active. It has been known for some time that a case of panic in one individual can instantaneously induce collective panic in a group of people, and hysterical behavior on the part of one person will spread like wildfire and easily affects an entire crowd. There are numerous examples of such psychological chain-reactions. It is also true that some people are immune and keep their distance, usually because they are better aware of the interaction between them and the group. On the whole we find that little systematic attention has been devoted to the concepts of mutual interaction, of positive or negative influences, or other forms of behavioral contamination.

Psychiatric literature has produced numerous examples of psychoses à deux or psychoses à trois, and of infectious psychoses (16) within families or in small communities. Diagnostically one has to detect the pathogenic nucleus inside the group. Mob psychology is for a great part the science of the psychic germ carriers. There are also several cases known where a latent psychotic parent pushes the child into abnormal or even criminal behavior. The child acts out, as it were, what the parent represses in himself although the elder is often quick enough to punish the youngster for his asocial behavior. The so-called school phobia is thought to be most probably motivated by the mother's unconscious separation anxiety: she does not want to the child to leave her.

By and large the theme of human interaction has been receiving more attention since through psychotherapy greater emphasis has been placed on human encounter and the interrelation between patient and therapist. Moreover, the subtle parent-child relationship is now looked upon as the initial conditioner of the molding pattern of man's psychic functions. Families live together happily or tensely, depending on the example set by the parents and their guidance. Omission as well as commission condition the child.

In every group a specific climate of mutual interaction is established and its quality usually depends on the leaders. From practical experience in the classroom we are aware that teachers are able to influence not only the morale of the entire class but also the mutual relationships between the students. Often the pattern of interaction is set at the beginning of the school year. A teacher unwittingly influences his class through his mood, be it good or bad, while by the same principle a student with a nervous tic can

infect his fellow pupils.

Books on human ecology or social psychology rarely touch upon the facts of mental contagion. Yet everyone is daily subjected to a multitude of influences that somehow fashion and alter his habits. It is a continuous bombardment by influences, with micro-conditionings and tiny seductions. Apart from the presence of atomic particles in the air that can gradually and insidiously change man's biologic condition, there are manifold subtle psychological conditioning units that bring about changes in people, in their interactions and their environment.

Man is not a separate individual who can preserve his independence. He is the nucleus of a social unit upon which language, history, tradition, myth, personal genesis and group influences are continually hammering away. This fact of daily interaction and coercion, which is the subject of every study of human communication, hurts man's illusions of having an independent ego—so much so that he is inclined to resist taking this vulnerability into account. Whenever two people meet, the stronger personality, after an initial period of psychic probing, knowingly or otherwise tries to coerce the weaker one, attempting to become the leader. Several patterns of interaction in which psychic contagion plays an important role can be detected. Between harmonious sharing together and the ultimate of permanent one-sided dominance lies a gamut of variations.

Man's personal and historical past may be called the vertical molding influences, his social environment the horizontal conditioner, as suggested by Ehrenwald in his studies on neurotic interaction in the family (6).

#### Each Man Is a Crowd

It may come as a shock to some that man is not a distinctly set off entity with a constant self but rather the focal point of a field of influences, and the nucleus of various passive disseminations and active participations in community life. Each man plays several social roles. He is not the sum total of what he consciously experiences. There is a vast reservoir of subliminal experiences and a large pyramid of unconscious and biological drives impelling his actions. He is not only that separate unique human being that his reflection in the mirror shows him to be; he is not only that highly original creative thinker the poet sings of. He borrows more than he knows from his epoch and the Zeitgeist, he absorbs continually from history and tradition, and as an individual creator he soaks up as much as he can to mold and transform into some kind of personal Gestalt. Collectively, the listeners have also a share in the composition of music as the composer himself as long as the audiences create and recreate the accumulated harmonies in the inner ear of their listening minds. A Mozart born in the twentieth century might have turned out a different

kind of music. To be sure, creative geniuses do transform the world in which they live; Hadley Cantril calls them the goal-directed transactions that go beyond the mere interactions (4). There are also the talented molders, as well as the mere plagiarists, and don't forget that the very word we speak is a form of plagiarism. Politicians, so utterly dependent on competitive election-strategy and public approval are even more products of the Zeitgeist and are continually being shaped and conditioned by the mass emotions of their electorates.

