

Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture

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*General Semantics and Philosophical Practice: Korzybski's
Contributions to the Global Village*

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1. Preface

I would like to begin by thanking the Institute of General Semantics for extending this generous and prestigious invitation to deliver the Korzybski Memorial Lecture for the year 2001. In particular, I thank Jeff Mordkowitz and Martha Santer for their hard work in organizing this event, and for their hospitality in taking good care of me. I will endeavor to rise to the occasion, by honoring the works and memory of Alfred Korzybski. Yet, I remain awed by your impressive roster of distinguished speakers past—several of whom have been, thanks to time-binding, my mentors-at-a-distance. Some great thinkers who have influenced me—and, it turns out, who have graced this podium—include Ashley Montagu, F. S. C. Northrop, Buckminster Fuller, Abraham Maslow, Jacob Bronowski, Gregory Bateson, George Steiner, and Albert Ellis, among other luminaries. To be deemed worthy of joining this constellation is truly a privilege.

I have long sustained a philosophical interest in human conflict, its putative causes and possible cures. That interest was thrust upon me as a schoolboy, in the autumn of 1962, during the Cuban missile crisis, when my classmates and I suddenly found ourselves in the

front lines of a war about which our ignorance was exceeded only by the dearth of relevant discussion in the classroom and formal study in the academy. In certain salient respects, little has changed in the thirty-nine years since. Last month, we New Yorkers suddenly found ourselves once more in the front lines of a war about which we had been woefully ignorant too, save that now public discussion is plentiful if ineffectual. The Cold War died with a whimper in the collapse of the Soviet Empire, but now a Holy War has been declared on us by foes far more implacable: They have little to lose but their lives, and have paradise to gain besides. So a new tidal wave of religious mass-psychosis drowns its hapless victims in a blinding sea of self-righteous hatred and venomous intolerance, ordaining an endless train of martyrs to perish in an escalating cycle of Kamikaze-esque infernos that spawn nothing but death, destruction, terror, and misery. Is this the manhood of humanity? Did we emerge from Plato's cave only to be bombed back into the shadows? Have we come so far, only to encounter regression by that time-worn formula—tribalism and hormones, identification and other social "lubricants with emery"? The abrasive compounds in current circulation

wear skyscrapers into rubble, and cities into ash. They are also the antitheses of the philosopher's stone. So, while Korzybski's contributions to our understanding of human conflict and its resolution are both laudable in themselves and vital to evaluating current events, he might nonetheless be spinning in his grave, lamenting man's perennial, devout, and obstinate commitment to a cornucopia of lunacies. Were lunatics but otherwise, as Korzybski in more hopeful moments envisaged as a possibility, we should not have so many other persons and things to lament in their wake.

I "discovered" Korzybski during my graduate studies in London. As a Commonwealth Scholar at University College, I could not quite manage to overeat, overdress, or overheat my garret. So I made camp in the British Library—where no one ate too well or dressed too fashionably, but where all bibliophilic appetites were admirably sated—and read to my heart's and mind's content for three straight years. I learned that I had a good nose for books and, following scent-trails of ideas, I charted some novel pathways through the infinite, intertwined, and infolded maze of human mentation. Korzybski's works were among the most expansive, well-appointed, and memorable avenues of thought that I explored in that labyrinth, and many of his ideas embedded themselves in mine. I had no inkling, back then, that I would one day become a philosophical practitioner, nor would that phrase have meant anything to me at the time; nor for that matter did those who invited me to give this lecture know of my formative experiences with Korzybski, for I had not hitherto disclosed them plainly. Even so, the intersection of general semantics and philosophical practice is now so evident to me, I am surprised that I did not volunteer to give this lecture sooner.

2. Of Maps and Territories

Let me illustrate how Korzybski has accompanied me all these years since London, and what an agreeable noetic companion he has been. When building the original website of the American Philosophical Practitioners Association (www.appa.edu), I reflexively embodied a site map. When I reached that sector of the site map which mapped the site map itself, I immediately recognized it as a non-Korzybskian region, and impishly exploited the circumstance in the following way. The Site Map entry under "Site Map" read:

Congratulations! You have discovered one of two non-Korzybskian regions on this site, in which the map coincides exactly with the territory! (Unless you click [here](#).)

Before explicating the parenthetical link, I must make clear why the aforementioned region is non-Korzybskian. His dictum that "A map is not the territory it represents" {1}, although used as an unsalutary straw man by Martin Gardner to vent some misdirected spleen, implies three important points—one logical, one figurative, and one semantic.

