HEINLEIN AND ELLIS: CONVERGING COMPETENCIES

Steve Stockdale *

On July 7, 2007, the Heinlein Centennial was held in Kansas City to celebrate what would have been the 100th birthday of acclaimed "Grand Master" science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein. Heinlein is generally acknowledged as one of the four great American science fiction writers, along with Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Arthur C. Clarke. Among his most notable books are *Starship Troopers*, *Stranger in a Strange Land, The Moon is a Harsh Mistress,* and *Time Enough for Love*.

On July 24, 2007, Dr. Albert Ellis died at age 93 in New York City. His front-page obituary in the *New York Times* referred to him as "one of the most influential and provocative figures in modern psychology." He originated the field of psychotherapy known as Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and authored more than 70 books, including *Overcoming Procrastination, How to Live With a Neurotic, A Guide to Rational Living*, and *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything — Yes, Anything*.

These two accomplished and celebrated men would seem to have little in common — one a Midwesterner, Naval Academy graduate, futurist, with an almost cult-like following of fans; the other a New Yorker who was referred to as "the Lenny Bruce of psychotherapy," known for his blue language and results-oriented approach to talk therapy.

And yet Robert Heinlein and Albert Ellis shared a common perspective, or point of view, that developed from the same source — Alfred Korzybski and general semantics.

Heinlein came to general semantics through Stuart Chase's *The Tyranny of Words* (1938) and attended two seminars with Korzybski in 1939 and 1940. In a speech in 1941, Heinlein made the seemingly outlandish assertion that Korzybski was "at least as great a man as Einstein" based on his "monumental piece of work,"

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Science and Sanity.

Ellis, so far as we know, never met Korzybski but credited him (and general semantics) as a major influence in his development of REBT, using descriptors such as *brilliant, masterpiece,* and *pioneer*.

I attended the Heinlein Centennial in Kansas City. One of the panel sessions I attended was on "The Competent Man." I learned this was a theme of Heinlein's that recurred throughout his novels. An oft-repeated quote from Heinlein's novel *Time Enough for Love* concerns competency as a general trait:

> A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

I had the privilege to hear Dr. Ellis speak on one memorable occasion a few years ago. In recalling that talk and in reviewing several of his writings, it seems to me that "competency" was also a recurring theme in his work, specifically as it related to *cognitive* competency.

As the lives and contributions of these two great men — Robert A. Heinlein and Dr. Albert Ellis, just seven years apart in age — shared the news pages in the same recent month, we choose to devote this special section of *ETC* to them.

The best years of your life are the ones in which you decide your problems are your own. You do not blame them on your mother, the ecology, or the president. You realize that you control your own destiny.

Albert Ellis

I am free, no matter what rules surround me. If I find them tolerable, I tolerate them; if I find them too obnoxious, I break them. I am free because I know that I alone am morally responsible for everything I do.

Robert A. Heinlein

WHAT WE COULD BECOME

Steve Stockdale *

Based on speaking notes prepared for a panel discussion on General Semantics at the Heinlein Centennial held in Kansas City, MO, July 7, 2007, celebrating what would have been the 100th birthday of science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein.

I have read only enough of Heinlein's writings to have a minimally-informed appreciation of his work. But I know something about the field of general semantics, which certainly influenced Heinlein's point of view during his early years as a writer and is unmistakably reflected in character and plot development throughout his work.

In the July 2002 *Heinlein Journal,* Kate Gladstone provided some details from the Institute's archives regarding Heinlein's attendance at two seminars with Alfred Korzybski in 1939 and 1940. (1) From my standpoint, the most interesting piece of Heinlein memorabilia found in the archives is an original transcript of Heinlein's Guest of Honor speech to the 3rd World Science Fiction Convention held in Denver in July 1941. The transcript was sent to the Institute by Heinlein's wife at the time, Leslyn. He titled his address, "The Discovery of the Future," published in 1992 in Yoji Kondo's collection of Heinlein's writings, *Requiem*.

As he concluded his Denver speech, Heinlein offered this testimony to Alfred Korzybski and general semantics:

> I save for the last on that list of the books that have greatly affected me, that to my mind are the key books, of the stuff I've piled through, a book that should head the list on the Must List. I wish that, I wish that everyone could read the book – it's just a wish, there aren't that many copies of it, everyone can't, nor could everyone read this particular book. All of you could, you've got the imagination for it. It's *Science and Sanity* by Count Alfred Korzybski, one of the greatest Polish mathematicians when he went into the subject of symbology and started finding out what made us tick, and then worked up in strictly experimental and observational form from

the preliminary works of E.T. Bell.

A rigor of epistemology based on E.T. Bell (break in transcript here – some words lost) … symbology of epistemology. Book refers to the subject of semantics. I know from conversation with a lot of you that the words *epistemology* and *semantics* are not unfamiliar to you. But because they may be unfamiliar to some, I'm going to stop and make definitions of these words.

