



Alfred Korzybski's Philosophical Views and Their Educational Implications

Kirti Matliwala

Assistant Professor,

Department of Education

Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat,

Gujarat, India.

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ABSTRACT

Today one can say the world is Black and White. White because as we can see that human civilization has progressed immensely due to development in the field of science and technology on one hand and on the other hand the world has also become a global village due to advancement in the field of Information and Technology. Black because one can see rampant disagreements, arguments, conflicts, and war around the world. One of the major causes of this conflict is a misunderstanding; caused due to the difference in perceptions arising due to sticking to faulty dogmas and beliefs. So at this juncture, if thoughts and views expressed by Alfred Korzybski are incorporated in our educational system they can prove to be a real boon. For Alfred Korzybski believed that " We need not blind ourselves with the old dogma ,that human nature cannot be changed, for we find that it can be changed." Thus, human beings through proper training can be turned into better humans making this world a better place to live in. Hence, this paper attempts to throw light on some basic principles and ideas like - The Map is Not the Territory, Infinite-Valued Logic, Semantic Reactions, Time Binding and Extensional Devices of Alfred Korzybski- a Polish-born American scientist and philosopher as incorporated in some of his works like; Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics, Manhood of Humanity etc.

Introduction

Alfred Korzybski was born in Warsaw, Poland on July 3, 1879. From childhood, he was fluent in four languages – Polish, Russian, French and German. He was educated at Warsaw University of Technology in engineering. He had served as an intelligence officer in the Russian army during the First World War and after being wounded in the war he moved to America in 1916 and settled over there. As stated by M. Kendig in his work *Alfred Korzybski: A Memoir*; Korzybski was an observer and a contemplator. He observed and studied man in Poland, in European cities and on the battlefields and also studied the history of men in libraries and universities; the success and failure of the human civilization and questioned the why and how and tried to comprehend his observations and experiences. He has penned down his contemplation in many books like *Time –Binding: The General Theory* (1924-1926), *Science and Sanity* (1933), *Alfred Korzybski Collected Writings: 1920-1950*, *Manhood of Sanity* (1921) and paper like *What I Believe* (1948). He had developed the whole discipline of general semantics which was born out of his contemplation and reflection of the fact that why human beings, on one hand, have made tremendous progress in some areas and why he is absolutely lacking in some? From this, he theorized that this could be the result of the attitudes and methodologies of science and engineering and as such the same attitudes and methodologies should be applied to individuals at micro levels and cultures at the macro level. This new discipline was introduced by him in his book *Science and Sanity* (1933) as a practical and a teachable system. Through *General Semantics* he has proposed that we should give up the old belief that humans are unchangeable contrary to it human beings can change if they are provided the right training.

Through this paper, an attempt is being made to reflect on some of the basic philosophies and key ideas of Korzybski as reflected in some of his works and their relevance and implication in the current educational scenario. How they can be encompassed in the current education system to bring some sanity in this chaotic age.

Key Ideas and Principles as Reflected in Alfred Korzybski's works

To begin with his theory of *General Semantics* he proposed that humans do not know the exact reality as they are limited by what they know firstly by the structure of their nervous system and secondly through the structure of their language. He believed that humans cannot experience the world directly but through abstractions and verbal indicators expressed and derived from the language which might lead to misunderstanding preventing us from knowing the actual reality.

By making a very powerful statement: -The Map is Not the Territory; a map does not represent all of the territories. Through this hallmark phrase we can imply that anyone who uses a map knows that regardless of how detailed, it still leaves out a lot of information. If we imply this in the language then we can say that a word is not what it represents; a word does not represent all of the facts. Through this statement, Korzybski implies that we attempt to make models, maps, and words about what the things and the world is, but the fact is this map and models are just an approximation of the real world or thing the actual territory is beyond verbal description.

Humans make abstraction or they perceive an event or thing from their own point of view which might be very different from the views or perception of others which may lead to misunderstanding. This can be best understood with an example the word car can invoke different images in different peoples' mind like some may perceive an image of an Audi or some can perceive a wagon-r. Similarly, language can be used to describe the taste of a thing but one cannot give the exact taste of the thing using language alone for according to General Semantics content of all knowledge is structure. So language can provide a structural map of empirical fact but there can be no identity only structural similarity between the linguistic map and the empirical facts which are observed and experienced by the people.