In its most literal interpretation, "A map is not the territory" is hardly the simple-minded truism that Gardner willfully disparages, any more than, say, Zeno's paradoxes are simple-minded illustrations that motion is impossible. In Zeno's case, we must find out precisely what is faulty in our assumptions in order to dispel the paradoxical notion that Achilles cannot overtake a tortoise, or that an arrow shot from a bow cannot fly. Although our sensory experiences (like Zeno's) apparently refute such preposterous assertions, humanity required two thousand years to develop mathematical machinery sufficient to expose the precise

errors in reasoning that made such assertions paradoxical. Only then did we settle Zeno's hash. In Korzybski's case, we must find out precisely what is faulty in our mentation in order to dispel the careless confusions between maps and territories that abound in mundane consciousness.

Logically speaking, the map cannot be the territory, because if it were it would have to contain itself, which plainly it cannot. That is to say, a map perfectly congruent with its territory would necessarily depict everything the territory contains, including the map itself. Nowhere on any map do we find the map itself, nor could we ever find such a non-Korzybskian map: for a map of the United States located in New York would have to depict itself in New York; and if it were then transported to L.A. it would have to depict itself en route to L.A. If you imagine that we have the technology to do this, think again: for the map that is depicted in the territory is a map that also depicts the territory on which it is depicted, and which also, therefore, depicts itself in that depiction. And so forth. Thus we require an infinite regression of maps, which is impossible. Thus, in any literal sense, the map cannot be the territory—and therefore is not. (QED)

But why do people then allow the same confusion to re-manifest at the figurative level? Menus are not meals, numerals are not numbers, prices are not values, appearances are not realities. Symbols and signs, in sum, are not the things for which they stand. Yet these entities are confused pervasively, and on a daily basis. Of course, it is profitable for manufacturers to advertise their products so as to promulgate and perpetuate this confusion, mainly by misrepresenting status symbols as status. Philosophers of every age have readily seen through this thin ruse, and thicker ones as well. Having one's life "mapped out" is palpa-

bly a different thing than living it. Moreover, it can be argued that personal unhappiness (and worse) often stems from following someone else's road map of your life, while fulfillment almost always ensues from leading your own life, as opposed to following someone else's map of it.

At the semantic level, words are not the things for which they stand—or rather hover, as diaphanous and chimerical tokens of things. This insight reaches closer to the kernel of Korzybski's humanism, for its corollaries are intended to liberate humanity from the social, theocratic, and political servitude that stems ineluctably from mistaking names for things, from linking names with distorted (albeit emotionally charged) beliefs about things, and ultimately from acting in the name of these distorted linkages. All that is real are the sufferings and other unwanted progeny of such blind unions that ensue from following fictitious maps (i.e., doctrines) of real territories (i.e., existences). Since such maps are themselves montages, hodgepodes, or revisions of yet other maps, it is not only the case that a map is not the territory it represents, but also it is manifestly the case that "A map is not the territory it represents" is not itself a map that is not the territory it represents.

Except, apparently, in cyberspace; for where the site map maps itself, the map and the territory seem to coincide. Recall the hypertext in that virtual location:

Congratulations! You have discovered one of two non-Korzybskian regions on this site, in which the map coincides exactly with the territory! (Unless you click [here](#).)

Of course this is an enticement to activate the link, which causes a page to be loaded, which is identical to the previous page in every

respect save one. Where the site map maps itself, the message on this new page reads:

Congratulations! You have discovered one of two non-Korzybskian regions on this site, in which the map coincides exactly with the territory! (Did you really think we'd let you Korzybskify a non-Korzybskian region?)

Clicking on this new link naturally reloads the previous page. I leave it to other philosophers to debate whether virtual domains really potentiate de-Korzybskification. Meanwhile, I received so many questions from puzzled visitors to the site, who did not in the least understand my little jest, that I eventually removed the site map altogether. Korzybski no doubt would have appreciated the irony: people readily confuse maps with territories on a daily basis, yet are themselves confused when the two virtually coincide.

3. Korzybski and Globalization

If we excavate Korzybski's phrase "lubricant with emery", we unearth the socio-political equivalent of one of civilization's enduring discontents, which systemic philosophers and other thinkers had previously recognized, and had endeavored but failed to remedy, whether in metaphysical, teleological, psychological, political, or moral contexts.^{2} Korzybski wrote:

... in the functioning of our nervous systems a special harmful factor is involved, a "lubricant with emery" so to speak, which retards the development of sane human relations and perverts general sanity. (1933, p. ii.)