In our world of today there are very few moral authorities and individuals who have transcended the overwhelming network of influences and dare to be unique and wise personalities. The cacophony of noises tends to drown the voices of wisdom. Telephone, radio and television bring daily hypnosis into our living room. Television violence disseminates a contagious and perverting influence onto our youths. Whereas executive power and dictatorship admittedly exist in our world, there is virtually no affirmation of the wisdom of a single unique human being.

When my book on brainwashing, thought control and menticide (12) first came out in 1956, several critics assumed that I was describing an extreme political phenomenon characteristic only of totalitarian regimes. The fact is that a major part of the book is dedicated to the non-obtrusive, quiet persuasion of minds that takes place in all personal encounters in every civilization. I pointed out how institutionalization and technicalization of our community life unobtrusively changes people's attitudes into automatic conformity and obedience, while simultaneously affecting their approach to personal responsibilities and commitments.

Descartes' Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am) needs revising for our times: I think, therefore I re-think other people's thoughts. I think, therefore I borrow from history and plagiarize my teachers' ideas. I think, therefore I am influenced and concentrate on thoughts inadvertently put into my head by other people's utterances and by the daily headlines. I think, therefore I reshape other people's ideas. This new position of man in the technical age demands great modesty about any direct personal impact on history.

In our affluent society a paradoxical phenomenon exists in advertising and in the machinery that engineers public opinion. In order to justify their existence, these institutions have to tax their ingenuity to the utmost so as to create artificial dissatisfaction in a relatively satisfied economy. It is a culture aimed at achieving thoroughly saturated gratification, with people continually on the lookout for newer and more thrilling needs, 'guided' by an artificial creation of new wants, combined with empty ways of filling leisure time. Because of more leisure time, our

society is perhaps more prone to mass suggestion than a culture in which primary human needs have not yet been fulfilled. Boredom provides a fertile soil for the seeds of suggestibility. Boredom can even have a luring hypnotic effect and can be more persuasive for some people than the clarity of purposeful work. The results of boredom are often disastrous. Human aggression, competition and even destruction may be aroused and unleashed, although minds at leisure can be kept occupied and turned away from the great void of senseless living. As we have noted elsewhere (13), it is all too true that regressive bestial feelings are more easily invoked and spread by propaganda than noble ones, according to the rules of mental contagion, some of which I now have to explain.

#### Direct Mental Induction and Regression to Archaic Communication

As we already heard, various synonyms are used to designate the phenomenon of mental contagion. We are all 'moved' by other people's emotions. Sometimes this emotional transfer is spoken of as moral contagion, sometimes as infectious defamation or contagious placing of blame. Stimulating propaganda is often called inflammatory. Again the referral to infectious diseases! A politician may speak of people being susceptible to other political currents because of their persuasive impact. One can refer to infestation with panic, or behavioral contamination, or the suggestive sloganization of a group.

Many a teacher complains of the one pupil who is having a bad influence on his class, officers report a few soldiers who have formed an infectious nucleus of panicky cowards in their companies. The psychiatrist describes infectious mass psychoses or, as mentioned before, smaller epidemics of psychoses à deux or psychoses à trois. He considers all these a special aspect of pathological intercommunication. In non-pathological cases he talks about contagious family interaction.

These subtle interactions are the products of the intricate web of communications that surrounds man. We live in a field of continuous intercommunication with conscious as well as subliminal perception. Stimuli from within and from outside, of which we are more or less aware, reach us continually. Even while asleep we are not completely cut off from sensory contact with our environment. Experiments show that even under anesthesia the cerebral cortex registers sensory stimuli. Exploration of the psychotherapeutic process has brought to light the existence of unconscious pre-verbal communication as well as unobtrusive subliminal information, both making use of infinitesimal verbal and gestural clues, and also of extrasensory perception. There is rhythmic induction and interaction, gesture and sound, and, at the very summit of verbal mutual contact the various levels of

semantic exchange. In this lecture attention will be given to the immediate induction and transfer caused by various forms of archaic communication.