Semantics is simply a study of the symbols we use to communicate. *General Semantics* is an extension of that study to investigate how we evaluate in the use of these symbols. *Epistemology* is a study of how we know what we know. Maybe that doesn't sound exciting. It is exciting, it's very exciting. To be able to delve back into your own mind and investigate what it is you know, what it is you can know and what it is that you cannot possibly know is, from a standpoint of intellectual adventure, I think possibly the greatest adventure that a person can indulge in. Beats spaceships.

Incidentally, any of you who are going to be in Denver in the next 5 or 6 weeks will have an opportunity, one of the last opportunities, to hear Alfred Korzybski speak in person. (2) He will be here at a meeting similar to this at a meeting of semanticians from all over the world – oh, McLean from Los Angeles, and Johnson from Iowa and Reiser from Mills College and Kendig and probably Hayakawa from up in Canada – the leading semanticians of the world – to hear Alfred Korzybski speak. I think starting Aug. 9, isn't it, Missy? The early part of August. It'll be in the newspapers in any case. And it's much better to hear him speak than it is to read his books. He's limited by the fact that he's got to stick to the typewriter, to the printed word; but when he talks – when he talks it's another matter! He gestures, he's not tied down with his hands to the desk the way I am; he walks, stumps all around the state, and waves his hands; (audience laughs) … and you really gather what he means. Incidentally – he looks like A. Conan Doyle's description of Prof. Challenger if Prof. Challenger had shaved his beard. Dynamic character. You may not like him personally, but he's at least as great a man as Einstein – at least – because his field is broader. The same kind of work that Einstein did, the same kind of work, using the same methods; but in a much broader field, much more close to

> human relationships. I hope that some of you will be able to hear him. I said that this will be one of the last chances, because the old man's well over 70 now; as he puts it, "*I vill coagulate someday, I vill someday soon, I vill coagulate*" – which is the term he uses for dying. (3) He speaks in terms of colloidal chemistry. Properly, it's appropriate. He won't last much longer, in the meantime he's done a monumental piece of work. He has worked out in methodology the same sort of important work that HG Wells did in the matter of description; and the two together are giants in our intellectual horizon, our intellectual matrix today, that stick up over the rest like the Empire State Bldg. (4)

Heinlein wasn't the only futurist who expressed admiration for Korzybski's general semantics.

- A.E. Van Vogt's series of *Null-A* novels was rooted in general semantics and provided many serious students their first exposure to the subject.
- Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*): "A man who knows that there have been many cultures, and that each culture claims to be the best and truest of all, will find it hard to take too seriously the boastings and dogmatizings of his own tradition. Similarly, a man who knows how symbols are related to experience, and who practices the kind of linguistic self-control taught by the exponents of General Semantics, is unlikely to take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, practical wisdom and political argument."(5)
- Alvin Toffler (*Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*) "… all of the questions that are raised by *Science and Sanity* are inherent or should be inherent in the work of any thinking writer or communicator."(6)
- Robert Anton Wilson (*Prometheus Rising*, *The Illuminatus* Trilogy, and *Schrodinger's Cat*) "All the events in the world that are going on I tend to see through a Korzybskian grid. He made a bigger impression on me than just about any writer I ever read."(7)

I must admit that I've never been a big science fiction fan. My naïve impression has been that most futurists or science fiction writers tend to focus on imagining how future technologies, alternative life-forms, or distant universes will be invented, evolved, or discovered.

However, among the authors who claim Korzybski as an influence, I find a

common interest in describing or developing human capabilities to their potentials. They seem to delve into positive speculations about what we as humans could become, were we to actually manifest the extensional orientation of perceiving, evaluating, and behaving as prescribed in *Science and Sanity*. Of course, the rocket ships and aliens are still featured aspects, but there is, to my limited reading, an attempt to imbue their characters with an abundance, or absence, of defining characteristics that can be related back to Korzybski's "semantic man."

I'd like to give you the briefest of introductions to the subject by discussing just four of what might be referred to as fundamental premises of general semantics.

1. The first premise is that our human abilities to perceive and sense what goes on in our continually-changing environments are limited and differentiated. As members of the human species, our abilities to see, hear, taste, touch, and feel are limited. For example, we know that there are limits to the frequencies humans can hear. We know that humans can't see certain wavelengths of light. We can extend our sensing capabilities through the use of tools and instruments, such as microscopes, telescopes, microphones, amplifiers, etc. Although we as humans share these general sensing potentials, we vary in terms of our actual individual capabilities. We each have a different combination of visual, auditory, and other sensory acuities. Therefore, presented with the 'same' event or stimulus, we will each perceive the event or stimulus according to the limits of our senses and nervous system processing. We will each abstract something different, to some degree, than anyone else and we will then individually construct our experience, awareness, and 'meaning' of the stimulus.