The emery is none other than identification. People are not self-governing primarily

because they have propensities to relinquish the burdens of thinking for themselves, of doubting their beliefs, and of examining their lives, in exchange for identification with received doctrines. This exchange of amorphous and malleable personal identity for formed and rigid identification with a shared system of belief, or more accurately, in exchange for the delusion of a shared system of belief, invariably retards or arrests psychological development, and concomitantly restricts or attenuates epistemic growth. The human equivalent of the homily "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," is surely "You can't teach an old Bolshevik new dialectics." It follows that the twin progeny of identification are infantilism and ignorance. As Korzybski observed, this transaction becomes circular: "Our rulers, who rule our symbols, and so rule a symbolic class of life, impose their own infantilism on our institutions, educational methods, and doctrines" (1933, p.41). Thus infantilism breeds ignorance; ignorance, identification; identification, infantilism.

The consequences of this vicious circle are as plain to us in 2001 as they were to Korzybski in 1933, and no less poignant in the aftermath of the horrific events of September 11. "As a result," he wrote back then

... a conflict is created and maintained between the advance of science affecting conditions of actual life and the orientations of our rulers, which often remain antiquated by centuries, or one or two thousand years. The present world conditions are in chaos; psychologically there exists a state of helplessness—hopelessness, often resulting in the feeling of insecurity, bitterness, etc., and we have lately witnessed psychopathological mass outbursts, similar to those of the dark

ages. Few of us at present realize that, as long as such ignorance of our rulers prevails, *no solution of our human problems is possible*. (1933, p.iv)

Korzybski's political prescription contains an intriguing and prescient ambiguity. For there appear to be two ways in which the ignorance of our rulers might cease to prevail, thus permitting our problems to be solved in spite of them, rather than exacerbated by them. The first lies in breaking the vicious circle by educating them; the second, in shrinking it toward a singularity by allowing them to remain ignorant while diminishing their control over our lives.

Since 1933, subsequent events have favored the second method, for the following reasons. Murderous dictators proliferated in the 20th century as in no other, abetted politically by rising tides of nationalism (i.e., tribal identification under political or theocratic totems) and economically by concentration of far-flung resources and consignment of powerful technologies to sanguinary ends. An enlightened despot being no despot at all, one could hardly have pre-empted Hitler by re-admitting him to art school. On the contrary, despotism requires ignorance, among other things, to be fully functional and attain its abysmal potential for ill-doing.

Korzybski averred that "If a psychiatric and scientific enquiry were to be made upon our rulers, mankind would be appalled at the disclosures" (1933, p.78). Within decades of this utterance, and apparently incognizant of it, Bion undertook precisely this research. {3} As his labors unhappily revealed, the unchecked herd almost always and willingly afflicts itself with the worst despot it can find. Bion wrote:

In its search for a leader the group finds a paranoid schizophrenic or

malignant hysteric if possible; failing either of these, a psychopathic personality with delinquent trends will do; failing a psychopathic personality it will pick on the verbally facile high-grade defective. I have at no time experienced a group of more than five people that could not provide a good specimen of one of these. (p. 123).

In unwitting corroboration of and convergence with Korzybski, albeit on a psychoanalytic tack, Bion further observed

that in his contact with the complexities of life in a group the adult resorts, in what may be a massive regression, to mechanisms described by Melanie Klein {4} ... as typical of the earliest phases of mental life. (p.141)

This independent account of adult infantilism is also empirically corroboratable, ad nauseam, by anyone who works in a university, or any similarly cloistered community. But the phenomenon is not so well-grounded in neo-Freudian accounts as it is in general semantics: belief in a system of shared beliefs is the social lubricant of the group; identification with this delusion is the emery; ignorance and infantilism are its dual by-products, which in turn potentiate the next generation of ignorant lambs, led—or slaughtered—by infantile shepherds. War, revolution, retribution, and regression are inevitable.

So much for the unchecked herd. But if and when the herd is checked by humane laws, to which the rulers are themselves subservient, despotism becomes more difficult if not impossible, and the group selects a different kind of leader: a CEO instead of a psychopath. While ignorance and infantilism may still surface, such vices will be tempered with virtues, and

more constructive courses can be charted. While the prejudices of ignorant and infantile politicians are not thereby eliminated, they are at least relegated to diminishing spheres of influence. This is Marshall McLuhan's global village, and Buckminster Fuller's spaceship earth. The village is managed by its Chamber of Commerce, rather than cowed by its shaman or bullied by its chieftain. At the spaceship's helm is a Captain Kirk, not a Long John Silver. Elected political leaders become celebrity CEOs: they are to the global village as the stars are to the film industry. That is to say, they are shameless exhibitionists among other things, but are constrained by producers, directors, screenwriters—and ultimately by consumers themselves—to play roles assigned to them, for a greater good, rather than to prey upon the audience, as they please, for a greater evil.

Thus globalization, in its most salutary aspects, is re-enacting the corollary of Korzybski's prescient prescription: our rulers may always and even necessarily be ignorant, but the politics of ignorance need not prevail in global governance. Hence Korzybski's thesis holds out hope for a solution to our human problems.