Archaic communication exists of the innate bodily signals and the adaptational responses existing before and immediately after birth.

The social intercourse established by innate bodily signal codes held in common by man and beast form part and parcel of archaic communication. Everyone understands and reacts to the distress calls of animals. Certain emotional expressions are immediately understood. Crying, laughing, rhythmic tapping, yawning, fright reactions, fainting, itching, dancing movements, sneezing, shouting, convulsions, erotic gestures—they all invoke immediate understanding and response. If I would imitate with my hands the movement of yawning without warning you, many in my audience would take over the sign and begin to yawn. Nothing is more contagious than a yawn—a sign of boredom—or the rhythmically reiterated shout of a crowd—the Nazi 'Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil' or the Fascist 'Duce, Duce, Duce'. If such primary expressions are not checked by self-restraint and dignified behavior, mental contagion is all the more apt to take hold.

Throughout history there have been numerous infectious dance epidemics. On a note of levity one might mention 'Rock 'n Roll', the 'Twist', and more recently the 'Beatle' craze. Rhythm in one person provokes rhythm in others. It is important to note that direct mental induction through rhythm and psychic co-oscillation follow a definite rule. The more an emotional expression reflects regression to the archaic biological sign code, the more contagious that expression will be. A yawning child, for instance, affects all the other children in the class. Somebody who is scratching causes others to feel itchy. Mental contagion means, in this instance, a common unobtrusive regression to a more primitive, pre-verbal sign language directly understood by all. The primordial units of mental infection are those which in history and time acquired adaptational responses that have a universal appeal. The biological and symbolic time-binders bind us to identical responses. In medicine we speak of communicable diseases caused by infectious units. Similarly in psychology can we refer to primordial transferable units of behavior which compel fellow beings to co-oscillate as it were, and to react similarly or in the opposite way. These inductions coming from outside our individual realm intrude into our clear semantic thinking and by their emotional impact hamper the life of reason.

Mental contagion is related to man's deep symbiotic needs and his utter dependency. More than any other animal he is dependent on the guidance of his fellows. It is as if the rising gap between maturing

humans has to be bridged by various new methods of communication. The biological basis of communication establishes the direct empathy that predominates in the mother-child relation and lives forth in all of us in the process of direct identification. Lately psychiatry studied more extensively the permanent symbiotic ties that can remain between individuals and are most probably one of the tenets of telepathy. As the distance between mother and child grows an urgent need for other more symbolic avenues of communication becomes established. Thus in every group-relation where the old symbiotic tie from early childhood is re-enacted—e.g. in societies where individualization is not emphasized, sometimes not even tolerated—the facts of mental contagion become more apparent. Social rites and symbols make their specific psychic demands on the individual. Even the outsider is affected, though it may be in a negative way. The group frequently induces the stranger's opposition.

It has been observed that mental infection increases when established social institutions collapse and the group regresses to more primitive means of intercommunication. Regression can also be the result of the shock of not understanding and lack of comprehension in a world that outgrows its traditions too rapidly. Reactive stupidity and the forsaking of intelligent endeavor often follow social revolutions.

When the individual's ego boundaries and ego defenses are weakened as the result of exhaustion or disease—which in semantic terms means that he has to abandon his high levels of abstraction—he is more easily suggestible and invariably feels himself to be a more passive victim of outside stimuli. This process can go so far that people feel completely defenseless. In schizophrenic doxasm we find the patient suffering from delusions of relatedness in which he feels as if his mind and brain were laid bare to every evil intention of others—a condition which he also interprets as being brainwashed or victimized by mysterious rays.

