



# Korzybski Files

The Life, Times, and Work of Alfred Korzybski with Non-Aristotelian Sightings and Comments on the Passing Scene

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Wednesday, January 4, 2012

## "A Difference That Makes A Difference"

Over the years, I've heard people, especially those involved with NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming), use the phrase 'a difference that makes a difference'. It has a catchy sound to it and the notion intrigues a lot of people who, at the very least, think of it as a neat kind of play on words. Where did the usage come from?

### *Difference and Differences That Make A Difference*

*Difference* qualifies as one of the most important fundamental undefined terms in the non-aristotelian worldview that Alfred Korzybski delineated. In a world where the premise of non-identity rules (the world we actually seem to live in), where *no* two objects however similar are 'exactly the same in all respects', *difference* indeed seems fundamental.

As a term, *difference*, also qualifies as one of the important *multiordinal terms* that Korzybski talked about. Although, I can give a dictionary definition of a multiordinal term, the specific 'meaning' of a multiordinal term only becomes clear in a specific context of discussion when one specifies the level of abstraction the word refers to. What does that 'mean'? For now, I'll roughly give Korzybski's simple rule for determining if a word qualifies as a *multiordinal term*: *Can the term be applied to itself and still make sense?* Can you fear fear? Can you be in love with love? Can you hate hate? Can you feel anxious about your anxiety? Can you have knowledge about knowledge? Can you think about your thinking? This is not just playing with words, but points to the multiordinal (multi-leveled) and concomitant self-reflexive character of the human nervous system and human evaluating. Thinking<sub>2</sub> about thinking<sub>1</sub> is not the same as thinking<sub>1</sub>. And how you think about what you think may be crucial.

Okay, back to the subject of this little (*still*) article: *difference*, another multi-ordinal term. In a non-identity world, a world of differences, we can have differences that make a difference (for given individuals with given purposes) and differences that don't (when we recognize similarities). For sane evaluating we need to recognize both similarities (where the differences among the different individuals viewed as 'same' *don't* make a difference for our purpose) and differences that *do* make a difference.

For Korzybski, difference was not the absence of 'sameness' (that would make 'sameness' fundamental, which seems a basic structural assumption of the aristotelian metaphysical worldview). Korzybski reversed this: 'sameness' or more clearly *similarity* constituted a species of difference; Difference, not 'sameness', seems more basic. As he also pointed out, a world of absolute difference between two things seems as impossible as one where absolute sameness exists. With every thing entirely different from everything else, recognition and knowledge would be impossible. In a non-identity world, difference appears fundamental; there exist only different kinds and degrees of differences. (See *Science and Sanity*, page 165.) What I've written here may—or may not— seem obvious; Korzybski wanted to get people to understand it and, more importantly, apply it in their everyday evaluating (not necessarily so easy, even if understood).

Although Korzybski may have used the phrase 'a difference which makes a difference' somewhere, I have thoroughly searched through his published writings and have not found it used. Korzybski's student and co-worker Wendell Johnson seems to deserve credit as the first to specifically talk about differences that make a difference and those that don't. Here's a bit from the discussion in his 1946 introduction to GS, *People in Quandaries*:

The law of identity sometimes holds sufficiently for practical purposes, in spite of its structural defectiveness. Therefore we can use it many times, but we should always be aware of our use of it. When eating peanuts, for example, we may proceed on the practical assumption that peanuts are peanuts, that peanut 1 is peanut 2, that they are the same. Even so, we should remember that they are not, that ultimately peanuts are not peanuts, that is, peanut 1 is not peanut 2. The differences, generally speaking, make no important difference, of course, and we can for the most part disregard them. But if we are basically oriented to non-identity, we will bite into the bad peanut that may be found in almost any bag, without bursting into invective against "*these* damned peanuts." We will merely discard peanut<sub>1</sub> and go on to enjoy peanut<sub>2</sub>, since basically we had not assumed that they would be the same anyway. Therefore, an occasional bad peanut is not cause of shock, no generator of tensions.

It is "in principle" that different things are the same. This is to say, it is on relatively high levels of abstraction, "in general," "on the average," "for practical purposes," "in main essentials," with regard to certain more or less important respects (not in *all* respects) that two different things may be evaluated, spoken of, or dealt with as though they were identical. For certain purposes specific differences may not make a difference; what is important is that we realize that differences exist and that we recognize the conditions under which they do make a difference. This is to say that what is important is that we be fundamentally oriented to non-identity so that we shall be prepared for differences at any time. It is precisely the differences we least expect that tend to make the biggest difference, that have the gravest consequences and demand the most difficult readjustments. [*People in Quandaries*, pages 178-179].

## Gregory Bateson and Difference

The usage 'a difference that makes a difference' is usually ascribed to the non-aristotelian (in the korzybskian sense) anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who used it in the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture that he gave for the Institute of General Semantics (IGS) in 1970. Bateson had had a long peripheral interest and association with Korzybski's work, having briefly corresponded with Korzybski in the late 1940s (the two men exchanged papers), and then having written a number of the dialogues with his daughter, he called them "metalogues", which were published in *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* starting in the early 1950s (ETC. was then edited by S. I. Hayakawa and published not by the IGS but by the International Society for General Semantics).

Bateson certainly qualified as a non-aristotelian before he ever heard about Korzybski (see *Naven*, a self-reflexive study of the anthropological fieldwork he did in New Guinea among the Iatmul, first published in the 1930s). But at some point, sometime in the 1940s, he appears to have read some of Korzybski's work, and probably other GS literature, including it seems nigh certainly Wendell Johnson's 1946 book, *People in Quandaries*.