Here the importance of communication skills come to play that much should be done to teach the children not just the literal meaning of words but to also equip them with skills of reading in between lines.

Maps: All kind of misunderstandings conflicts arise because of formation of maps which are based on our preconceived notion of a thing, person or event.

So based on this today there is a need to free ourselves specially the young generations from the stereotypes of preconceived notions and dogmas and so here at this juncture our education system can play a key role in this regard by adopting modern dynamic methods of teaching like brainstorming where children get an opportunity to step of the stereotypes.

Time –Binding

Korzybski stated that human beings are the only species of living things that have the unique neurological capacity to create, preserve and transmit what they have learned as individuals to the future generation. This unique capacity which human beings possessed was termed as Time-Binding by him. He believed that each generation is equipped with a unique

capacity from where the other generation left off. Keeping this unique capacity of human beings as time binders it is very important that when we pass on the treasure house of our knowledge and culture to the coming generation the chest of the transmitted knowledge and cultures should contain valuable jewels like humility, conscientiousness, compassion and so on. The transmission of this depends on to a large extent on language. So it is extremely important to make use of this powerful weapon with great sensibility otherwise it could result in dire consequences.

Here again, education system comes to play because books printed by the system should transmit unbiased report of the culture and also they can play a major role in transmitting cultural knowledge creatively in an artistic manner by organizing various youth and cultural festivals.

Infinite - Valued Logic: According to Korzybski Aristotelian logic was two-valued, implying that any proposition could be either right or wrong; whereas according to him logic is infinite-valued meaning that any proposition should be examined from all angles or degrees of the proposition. No one answer, model, action or person is right or wrong.

- When one implies the concept of infinite valued logic linguistically one can come up with Multi ordinarily of terms.eg. Words just do not have only one meaning but they have different meanings for different people. According to him, difference was one such multi-ordinal term.
- He believed that people should be trained to relate to the world in flexible and infinite-valued ways so all kind of misunderstandings could be avoided.
- Children through various educational programs and through various modern teaching methods like brainstorming and scientific training and inquiry methods should be trained to look at all aspects of an event and accept the different angles of the events. They should be trained to be flexible and not rigid in their views.

Abstraction

As we grow from infancy to maturation we develop the capacity for language and critical evaluation and using these capacities we form categories of classes and things based on common characteristics for example animals birds and so on. As the classes grow we form subclasses which are more abstract and the problem according to Korbybski with abstraction is

that as the chain of classification grows; reality loses its concreteness and concreteness is the foundation necessary to have a sane and a rational mind.

In order to avoid abstraction and the resultant misunderstandings and also for clarity of comprehensions modern methods of education like demonstrations and use of audio-visual aids should be amply used which provides a concrete learning experience to the students.

Allness refers to your belief or thinking that you know more about a subject than you do or should know. But the fact is that we don't know completely anything about anything. True wisdom lies in the fact that there are yet many things that one doesn't know. He has explained this fact with a simple example of a pencil he has asked to pick up a common pencil and observe it for a minute and you will see many things you haven't noticed about the pencil before. Korzybski liked to point out that there are microscopic and sub-microscopic qualities to every object. Every pencil is essentially unique. There is always an "etc." in anything we describe.

Teachers should be made to understand that each child is unique, all the children have different learning habits and so they should be made to use a blend of teaching methods catering to the different learning needs of the students. In the same way, students through methods like debating and brainstorming should be made to understand that there are views and ideas beyond their own views and ideas which must be accepted and respected.

Identification

Another of Korzybski thought which is very closely related to allness is identification is our automatic response to a new event in the same way as we responded to our earlier experience. According to him, a major cause of much of our mental distress is our automatic response to an experience that might have caused pain or anxiety that an earlier experience had caused us. This inability to make a distinction between experiences leaves us with pre-programmed responses, which compels us to act in a certain way, which might again cause pain or anxiety. Korzybski's non-identification represents a keen understanding that "this is not that," and thus that each event must be addressed in its own terms.