However, man's involuntary regression under the burden of group action and mental contagion is not always a negative phenomenon. Unfavorable forms of regression do exist, leading to loss of self, to primitivity, chaos and decay. But there is a positive side of regression leading to revitalization and towards new adaptations of the individual organism. We must bear this ambivalence in mind. In sleep and in our dreams we all regress and at the same time regenerate our inner forces. Sleep, as Shakespeare says, knits up 'the ravelled sleeve of care.' While the group, with its greater chance of mutual contamination, tends to incite the individual to regress to primitive actions, its continuity and its protective influence can prevent the individual from regressing too much. Tradition and social ritual, however rigid they may be, have a

way of bracing the mental backbone of those who have not yet developed a well rounded self-awareness.

The old mystics believed in a collective emotional state with which the logic of thought only interfered. In other words people participate in the same feelings, but when it comes to the conceptualization of thought and the distantiating required by it they are apt to diverge. I am thinking here specifically of the classroom, this most common experimental group. Thought, reflection and discussion slowly make individual entities of the participants, although they never gain complete independence from the thoughts of their teachers. For this they need the verification of varied thoughts of different instructors who teach them to look at a subject from different angles.

The ambivalent relation between group and individual is clearly demonstrated by man's motivation for mutual participation and symbiotic enjoyment. The group comes together not only for mutual collaboration and friendly cooperation, but also with a hostile intention of which it is less aware, namely to exclude others, to let off steam and to ban and sometimes persecute the black sheep and the scapegoats who have to be offered to the gods of hatred and revenge. This inadvertent urge to vent common hidden aggression on outsiders is one of the fundamentals of group prejudice. Scapegoatism and prejudice rear their heads early, first within the family, then in the classroom. Racial prejudice is in many ways a displacement and a compounding of earlier sibling rivalry. The semantics of prejudice and vituperation teach us again how infectious rage and hatred can be.

Increased inner tension may lead groups to burden themselves with an enormous load of rules and regulations, and with extreme legal restrictions as a protection against inner ambivalence and conflict. We see another solution of these internal antinomies, for instance, in totalitarian regimes. The greater their internal trouble the more intense will be their search for outside enemies and scapegoats. Demagogic strategy also employs psychic contamination, whereby resentment is used as a common arouser of aggression.

By contrast, a democracy founded on freedom wants to impose a minimum of law, asking of the individual a greater measure of humanism, dignity and self-control than the law requires. The essential difference between enforced dictatorial legalism and the freedom of voluntary personal commitment lies in the confidence men have in their intentions toward each other. This self-confidence is stimulated by personal example and emotional transfer of mutual trust. One of the most important factors in learning and maturing is the wholesome example set by consistent, benevolent and wise leadership. This is what we might call the converse form of mental

contagion through good and just examples.

### Man's Vertical Conditioning

The fact that man's feeling and thinking are not only influenced by the present but are also products of long historical vertical tradition comes to the fore particularly at times when he feels threatened in his social and private existence. Throughout the world, whenever conquerors and tyrannical occupiers have tried to change the social and economical relations in a country, a resurgence of historical interest has always been the result. In my native Holland, after the Nazi occupation, books on historical topics were at the top of the bestseller lists. We can regard this revival of interest partly as a form of escape into the days of yore, into the glory and heroism of the past. However, it is more than escape because history and tradition are the mental roots which gave life to the very group that is now in danger.

There is no doubt that this identification with the past and pride in heritage can be inspiring and may give birth to the most vital ideas and energies a group or a nation possesses. We carry within us not only a feeling of horizontal identity, of doing what the Jones's and the Smiths are doing, but also a vertical or historical identity. This is what justifies our painstaking teaching of history in the schoolroom. Yet this same vertical identification may result in the most primitive regression to antiquated myths and black magic, such as the world experienced in Nazi mythology with its glorification of the blond beast in man and the ancient Germanic need for doom and Nemesis. Our illusion of fast progress and change fails to give sufficient attention to these history and time-bound patterns behind the facades of modernism.