Yet hope held out is not necessarily hope seized. Korzybski also foresaw that science and technology, if enlisted in the service of the politics of ignorance, would lead to unprecedented destruction. Seeking some good even in this, he supposed that such developments might at least educate humanity about the true nature of its plight. In 1933, he wrote:

The future war will, perhaps, automatically bring these problems to the foreground. It will be an extremely devastating (and less picturesque) aerial war, in which women and children will not be spared. (p.521)

Given the surety of hindsight, it may be

difficult for us to appreciate the clarity and prescience of Korzybski's vision. But consider that he wrote these words before the re-arming of Germany, before the blitz of London and the Battle of Britain, before the fire-bombings of Dresden, Hamburg and Tokyo, before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, before the Cuban missile crisis and the specter of nuclear holocaust, and before strategic bombings, carpet-bombings, saturation bombings, and smart-bombings became the order of the day—and also before commercial airlines became international terrorism's target of opportunity and arrow of choice. More particularly, it is instructive—if demoralizing—to contrast Korzybski's warning with assessments by his military, scientific and political contemporaries, who appear impenitently and almost willfully blind by comparison.

Recall for example, Field Marshall Haig, CIC of the allied armies in Europe during World War I. At the first battle of the Somme, he ordered his troops to walk at port-arms across no-man's land. Tens of thousands were mowed down in a few hours by the Maxim machine gun. This military "genius" later gave out, in 1925, "I am all for using aeroplanes and tanks, but they are only accessories for the man and the horse." {5} Lloyd George, pandering to no one's sensibilities, described Haig as "utterly stupid". {6} Similarly, during World War II, the French High Command refused to blockade the main roads behind the Maginot Line with felled trees, to impede the invasion of Panzer tanks, on the grounds that such obstacles would obstruct the advance of the French cavalry.

The speculations of Nobel laureates in physics fared no better. In 1923, Millikan said "There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom." {7} Ten years later, Rutherford commented, "The energy produced by the breaking down of the atom is a very poor kind of thing. Anyone who looks for a

source of power in the transformation of the atom is talking moonshine.”{8}

Leading politicians were just as blind. Witness Chamberlain, the goat of Munich, bleating “Peace in our time” after handing Czechoslovakia to Hitler. A few years later, when it became imperative for America to build an atomic bomb, given that the Nazis and the Soviets were undertaking similar labors, the initiation of the Manhattan Project by Roosevelt required not only the desperate persuasion of Szilard and Einstein, but also the intervention of a childhood friend of Roosevelt’s, namely Sachs, without whom not even Einstein’s warning would have been attended.{9}

So what enabled Korzybski to foresee the likely, if devastating, future with such clarity, and what prevented his voice from being heard? Apparently one and the same thing; namely, his understanding of human misunderstanding, which entails the constant possibility (if not likelihood) that, since misunderstanding is the received and self-perpetuating human condition, those who understand it are bound first and foremost to be misunderstood themselves. Given that scientific discovery and technological innovation must always, by definition, outstrip military incompetence, scientific naivete, political myopia, and moral stagnation alike, what forces must then prevail in global governance, if we are to prevent recrudescences of past horrors and occurrences of yet unimaginable ones? What purchase does general semantics have in a volatile world, teeming with rapacious beings, whose cultural evolution is precarious and altogether reversible? Surely one of the most vexing and insidious features of mis-named “homo sapiens” is this: that his congenital dis-ease too often predisposes him to prefer that very dis-ease to its cure.

While globalization is a force to be reck-

oned with, its evolution is not always or necessarily utopian. Ruthless exploiters of underdeveloped resources, both natural and human, have the power to recreate and proliferate the worst excesses of the industrial revolution in scores of nations around the globe. By contrast, ruthless developers recognize the utilitarian benefits of not recreating unnecessary hells, and toward that end “social value” is an oft-repeated buzzword of late, at least in the inner councils of those who govern the world’s financial and commercial engines. Although Korzybski would surely have taken as dim a view of multinational corporate culture’s imposed logos as he did of theocracy’s mind-numbing dogmas and polity’s stultifying slogans, he also would have been bound to notice a difference. While any book, whether of wise benedictions or maleficent ravings, might by accident or design become a religious text, to adopt such a text as the foundation of a political edifice is to flirt with every conceivable kind of disaster, and to ensure that social transactions range from “lubricants with emery” to unadulterated emery, hold the lubricants. We have already discussed the failings of political systems themselves. From the viewpoint of general semantics, theocracy dogmatically resists scientific discovery and technological innovation, while bureaucracy implements them self-servingly and mismanages them clumsily. But in so far as such discovery and innovation conduce to overall systemic efficiency, and the amelioration of production and delivery of goods and services, business organizations wholeheartedly embrace them. The “knowledge economy” and the “learning organization” are not empty phrases; they apply with increasing force in the global village, and are hallmarks of individual open-mindedness and social progress. Optimistically, they portend lubricants without emery. By contrast, when did you last encounter an “open-minded

religion” or an “enlightened tyranny”? Blindness and ignorance are good for mass religions, and good for despotic states, but are manifestly bad for global business. But general semantics is very good for lubricating transactions within the global village, and hopefully the global village will reciprocate.

