

Time Binders

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Part of the Series: Truth

Previous Post: Jan Bloch's Impossible War

“The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.”

The Manhood of Humanity is a somewhat obscure philosophical treatise written by Polish-American immigrant Alfred Korzybski shortly after Jan Bloch's Impossible War had played out across Europe to the cool tune of twenty million deaths. This relatively obscure little book would go on to be the underpinnings and justifications for Korzybski's later work, *Science and Sanity*, the founding document behind the General Semantics movement. In this way, we find in *The Manhood of Humanity* the origins of the modern rationalist and effective altruist communities.

We'll start with the man. Alfred Korzybski is, to put it simply, something of a larger than life character. He learned four languages as a child, but none of the ones he needed to go into a field he wanted. He had an engineering degree he never used. Immediately upon graduating, he took off wandering around Europe. He trained in sword fighting, he picked up girlfriends as he wandered in and out of towns, apparently, he managed to get an audience with the Pope at some point. Korzybski's biography by Bruce Kodish is full of examples of Korzybski being super extra and it's worth a read if you're the sort of person to read biographies. The author was even kind enough to put a free abridged version online.

After his father's death, Korzybski returned home, but he wasn't happy about it. In a state of frustration and disillusionment with his life in Tsarist Poland, he had read Jan Bloch's book. He came away from it with the conclusion that a new war in Europe was looming, inevitable. What makes a war inevitable? How can we steer humanity off this dreadful course? He had started to think about these things, but he would not properly formulate them until the war had ended. One more year would go by, and then Archduke Franz Ferdinand would be assassinated in Sarajevo.

Upon the war's start, Korzybski immediately joined the Imperial Russian army. He saw a victory by the Entente powers as more likely to enable the creation of an independent Polish state. Conversely, an expansionist Germany was likely to simply annex the Poles and colonize them. Because he could speak four languages, Korzybski was assigned to a special intelligence unit and would avoid the worst disasters of the war. However, he still saw the wreckage of them as he rode around on horseback:

So we put in our front some body, some sort of army, and the Second Army was sent to East Prussia, of course, complete disaster, complete. I was ordered there, but I came already after the disaster. I only saw the fleeing remnants, five men out of [every] 4,000.

Eventually Korzybski had a horse fall on him, crushing his pelvis and putting him out of the direct fighting fairly early in the war. He was reassigned to an office posting in America, acting as a liaison between the Russian and American governments. After the Russian revolution, Korzybski stayed in America as an immigrant, where he would return, with newfound urgency to the question of how such a horrific event could be prevented from happening again. The result of this contemplation was *The Manhood of Humanity*, which we'll be going over today.

Korzybski is rather dated, and he gets a lot of flak for wandering off into more crankish territory in places, but if you want to really understand where you've come from and where you're headed, it's important to be willing to study one's somewhat embarrassing memetic ancestors.

We'll begin our analysis in *roughly* the same place we started when we were discussing Becker, with the observation, or perhaps declaration, that humans are distinct from animals. It's a trend I've noticed quite a lot from these twentieth century philosophers, many of them seem to start their explorations with an observation that can basically be summed up as: "Well, God's dead but dogs haven't invented fire yet" and trying to make sense of a world where both those facts are true.

So in 1921, there were two main schools of thought regarding humanity's place in the world. The first was the original religious dualist perspective, stating that humans are a wedding of body and soul. The second was a response to the first, which declared that no, humans were nothing more than animals. Korzybski thought both these takes were wrong and were hurting the ability to understand ourselves and thus solve the problems of our civilization.

It will be seen that to live righteously, to live ethically, is to live in accordance with the laws of human nature; and when it is clearly seen that man is a natural being, a part of nature literally, then it will be seen that the laws of human nature—the only possible rules for ethical conduct—are no more supernatural and no more man-made than is the law of gravitation, for example, or any other natural law.

Make no mistake, Korzybski saw humans as natural beings, a part of the world and not containing parts distinct from it like souls. He believed that science would be able to fully understand humanity someday. But at the same time, he *didn't* see humans as animals. There was something distinct about us.

But if a soul isn't what makes humanity unique among the animals, what does? To Becker, it was our understanding and knowledge of our mortality. To Korzybski, it was a different factor, one which he refers to as *time binding*.

Korzybski put a lot of emphasis on the idea of time binding, and it's where most

accusations of woo are leveled at him. The first group he made to discuss his ideas was even called the Time Binders Club. I think that the metaphor itself is sound and is worth considering on its own terms, even if Korzybski gets let's himself get sucked into the positive affect spiral around his favorite concept. Keep your eyes on the prize and remember that it's just an abstraction.

A plant absorbs light from the sun, takes in molecules of air and water and nutrients from the soil, and locks them into new structures. In this way, a plant is *energy binding*. It binds along one dimension.