The words man speaks have their roots in a history of different meanings. These meanings unconsciously reverberate in the word-symbols with which he expresses himself. Symbols are indeed the genes of history. Linguists have aptly described how our thinking is fashioned by the treasure of verbal tools at our disposal. Our thinking is tied up with our language, and to close the circle, because of the language we use we are unwittingly bound up with the historical modes of thinking that language represents (15). In turn, the language handed down to us directs our modes of perception (17).

Another example of vertical conditioning of our behavior is what we might call pseudo-heredity—the subtle interaction from generation to generation. Without denying the facts of biological heredity, Ehrenwald (6) gave a crystal clear description how generations of obsessive-compulsive people (the Obscomp family) laid the groundwork of the same conditioning milieu for the next generation, so that the same old pattern of pathological psychic defenses had to be built up again by the newcomers.

Developmental psychology has only begun to delve into the many psychic interrelations and interactions that exist between generations. In a paper on the influence of television and other means of communication on family interaction, I demonstrated how degenerating and apathizing the growing lack of emotional contact between the generations can be, especially since our technical know how makes it easier for them to justify individual aloofness. Withdrawn parents make for either rebellious children or for withdrawn ones. In a mechanized society, steeped in what amounts to an automatic urge to conform, the youngster's hostility and even his delinquency can be one of the paradoxical protests against the feeling of annihilation of his individual dignity. Numerous clinical examples exist of a form of passive destructive robotism that follows every command issued, be it criminal or otherwise. Eichmann was the very example of such a robot full of conscientiousness, yet without a conscience. Technical automatization gives people the impression of a restless going-on, a speedomania that prevents thinking and precludes the awareness that many precious things exist beyond and even contrary to mere doing. The age of haste threatens to destroy our capacity for individual meditation.

Specific sensitive phases exist in the development of the individual in which traumatic occurrences may have a deep conditioning impact, making people more vulnerable to mental contagion during that period. There are, for instance, ultra-sensitive developmental periods, such as the walking crisis of the infant and the Weltschmerz years of adolescence which can render the growing individual temporarily more vulnerable to stressful impact and to greater molding from outside. Every educator has to be mindful of this fluctuation of formative impact by the environment. Going to school, a first token separation from the mother, is one such reconditioning phase in the life of the child. With the help of the teacher the child can either start a pattern of corrected sibling rivalry by improving relationships with his peers, or its old separation phobias can become aggravated.

A cornerstone in the study of mental contagion is the clinical acceptance of historical causation in the individual development of human behavior. We accept the fact that a repressed, highly traumatic experience from the past can be reactivated when a recent dramatic occurrence suddenly triggers off the old despair which might otherwise have left no traces and been forgotten forever. Victims who passed their adolescent years in concentration camps live constantly on such a precarious mental tightrope. Every new stressful emotion triggers off desperate feelings connected with the past and these powerful feelings threaten to send their victims hurtling to

the ground.

### Horizontal Social Conditioning

Which are the horizontal factors that contribute to mental contagion? When considering ecological and psychological factors that condition and direct human behavior we generally think in terms of conscious persuasion, or more forcefully, mental coercion. Yet there are many unobtrusive influences in society which shape our lives, often with as great an impact. For example, technicalization and institution-ization—more than other cultural phenomena—have destroyed many a person's belief in himself as a self-governing individual. He feels caught up in a network of suggestions difficult for him to offset with his private opinion and his own ethical evaluation because he is usually not aware that these suggestions exist. We must distinguish here between depersonalization—a temporary defensive surrender of the individual's integrity to mass influences, which is a universal and normal process—and depersonalization, which is a process of psychotic breakdown of the ego.