4. General Semantics and Philosophical Practice

In this final section, I will sketch a few of the connections between general semantics and philosophical practice, and illustrate in the process how Korzybski can and should be viewed as a primogenitor of the nascent movement of philosophical practitioners.

Before doing this, I must confess to you a sin of omission that consists in my having failed to credit Korzybski as fully as he merits as a theoretician of said movement. In my new book {10}, there is an obvious place in which Korzybski should be credited, alongside Bertrand Russell and Mortimer Adler, among mid-twentieth century philosophers who called attention to some wrong turns (into dead-ends) that philosophy had taken. While I did mention Korzybski in a footnote in that chapter, I had completed the manuscript well before writing this lecture, and thus deprived myself of recollecting how much of general semantics intersects with philosophical practice. Allow me partially to remedy that defect now.

4.1 I will treat first the similarities between general semantics and philosophical practice most broadly construed, then move on to some special cases. In so doing, I quote from the literature of Steven Lewis, whose website contains cogent synopses of Korzybski’s main themes. First, as Lewis writes,

General semantics teaches that life issues become clearer and more man-

ageable as we move toward (1) a better understanding of the background assumptions we bring to a situation; (2) a willingness and an ability to make accurate observations; (3) a willingness to continuously test, examine, evaluate, and change our assumptions and behavior based on our observations.

Now if one asks, “What does philosophical practice seek to accomplish with and for its clients—be they individuals, groups, or organizations?”, my response is: “It seeks to help them make sense of their circumstances and lives, by offering them philosophical insights that enhance understanding, and by suggesting interpretations that conduce to betterment.” I will amplify this in light of Lewis’s three points.

First, such a process almost invariably involves articulating, examining, clarifying, or modifying a client’s background assumptions, in so far as these give rise to cognitive or existential dissonances in light of undeniable or discomfoting extra-mental realities. As Epicetus finely said, “Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of things.” Since our views of things are grounded in nothing but our background assumptions, these must be exposed and examined whenever “things” appear disturbing.

Second, accurate observations are the mainstay of empirical science, and are in some ways the antithesis of armchair metaphysics. Yet the two are linked by the preceding phenomenon, in that the accuracy of observations is conditioned partly by the background assumptions (i.e., the metaphysical presuppositions of a regnant paradigm) inherent in experimental design. If even the most sophisticated scientific theories and elegant experiments are value-laden (which they are), then

how much more contaminated by inaccuracies are the rushed judgments, media-driven opinions, and half-baked ideas of the masses? A willingness to make more accurate (i.e., less value-laden) observations about self and circumstance must emanate from the client initially, but given this, the practitioner can indeed offer tools that sharpen the client's ability to do so.

Third, engaging in continuous assessment of assumptions and pertinent modification of behaviors is tantamount to what Socrates called "leading the examined life". Philosophy in this sense is anything but a theoretical or hypothetical activity, for its insights and methods are intended from the outset to alleviate personal difficulties and ameliorate human estates.

Thus Lewis's characterization of general semantics and my characterization of philosophical practice appear largely equivalent, or mostly congruent. Alternatively, from the client's perspective, Lewis lists some perennial loci of noetic and affective discomforts addressable by techniques derived from general semantics: "personal relationships, critical thinking, professional development, child raising, adjustment to change, communication, industrial management, problem solving, decision making, stress management, conflict management". Consistently enough, this menu reads like the table of contents of my self-help book, *Plato Not Prozac* {11}, in which my colleagues and I apply philosophical insights in the following areas: relationships, familial strife, the workplace, mid-life crisis, morality and ethics, finding meaning and purpose, gaining from loss, adapting to change, and practicing philosophy with groups and organizations. Overall, aficionados of general semantics and clients of philosophical practice are seeking to resolve or manage convergent sets of issues, and are finding congruent approaches.