2. A second fundamental premise upon which general semantics is based may be best stated by quoting from the linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely

> as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (8)

In other words, the culture and language in which we are raised will shape or influence how we construct the 'realities' of our experiences, given the peculiarities of that culture and language. This has become known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Similarly, Korzybski posited in *Science and Sanity*:

> … every language having a structure, by the very nature of language, reflects in its own structure that of the world as assumed by those who evolved the language. In other words, we read unconsciously into the world the structure of the language we use. (9)
>
> We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of *semantic reaction* and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is *automatically projected* upon the world around us. (10)

3. Another fundamental premise of general semantics is that humans have the ability to respond conditionally to verbal and non-verbal stimuli. In his famous experiments, Dr. Ivan Pavlov trained his dog to manifest a conditioned response behavior. By ringing a bell at the same time he fed the dog, Pavlov conditioned the dog to associate, or identify, the sound of the bell with the food. When the dog heard the bell, it expected food and began salivating in anticipation. Therefore the dog's behavioral response (the salivating) resulted directly from the stimulus of the bell; when Pavlov rang the bell, the dog salivated. Humans, however, have the ability to respond more appropriately in less conditioned ways — condition*ally* rather than condition*ed*. We may talk in terms such as "he really pushed my buttons," but in most cases we have some degree of control over our responsive behaviors, regardless of which button is pushed. If we don't exercise that control, if we immediately react without pause and without regarding the situation and the consequences, then we can rightly be accused of exhibiting more animalistic, rather than more human, behaviors.

4. The fourth premise I would mention in this condensed introduction is related

to perhaps the most familiar metaphor associated with Korzybski — *the map is not the territory*. Our ability to achieve "maximum humanness" and evolve to our individual potentials is at least partially a function of how accurately our language behaviors reflect and are consistent with what we 'know' about our world. In other words, our verbal 'maps' ought to be congruent with and structurally similar to the facts of our non-verbal 'territories.' The world of words we put inside our heads ought to be related to and similar with the world of non-words in which we live.

Abraham Maslow, in his study of what he called *self-actualizing* behaviors, wrote of individuals whose internal 'maps' were in synch with their external 'territories':

> One particularly impressive and instructive aspect of this superior relation with reality...was [their ability to] ...distinguish far more easily than most the fresh, concrete, and ideographic from the generic, abstract, and rubricized. The consequence is that they live more in the real world of nature than in the man-made mass of concepts, abstractions, expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes that most people confuse with the world. They are therefore far more apt to perceive what is there rather than their own wishes, hopes, fears, anxieties, their own theories and beliefs or those of their cultural group. (11)

Please note that these four premises do not constitute *all* of the premises of general semantics. Some might claim that these do not even constitute premises as much as they represent derived extrapolations from other, more fundamental, premises. But in the context of this Heinlein Centennial, I hope they provide a basis for re-examining Heinlein's work — particularly his characters — from a general semantics perspective. I suspect that, in addition to his "discovering the future" of interplanetary travel and intergalactic communities, Heinlein has revealed through his fictional characters what we, the readers, might one day become.

And that, to quote the Grand Master, "beats spaceships."

NOTES

1. http://www.heinleinsociety.org/rah/history/GeneralSemanticsInfo.html
2. Heinlein refers to the Second American Congress on General Semantics held at Denver University in August 1941.
3. In 1941, Korzybski was only 61 years old. He died in 1950 at age 70.
4. Heinlein, Robert A. (1941) "The Discovery of the Future." Speech delivered as Guest of Honor to the 3rd World Science Fiction Convention, Denver, CO. July 4, 1941. Recorded on discs by Walter J. Daugherty. Transcripted by Assorted Services. Presented by Forrest J. Ackerman. A Novacious Publication.
5. Huxley, Aldous. (1963) "Culture and the Individual." *Playboy Magazine*, November 1963.
6. Toffler, Alvin. (1991) "The Relevance of General Semantics." *Thinking Creātically*, Institute of General Semantics, Englewood, New Jersey.
7. Wilson, Robert Anton. (2001) "The Map Is Not the Territory: The Future Is Not the Past." Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture, 1997. *The General Semantics Bulletin Numbers 65-68*.
8. Whorf, Benjamin Lee. (1956) *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* edited by John B. Carroll, p. 134. The M.I.T. Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Reprinted from *Language, Culture, and Personality, Essays in Memory of Edward Sapir*, edited by Leslie Spier, Sapir Memorial Publication Fund, Menasha, Wisconsin, 1941.
9. Korzybski, Alfred. (1933) *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, p.59-60, Fifth Edition (1994). Institute of General Semantics, Englewood, New Jersey.
10. Korzybski, Alfred. (1933) *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, p.90, Fifth Edition (1994). Institute of General Semantics, Englewood, New Jersey.
11. Maslow, A.H. (1954) *Motivation and Personality*, p. 205. Harper & Brothers, New York.