In the German S. S. state every soldier had to be an automatic, obedient follower. His oath of loyalty implied complete and unquestioning obedience to the orders from his Führer and was absolutely binding. Were he to become critical of the commands he had to follow, his only moral choice would be flight or suicide. The loyalty oath, an old magic tool of mental contagion instituted to ensnare man's conscience in a sand trap of unceasing loyalty, is still one of the great illusionary equalizers of our time. The fact is that mature man cannot be unconditionally submissive to a fallible fellow man. He needs real terror or terrorizing fantasies to incite him to submit. Dictatorial coercion enforced by terror changes nearly everyone into an automatic submissive conformist. Even the on-looker who wants to steer clear of this process is not immune to the gradual equalization of minds through his inadvertent interaction and sympathy with other people's fears and sorrows.

Time does not permit a description of all the intricacies of unconscious and unobtrusive mental coercion which I discussed in detail in a monograph on brainwashing and menticide. Suffice it to say that we have become increasingly aware that systematic mass-persuasion, mass-suggestion, and mental mass-coercion do exist. Every group, every society, and every culture exert stresses and tensions which have a molding and conditioning impact on its members. In the Saturday Review of September 6, 1958, the late Senator Richard L. Neuberger described a panicky surrender of the U. S. Senate to a highly charged emotional collective confusion. The subject under debate was whether to vote funds for a study on 'Strategic Surrender'. Few had taken the trouble to read the volume in question but the key word 'surrender' had aroused a

feverish excitement that finally led the Senators to surrender to collective emotions of pseudo-heroism rather than weighing with reason the matter under scrutiny. Indeed, mental contagion is related to the bolstering of hidden anxieties and our defenses against them.

Studies by Benedict (2) and Mean (8) show how special traditional habits determine the aspect of a culture from the very onset. We speak, for instance, of schizogenic societies (Bali) and paranoio-genic societies (the Dobu and the Nazis). Also, we refer to apathizing and criminogenic societies, or to shame-and-guilt societies. It is all dependent on how conditioned and internalized the various individual and social responsibilities in these cultures have become. A society usually hands its members, in addition to the verbiage and labels, a cluster of articulations, justifications and clichés, giving the reasons why the participants are expected to adjust to that society's code, prejudices, and ceremonials. This 'platform' usually tends to obscure the fact of need for compliance and psychological submission. Because politicians always have to manipulate the instrument of persuasion, they themselves are often victimized by their own tool and become more vulnerable to suggestion. The same is true of hypnotists.

Man's innate masochism and his need for dependency play an important role in his nearly automatic submission to doctrines. To give a paradoxical example, social tension and stress as such do not always have a direct anxiety-provoking impact on man. Sometimes it is the cessation of tension, the liberation from burdens, and the frustration caused by sudden unprepared-for leisure that cannot be creatively filled, that affect man's equilibrium. Panic, for instance, can develop when danger and stress are over, precisely because the tense misery has passed. Many people do not know what to do with their pre-ordained defensive attitudes once outside dangers are eliminated. To translate this into educational terms we can say that the absence of rules and the lack of discipline in a broken or weakened family can arouse all the panic of unchecked unconscious drives in a child. Education has to help the child discipline his crude instinctual impulses. No society can forego the need for restraint.

Social tension, coercion, and the compulsion to conformity better fulfill immature human needs when aligned with substitute gratifications such as utopian expectation, self-adulation, or externalized hatred as manifested in prejudice and scapegoatism. The contagion of aggression, excitement and debunking helps people to let off steam. Many people have an aversion to individual freedom because such freedom must lead to greater responsibility and individual commitment.



Man looks at the world not through rose-colored glasses but through the lenses of his biased emotions. The slave can be made to believe that he lives in paradise, while those who have the luxury of freedom and independence can be talked into suffering daily feelings of deprivation and dissatisfaction. Indeed, in our technical era the emptiness of more leisure time has become for many a new burden calling for new adaptations.

How man is influenced and mentally infected by his horizontal social conditioning can easily be demonstrated in the relatively small world of psychologists and psychiatrists. The theoretical schisms between these practitioners of the art of mental healing are usually determined by the school the student happened to visit and subsequently by his teacher's opinions rather than by his own initial verification of facts and thoughts. The student's initiation into a specific psychological group or subgroup is more often directed by similar social and ecological factors—suggestion, economic wherewithal, and prejudice—than by elaborate study of the various pros and cons of his adopted psychological system and its competing views.