4.2 The notion of time-binding, and deriva-

tive notions applicable to both quantitative and qualitative life issues, represents one of Korzybski's most enduring contributions. In essence, time-binding is the capacity to experience not only temporal continuity of consciousness (which humans share with other sentient beings), but also consciousness of temporal continuity (which humans possess uniquely). One general consequence of time-binding is our accrual of history, couched in oral, written, or visual traditions. Another general consequence is our accrual not only of symbols and tools, which are the building blocks of human culture, but also of meta-symbols and meta-tools—taken together, symbolic structures—which are the blueprints for the space-binding of culture, which in turn permits cultural invention, production, dissemination, competition, and obsolescence. These things, in sum, constitute human cultural evolution, which is not Darwinian, rather Lamarckian in character, and which is governed *sui generis* by a process I term "synthetic selection"—the cultural analogue of Darwinian natural selection. Perhaps an example is instructive.

Chimpanzees routinely utilize rudimentary tools to procure nourishment. They imbibe rain water that has accumulated on leaves. They extract nuts from shells using stones. They "fish" termites from nests using twigs they have stripped for that purpose. However, they do not fabricate vessels to catch rainwater, do not collect the stones they use as nut-crackers, and do not retain the termite-fishing twigs they have customized. Why not? Precisely because, Korzybski would answer, they lack the capacity to bind time. Their simian temporal continuity of consciousness allows them to locate a leaf, stone, or twig for a purpose to be fulfilled in the immediate continuous present, but no more. It is human consciousness of temporal continuity that allows us to

fabricate and set out vessels in anticipation of catching rain water, to save stones that make good nutcrackers, and to retain sticks that we had fashioned for specialized purposes, for future use. This, in sum, is the difference between spontaneous chimpanzee tool-use and neolithic culture. But that is only the first gift bestowed by time-binding. The articulation of symbolic structures permits a further cultural evolution: that is, the refinement of the tools themselves, along with the articulation of symbolic structures that preserve both the blueprints for making the tools and the instructions for using them. And that, in fine, is the difference between neolithic culture and the developed world.

But here synthetic selection capriciously obtrudes, and prevents a uniform cultural evolution across the species. For it is the symbolic structures already in place in a given human group—be it a tribe, a city-state, a nation-state, or a multinational consortium—that determine the subsequent acceptance, rejection, or restricted usage of evolving symbols and tools themselves. Thus symbolic structures may be in place that reject new technologies entirely, as the Iron Age was once rejected in the Nile Valley; or that reject new symbolic structures, as the Nazis rejected so-called “Jewish physics”; or that accept new technologies entirely, as America accepted the automobile, or that restrict the usage of symbols and tools, as states do when they license professionals of various kinds. Thus, while time-binding allows for prodigious human progress, the trajectory of cultural evolution is quite susceptible to censorship, idiosyncrasy, caprice, and regress. While biological evolution is not naturally reversible, cultural revolution is synthetically reversible—and that in myriad ways. For example, a given group of humans can be “bombed” back to the stone age (but only temporarily, if it retains its meta-symbolic struc-

tures), or it can be deconstructed into the stone age (e.g., by the political rectitude that prevails in American higher education), or it can legislate itself back to the stone age—a specialty of fanatical theocratic states.

As Korzybski knew full well, time-binding in its most elevated form allows ordinary persons of a current generation to resume their cultural evolution where geniuses of previous generations left off. Thus we can perform Mozart’s works, solve Einstein’s field equations, and re-interpret Korzybski’s system of ideas, without consulting these primogenitors directly. Unfortunately, the same phenomenon, in its most abysmal form, also can cause ordinary persons of a current generation to have their cultural evolution arrested or reversed by malevolent or egregious meta-structures imposed by despots of a previous generation.

The implications of time-binding for philosophical practice are both seminal and vital. If one’s unhappiness (or other unease) is a function not so much of things than of unfortunate views taken of things, where the “taking” means protraction via time-binding, then two important observations follow. First, it does not appear worthwhile or even feasible to work on “unbinding” the unfortunate views taken of things by explicating the causal nexus that gave rise to these debilitating views in the first place. That strategy, which is nothing but boilerplate psychotherapy, too often reconfirms for the client nothing but the justification for holding these unfortunate views to begin with. This only salts the wound. Second, it does appear worthwhile and feasible to exploit time-binding in the following way: Instead of seeking to “unbind” an unfortunate view of things, one seeks to offer an alternative and more fortunate view of them, which if once time-bound through lived experience can then replace the older view—not by imposition or

usurpation, rather by supersession. This begins to heal the wound. Thus time-binding permits experience, and interpretation of experience, and assimilation of others' interpretations of experience, without which the human being would resemble a complete victim of circumstance, a robot, or a potted plant.