So, as far as I know, as a matter of historical record, Wendell Johnson was the first to use 'a difference that makes a difference' as a significant formulation while explaining Korzybski's premise of non-identity. This takes nothing away from Bateson's brilliance. As a theorist Bateson built upon the notion of *difference*, and a *difference that makes a difference* in original and significant ways for the human sciences, starting it seems with his AKML paper: "Form, Substance, and Difference", which I read soon after it was published and which I still recommend most highly. I would find it most instructive for some serious student or students—perhaps they are reading this now—to trace the development of the notion of difference and differences of differences from Korzybski to Wendell Johnson to Bateson in much greater detail than I've done here (without getting lost in verbalism). That would constitute a genuine contribution to korzybskian GS scholarship. Any takers?

Bruce Kodish at 9:09 AM

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7 comments:

Ben` January 4, 2012 at 11:50 AM

Nice piece, Bruce. Can't take up the challenge, but hope to hear the results of someone else's research!

Ben

Reply



**Lance Strate** January 4, 2012 at 12:35 PM

Bruce, what is unique and groundbreaking about Bateson's use of the term is the connection to Claude Shannon's information theory, which Bateson was instrumental in extending and transforming into systems theory. According to Shannon, the function of information is to reduce uncertainty, so if that does not occur, we have a difference that doesn't make a difference (in that way, we can distinguish mere data from actual information).

However, I have recently been informed that the originator of the idea of a "difference that makes a difference" is not Korzybski, as you suggest, but the philosopher William James, and perhaps C.S. Peirce as well, and that it is a common notion in the philosophical school of pragmatism. It certainly fits in with the pragmatic view of the world, and is a fine pedigree for this turn of phrase.

Reply



**Bruce I. Kodish** January 5, 2012 at 7:27 PM

Thanks, Ben and Lance. Lance, your comment jibes with my understanding of Bateson's theoretical innovation.

Can you point me to James' or Peirce's reference to 'differences that make a difference'. I'd like to trace this back.

Reply



**Bruce I. Kodish** January 9, 2012 at 11:53 AM

I found the William James reference that Lance was probably referring to, a report by James on his nitrous oxide experiences "Subjective Effects of Nitrous Oxide"  
<http://des.emory.edu/mfp/jnitrous.html>

James wrote: "The most coherent and articulate sentence which came was this: There are no differences but differences of degree between different degrees of difference and no difference."

His insight, as such, seems to me, rather unworkable.

So this certainly shows that Korzybski not the first person to use what he called multiordinal terms. Indeed they are probably as old or almost as old as human language. But Korzybski was the first, as far as I know, to label such terms multiordinal and to explain them in terms of a comprehensive psycho-logical framework, one that is still not widely understood or used today.

Reply

**Ross** February 3, 2012 at 1:30 PM

The premise of non-identity has application in psychotherapy. One of psychiatrist Peter Breggin's guidelines for empathic therapists is that "We do not reduce others to diagnostic categories or labels. [...] Instead, we encourage people to understand and to embrace the depth, richness and complexity of their unique emotional and intellectual lives." The empathic therapist has a deep appreciation of individual human differences.(The "Guidelines for Empathic Therapy" and information on Dr. Breggin's Center for the Study of Empathic Therapy, Education & Living can be found at

Reply



**Bruce I. Kodish** February 4, 2012 at 11:20 AM

Thanks, Ross. I'll check out Dr. Breggin's work.

Reply



**Janan Yousif** April 21, 2016 at 1:45 PM

Hi Bruce,

This is a very interesting piece, particularly as I'm just six weeks from finishing my MA thesis in "Human Science" on the specifics of this area of Bateson's thought.

The thesis title is: "Demystifying the 'Double Bind': Gregory Bateson and the Outlines of a Cybernetic Epistemology (New Science of Living Organisms)". One of my major chapters, which I'm finishing at the moment, has the following sections:

The Processes of Perception

-The Fallacy of Unmediated Perception: Conscious Products and Unconscious Processes

-Biological Adaptation: Binocular Vision and 'Double Description'

-The Notion of Difference

-----Difference cannot be Localized

-----Difference is not Quantifiable

-----Difference cannot be placed in "Objective" Time

-----Difference is Abstract and Immanent

-----Potential Differences and Ideas

-----The Conversion of Static Differences into 'Events in Time'

-----Effective Differences, Information, and the 'Difference which makes a Difference'

-----From "External" to "Internal": Proportional Ratios of Difference

-----Metabolic Energy: The Bridge between Pleroma and Creatura

It seems that Bateson built upon the Weber-Fechner law of ratio differences, and also Norbert Wiener's finding that the tension of a muscle is proportional to the logarithm of the frequency of neural impulses travelling to the muscle. From the above, it appears that William James may have been attempting to also elaborate on the Weber-Fechner law of the 1830s. However, it seems that Bateson made a lot more sense out of it.....at least that is what I'm finding.

With best wishes,  
Janan Yousif

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### About Bruce I. Kodish



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I've received wide acknowledgment as a leading scholar-teacher of the korzybskian discipline of applied epistemology known as 'general semantics'. In 1998, with my wife Susan Presby Kodish, Ph.D., I received the Institute of General Semantics' prestigious J. Talbott Winchell Award. With "deep appreciation and warm thanks" the award acknowledged the Kodish's "...many contributions severally and together to the wider understanding of general semantics as authors, editors, teachers, leaders", and "their concern with the alleviation of social and individual problems, and their active interest in the on-going work in general semantics." I've written the first full-length biography of Alfred Korzybski, author of *Manhood of Humanity* and *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*. My book, *Korzybski: A Biography*, received the S.I. Hayakawa Book Prize in 2011. Although I am retiring this year after 36 years as a physical therapist, I continue a lively interest in corrective exercise and rehabilitation and have a part-time practice as a consultant and personal trainer specializing in the Alexander Technique of Posture-Movement Education.

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