Man's freedom starts by delineating his unfreedom. That is why we have to study the spiderweb of communication that invades our freedom of thinking and abstracting. We cannot merely study man as a concrete, independent, self-enclosed entity. He always lives in a field of multifarious influences. Even as a scientist he remains a benign plagiarist, and this is true of the philosopher as well. The words we speak are taken over from the language of thousands of generations. Although we impute to each other a similar manner of thinking and feeling, it is because of our disparate backgrounds that we all give a different interpretation to the words we hear.

Nevertheless, man is in continuous mutual relation and communication. Again, the loneliest hermit carries within his mind his fantasied companions with whom we have inner conversations. Everyone is in himself a center of psychic reception and absorption. Man is also a transmitter of messages. There is no such thing as an isolated self—one is primarily a group of shifting ego-boundaries in continual exchange with the ego-boundaries of others.

In communicating, the core of the other person is rarely reached. The much talked-about I or Ego or Self, residing within its boundaries, is a hypothetical central pilot who receives as well as broadcasts messages. He relays the incoming communications according to an inherited and acquired code and, in addition, he may be a thinker for himself and a doer in his own right. These central pilots are agents acting upon various influences according to their innate sense and the code imprinted on or developed within them.

Man's need for an elaborate network of communication is related to the absence of ripe instincts at birth. His foetalization, biological retardation, and his lack of agile adaptation cause him among all animals to be almost completely dependent on his parents and peers during infancy and early childhood. By opposing his peers, man remains related to them. Within the intricate communication network he perpetually classifies himself as to where he belongs, where he wants to be accepted, what network he fits into or wishes to fit into.

Man's self-realization implies his being aware of his continual interdependence and interrelation even in his maturity. With Plato we may say that reason makes people less amenable to coercion. A strong feeling of self usually betrays a satisfactory social adaptation—one feels accepted and successful. It does not always mean being a strong autarchic ego. Many subtle clues are used in this never-ending process of social selection and verification whereby various people are included or excluded from the individual crowd we call the total person.

#### Summary

Mental contagion delineates the science of concealed communication, of the manifold hidden clues and disturbing noises in the system of mutual information. The study of psychic infection shows, more than the individual analysis of man, how intimately bound up man's emotions and behavior are with his environment and his biological and historical past. Both biological and historical time are condensed in man and determine his limitations.

This brief survey of the influence of mental contagion in personal and social interaction shows first that man is an individual crowd, a complex being directed by manifold internalized suggestions and identifications through which traditions, parents, family habits, and teachers unobtrusively shape him. Man is not only an individual thinker but his cultural traditions and the Zeitgeist think in him and for him through an intricate web of communications. We are brainwashed as it were by our own, and our fellow beings' primitivisms.

Vertical mental contagion is the product of the influence of linguistic conditioning, of history, tradition and pseudo-heredity through interaction of generations. Horizontal mental contagion is the result of the unobtrusive mental exchange, persuasion and coercion that condition man's behavior. Simple rules can be formulated for the contagiousness of psychic phenomena. The more a human expression resembles an archaic and innate biological adaptation the more it forces fellow beings to react in the same way. Co-oscillation with and induction by archaic communication is the core of mental contagion.

The unique individuality in the 'internalized

crowd' gets a greater chance to assert itself when critical assessment of existing persuasions and suggestions can be made and the person can distantiate himself from the web of conscious and inadvertent communications that are molding him. We may finish with Spinoza's adagium that 'man's freedom starts by delineating his unfreedom.'

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Dr. Meerloo's Korzybski Memorial Lecture has been published as Chapter 15 in his recent book, UNOBTRUSIVE COMMUNICATION: ESSAYS IN PSYCHOLINGUISTICS (Royal Van Gorcum, Netherlands, 1964).