4.3 With respect to language and logos, Korzybski bequeaths to us a deep paradox. In so far as general semantics constitutes a useful framework for philosophical practice, whether as a generalized approach to problem-solving or as a specific tool for the time-binding of constructively lived experience, it also confronts us with a formidable problem; namely, the role of linguistic function versus that of semantic structure. The paradox, as I see it, is this: Absent exposure to and acquisition of a natural language, a human being's cultural evolution will be arrested at the level of an ape's. The few well-documented cases of feral children chillingly corroborate this premise. Then again, given the socialization (i.e., lubricant) that flows from normal linguistic function, there is no sure way to prevent a pervasive inculcation of abrasive semantic structures (i.e., emery). When the latter evolves to the point of politopathy, and one confronts a deranged collective whose time-bound abrasions are aligned toward the attainment of a malevolently and malignantly dysfunctional end, one would rather be confronting feral children. Human ferality is tragic but containable; whereas politopathy is tragic but uncontainable. Moreover, the prevention of ferality may produce politopathy, in which case the cure is arguably worse than the disease.

And so Korzybski's fundamental question pertaining to progress may prove unanswerable, paradoxically in light of the very answers he gave. His question was this:

How is it that we humans have ad-

vanced so far in science, mathematics and technology, yet we demonstrate so much confusion, misunderstanding, and violence in our interactions with others and within ourselves? {12}

While we have already identified some central facets of an answer, one further insight of general semantics bears mention now. Well in advance of neuroscientific developments that later richly vindicated him, Korzybski wrote that, notwithstanding the capacity of language to evoke strong emotions, the experience of emotion itself occurs on non-verbal, or (as he termed them) "silent levels". {13} Thus, while strong and perforce destructive emotional responses to language, which so often precipitate unsalutary social consequences, may have been inculcated formatively and necessarily by verbal mechanisms, they cannot later be eradicated by substituted verbal mechanisms, no matter how constructive.

Both emotional extremes—from laughter to anger—work in just this way. Consider the ambiguous headlines "Escaped Leopard Believed Spotted", or "Girl Becomes Methodist After Delicate Operation", or "Police Stoned in Hartford". {14} They evoke laughter not merely because of their ambiguity, but more significantly because each bears a semantic interpretation that clashes with background assumptions in our received symbolic structures, structures which also connect to non-verbal portions of the brain (e.g., those containing memories and mediating emotions). Words trigger visualizations that undergird their meanings, so as we picture these headlines, and perceive the ironies of the unintended meanings, and the impossibility of the pictures themselves configured against our received cultural background, we must either laugh (in relieved dismissal of this pseudo-threat to the received system, which if real would entail

massive reconfiguration), or become unhumorously hypercritical (in defense of the received system, just in case we mistake the unintended meaning as intended).

But the general semantics of other emotions work in just the same way. Consider the possible sentiments aroused by these words:

For those who respond to their Lord, good; but those who respond not to Him, had they all that the earth containeth and its like beside it, they would surely give it in ransom: these shall have an evil reckoning, and Hell shall be their Home ...

A likeness of the paradise which is promised to those that fear God:—the rivers flow beneath it; its food and its shades are everlasting. That is the end of those who fear God; but the end of the unbelievers is the Fire. {15}

Among “unbelievers” such as myself, these words initially arouse disbelief, as I take their historical context to be the inchoate ravings of a possible madman. Among classical liberals such as myself, these words arouse dispassionate tolerance, as I take their religious context to be not very much worse than most others, and I accord people the right to worship pretty much as they please, so long as they leave me and mine out of their prayers. But these words also arouse in me an admixture of compassion and repugnance, for they have enslaved hundreds of millions of people, and have consigned them to an ongoing earthly Hell supposedly reserved for infidels like me in the hereafter (hence my compassion); and they have moreover sanctified the heinous deeds of an army of terrorists who have murdered thousands, all the while believing they were performing the work of a merciful Deity (hence

my repugnance). Fanatical believers will do anything in their power to sustain the visions of paradise dancing in their heads, just as children will do with visions of sugarplums on Christmas Eve.

Against such a specter, what tangible hope can general semantics hold out for the “manhood of humanity”? At least for those who would be free, visualization offers more hope than words. Thus Korzybski introduced it as an alternative pathway toward the elimination of emery. And once again he turns out to be a scientific prophet, for the powers and efficacies of visualization are only beginning to be appreciated in the West. Here are but a few examples of its relevance. In mathematics, symbolic structures and their relations are more often initially depicted rather than deduced by the mind; seeing the overall “shape” of a proof is a prelude to generating its inferential content. In the sciences, visualization ubiquitously precedes hypothetico-deduction. For example, Einstein’s depiction of the form of the field equation of general relativity, like so much of his physics, preceded his arrangements and rearrangements of its mathematical ornaments. In strictly-determined games like chess and go, many outstanding players find their best moves by picturing the strengths and weaknesses of possible positions, rather than by articulating, branching, and pruning the associated decision trees. Composers of music often “see” structures before they “hear” notes, while seasoned performers can practice a piece from the score alone, by visualizing themselves playing it. In general, visualizing one’s hands while dreaming abets the process of remembering dreams. In Tibetan and other yogas, visualizations of detailed Mandalas are prerequisites to advanced yogic practices. And even in allopathic medicine’s treatment of cancer and other serious diseases, it is empirically efficacious to complement or supplement invasive interven-