Education system by providing children with varied learning experiences and also organizing the different competition and by making children participate in experiences and competition not with the aim of learning but for the purpose of participating can lead to building up their confidence and developing the habit of overcoming the fear of failure.

Elementalism

In General Semantics he has talked about the concept of non-elementalism. He argues that elementalism the process of breaking the world down into smaller components till each part do not have any interrelationship may be good for problem-solving on one hand but on the other hand it might also lead to linear and mechanical thinking and dualism. Non-elementalism on the other side gives us a more realistic and comprehensive framework for understanding life.

Subjects should again not be taught in isolation but as an integrated whole and as such textbooks and learning material should be published which present subjects as a whole and even subjects should be co-linked with each other.

Semantic Reaction

As stated, the human nervous system and language represent a highly integrated system. Words have an emotional effect on us. They can, according to how they are used, evoke many very strong emotions. We can be moved to tears or laughter, love or hatred by words and symbols

Korzybski concluded that formal methods of treating language – linguistics, semantics, logic, etc. – do little to improve evaluation and reduce the negative effects of words. We have to learn, as the old wisdom tells us, to pause, to count to ten, or, in his terms, delay reaction. Delayed semantic reaction, he asserted, is a primary benefit of extensionalization. The use of general semantics, and extensionalization in particular, automatically introduces a delay in reactions, transforms “the animalistic (human pathological) signal reactions of low conditionality into human symbol reactions of full conditionality, by the stimulation of the cerebral cortex.”

Semantic reactions triggered by words or actions which many times result in misunderstandings and conflicts can be avoided by integrating course like yoga ,meditation and ample sports and creative activities in the curriculum in order to channelize the negative emotions and also to delay the negative impact of words and actions. He had also thrown light on the linguistic device which can be used as delay tactics, which he called as extensional devices.

Extensional Devices are the linguistic elements whose main function is to remove uncertainty and emotional aspect out of the statements in order to create more rational and realistic descriptions. The five extensional devices are:

Indexes and Chain Indexes: are used to add on specific details like people's name. Location, they are used to indicate interconnection of happenings in space and time. Where a cause can have multiple effect or effect, in turn, can become a cause.

Implication is that everything is or person is unique.

Dates:

Dating just does not mean adding the dates when the event occurred but it has a deeper implication it implies the process of change. It is necessary to know that a particular idea comes from the particular point of time but it is equally important to know that our perceptions and understanding of the meaning is different now than it was then because we mature and we learn from new avenues of knowledge that we encounter every day

'Etc': Et-Cetra ;not all; to train us about the characteristics which are untold and also indicating that many things are yet left out the picture or the story is not complete.

Quotes: To forewarn us that eliministic or metaphysical terms should not be trusted and speculations can be misleading. They are used to separate something out which are not 'real'

Hyphen: They bind the words together in strength making connections. To remind us of complexities of interrelatedness in the world.

Korzybski had further expressed his views on the aspect of the failure of philosophy to fulfill its function, survival of fittest and on freedom. He felt that today it seems that philosophy does not fulfill her aim to bring the result of experimental and exact sciences together and solve the problems in the world. The world today as no collective or organized higher ideal and aim or fixed general purpose. And so there is a need to awaken collective power.

He also has expressed that the theory of 'Survival of the Fittest' is not a principle for 'time-binding being' he believed that it is fit only for the physical bodies of the animals, its impact upon a human being is degrading and sinister. According to him, application of this principle to human affairs has degraded the whole human morale.

So keeping in line with his philosophy today education system can play a role in developing a common progress related national aim in the students. And through various social programs can develop in students' feelings to take care of the weaker sections of the society.

Conclusion

Old order must change giving way to a better new; Thus if we incorporate some of the positive philosophy and principles reflected in the work of Alfred Korzybski in our education system because education system burdens the responsibility of producing enlightened productive citizens of tomorrow; then we will be able to change the current black and white hue of our planet fraught with misunderstanding ,tensions, and conflicts and add the warm colour of love ,compassion and understanding making the world a more colourful and better place to live in..

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