An animal can do most of the same things as plants, (take in energy to create new structures) but now in addition to this dimension, an animal can also move around and manipulate space in order to acquire resources. In this way, an animal is *space binding*. It binds along two dimensions.

And then there are humans, who can do all the things that animals can, but now also have this new ability to create lasting information structures and pass information forward between individuals using language, which enables us to transcend our temporality and make us *time binders*. We capture the past and carry it forward with us in the form of our collective knowledge. We bind energy, space, and also time, three dimensions.

This is a pretty simple metaphor, but Korzybski irons it for a lot of interesting insights. The first important insight is the idea of dimensionality. The idea is to think about time binding as a measure of dimensions of freedom that a lifeform can move within. If you think that humans are animals, and are trying to predict humans using the same dimensionality paradigm that you use with animals, you're going to miss *most* of what matters to humanity, since that's stored as volume not surface area. You're essentially using the wrong system of measurement to try and capture humanity, and this is why we have not been able to get very far with it.

However, that understanding was critical, necessary, and that brings us to the second, and probably more important of Korzybski's insights. It's often overlooked since time binding gets more of the spotlight, but Korzybski sort of created the idea of x-risk?

Because we are human beings we are all of us interested in what we call progress—progress in law, in government, in jurisprudence, in ethics, in philosophy, in the natural sciences, in economics, in the fine arts, in the practical arts, in the production and distribution of wealth, in all the affairs affecting the welfare of mankind. It is a fact that all these great matters are interdependent and interlocking; it is therefore a fact of the utmost importance that progress in each of the cardinal matters must keep abreast of progress in the other cardinal matters in order to keep a just equilibrium, a proper balance, and so to maintain the integrity and continued prosperity of the whole complex body of our social life; it is a fact, a fact of observation, that in some of the great matters progress proceeds in accordance with one law and one rate of advancement and in others in accordance with a very different law and rate; it is a fact, a fact of observation and sad experience, a fact attested by all history and made evident by reason, that owing to the widely differing laws and rates of progress in the great essential concerns of humanity, the balance and equilibrium among the parts is disturbed, the strain gradually increases until a violent break ensues in the form of social conflicts, insurrections, revolutions and war; it is a fact that the readjustment that follows, as after an earthquake, does indeed establish a kind of new equilibrium, but it is an equilibrium born of violence, and it is destined to be again disturbed periodically without end, unless by some science and art of Human Engineering progress in all the great matters essential to human weal can be made to proceed in accordance with one and the same law having its validity in the nature of man.

This idea of asymmetric progress, the failure mode that arises from it, and the solution to this failure mode in a proper science of humanity is together the essential justification for Korzybski's decision and drive to create the general semantics movement. This idea has also been carried forward into the modern rationality community as a part of the philosophy around rationality as x-risk mitigation.

And so I repeat that the world will have uninterrupted, peaceful progress when and only when the so-called social “sciences”—the life-regulating “sciences” of ethics, law, philosophy, economics, religion, politics, and government—are technologized; when and only when they are made genuinely scientific in spirit and method; for then and only then will they advance, like the natural, mathematical and technological sciences, in conformity to the fundamental exponential law of the time-binding nature of man; then and then only, by the equal pace of progress in all cardinal matters, the equilibrium of social institutions will remain stable and social cataclysms cease.

This was a rather brilliant but perhaps overly ambitious goal. Armed with this new foundation, Korzybski would spend the next twelve years writing *Science and Sanity* which is basically the sequences if they were written in 1933. Using that, he would found the field of *General Semantics*, the name he coins for his attempt at human engineering and science.

Unfortunately for Korzybski, General Semantics never really took off or achieved prominence as the new field he had set out to create. It wasn't without some success and it has been taught in some colleges. But overall, despite trying to create something

grounded in science and empiricism, over the years the empiricism leaked out of general semantics and a large amount of woo and pseudoscience leaked in. This looks like it was actually a similar failure mode to what had started happening with Origin before I stopped the project.

With Origin, I introduced a bunch of rough draft concepts and tried to bake in the idea that these were rough ideas that should be iterated upon. However, because of the halo effect, those rough drafts were taken as truth without question. Instead of quickly iterating out of problematic elements, the problematic elements stuck around and became accepted parts of the canon.

Something similar seems to have happened with General Semantics, at a certain point it stopped being viewed as a science to iterate upon, and began being viewed in a dogmatic, pseudoscientific way. It would eventually spin off a bunch of actual cults like Scientology and Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and while the Institute of General Semantics still exists and still does things, no one seems to really be trying to achieve Korzybski's goal of a science of human engineering. That goal would sit on a shelf for a long time until finally it was picked back up by one Eliezer Yudkowsky.

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