tions with visualizations that mobilize the immune system's response. Finally, in philosophical counseling, the visualization of alternative dispositional states is often a client's key to resolving or dissolving a persistent problem.

Korzybski was clearly onto something. Even so, it is difficult to visualize a world whose majority of inhabitants are willing or able to excise their emotional energy via visualization. And we must remain vigilant too, lest visualization verge into hallucination. Heed this apocryphal tale, not from *Arabian Nights*, but from the quintessence of Middle-Eastern doublethink:

A village elder was trying to sleep during the ferocious heat of day, but his slumbers were disrupted by a throng of children playing under his window. So he deceived them into departing by calling to them: "Children, why are you wasting your time playing here, when they are giving away free figs in the marketplace?" At that, the children scampered off to claim this gratuitous treat. The elder then resumed his repose, but found he could not sleep. "Why am I wasting my time lying here," he mused, "when they are giving away free figs in the marketplace?"

While Plato justified the Noble Lies told by the ruler for the sake of the polity, only Machiavelli condoned lying to the polity for the sake of the ruler. But neither would have comprehended lying to the polity for one's own sake, and then succumbing to the lie to one's own detriment.

So where is this marketplace, in which free figs are dreamed, and the dreamer wakes to seek them? I will tell you, and the tale brings us full-circle, into yet another non-Korzybskian region. The place in which hallu-

cinations are realities, and in which lies are believed by the liar, is also a place where the map and the territory coincide. But here's the catch: that place is non-existent. It is only a name; like the square circle, or the worker's paradise, or the Great Satan, it stands for nothing but a synonym for impossibility. And here's the moral: Our global village is manifestly a Korzybskian place, in which our maps are only as good as our ability to make them, and as useful as our ability to interpret them, in which hallucinations do not correspond to realities, and in which lies cannot represent truths. We must remain aware of Korzybski's outstanding contributions to the welfare of this village. The alternative, which consists in remaining heedless of them, does not make for better maps, but only for worse territories.

Thank you very much for your attentiveness and your indulgence.

Notes and References

- {1} A. Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, The International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, Lancaster, PA, 1933, p. 58.
- {2} E.g., Plato, Augustine, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Koestler.
- {3} W. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1961.
- {4} See M. Klein, *Contributions to Psychoanalysis*, 1948, and *Developments in Psychoanalysis*, 1952. Hogarth Press, London.
- {5} Cited by B. Hart, *Defense of the West*, Cassell & Co. Ltd., London, 1950, p. 66.
- {6} Cited by N. Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1976, p. 158.
- {7} Cited by C. Morgan & D. Langford, *Facts and Fallacies*, Webb & Bower, Exeter, 1981, p. 46.
- {8} *Ibid.*, p. 47.

{9} E.g., see R. Jungk, *Brighter Than a Thousand Suns*, Victor Gollancz Ltd., London, 1958, p. 115.

{10} L. Marinoff. *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, New York, 2001.

{11} L. Marinoff. *Plato Not Prozac*, Harper-Collins, NY, 1999.

{12} *Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings: 1920-1950*, p. 690.

{13} See the subsequent Papez-MacLean theory of emotion.

{14} From Dr. Bremner's "HTK", cited by Steven Lewis, on his website:

<http://www.kcmetro.cc.mo.us/pennvalley/biology/lewis/gs.htm>

{15} *The Koran*, Sûrah 13, The Thunder, verses 18 & 35.

Editor's Note: Dr. Marinoff currently chairs the Philosophy Department at City College of New York. I like his Korzybskian stance; as Susan Kodish said, "a riveting and insightful lecture". I would add that, in any debate over whether or not coinciding virtual domains constitute an exception to Korzybski's law of non-identity, I would argue that they do not. AK stressed the adoption of *sub-microscopic*, *process* orientations. In our space-time universe, two images of the 'same' screen in virtual space cannot be accessed without the passage of time; and that flux of space-time between mouse-clicks results in real, sub-atomic differences between the images (and perhaps other differences on somewhat higher levels). Not "identity", i.e., absolute sameness in all respects, but "invariance under transformation", another Korzybskian principle, describes the situation well, it seems to me.

