

A Master Principle: Consciousness of Abstracting

by Michael A Green, (theallowablethoughtcage.com), 2017

This article is my rewrite and elaboration of an article originally written by Milton Dawes called 'Consciousness of Abstracting: A Master Principle', published on his website (miltondawes.com) on 11/17/2016. He has graciously given me permission to claim this rewrite as my own, with reference to his article which is the foundation on which I have constructed this version. His article was written to established students of Korzybski's work while my version is written to the general public. He explains that his article was abstracted from Alfred Korzybski's 'Science And Sanity', evaluating and emphasizing 'consciousness of abstracting' as a master principle to be applied as an overall attitudinal and behavioral modifier. I extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Mr. Dawes for writing an article so insightful it inspired me to expand and reinterpret it for a broader audience. Still, many of the sentences which follow are just as Milton initially wrote them or are only very slightly modified, so I am serving here only as his co-author and editor. He provided the basic structure and content. Some of my interpretations may differ from his, though I am unaware of any important disagreements he and I have on this topic as of the time of this writing.

Master principle

We can understand 'consciousness of abstracting' as a master principle of principles. This master principle can provide us with one of the most important psycho-emotional and logical tools we have ever had available for the development, improvement, and progress of virtually every field of human endeavor and activity. Pretty bold claim, huh? Let's see if it holds up to scrutiny....

As a tool, consciousness of abstracting is a label for a self-conscious, self-reflexive activity—*something we can do and know we are doing*. This involves using one instance of conscious awareness to modify, evaluate, critique, and refine another instance of awareness and its contents (experiences, ideas, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and the like), along key boundaries that are particularly important for 'proper' human evaluation.

As a principle, theory, and prescription for sanity, 'consciousness of abstracting' can provide us with a standard for 'critical thinking', with a theoretical foundation for psychological and emotional health, and with a tool we can use to modify our attitudes and behavior in the direction of greater sanity, balance, wholeness and wellness.

Some people consider consciousness of abstracting as the 'evaluational' equivalent of “ $E = mc^2$ ”, an advanced 'relativistic' principle applicable to and covering the study of human awareness, human values, education, communication, interactivity, relationships, and the apparent limits of human understanding and knowledge. There are various 'realms of discourse', 'levels of order' or 'orders of abstractions' that we need to 'navigate successfully' in order to avoid deep-seated and potentially chronic confusion.

Some of the key levels of abstractions we need to get better at recognizing, keeping distinct, and untangling or setting straight, in their natural order of importance from lower (closer to 'objective' reality) to higher (further from 'objective' reality) levels are:

- 1) the universe (the quantum soup or nature/creation as a whole)
- 2) objects we recognize in the universe (things human beings 'sense' or 'perceive')
- 3) labels we attach to objects we recognize in the universe (introducing words)
- 4) descriptions we make of labels and objects we recognize in the universe (involving more words)
- 5) inferences we make about objects, labels and descriptions we recognize in the universe (involving the bulk of the words we inherit and use in our languages)

These are each different levels of abstractions and we need to get very good at distinguishing between them, not identifying any one level as being the same as (identical with) any other, not confusing one level with another in any of our evaluations, not considering a higher level of order as more important or fundamental than a lower level of order, and being able to detect when any of these confusions of levels of abstraction exist in any of our reading, writing, listening, talking, or formulating of any of our theories or philosophies.

When we spot any confusions among these levels through 'consciousness of abstracting', we become able to see and understand these 'errors of evaluation', and to reevaluate them, so as not to remain confused, misguided, deceived, or manipulated by mistakes from accidental and/or intentional confusions currently rampant in our language, communications and media environments (in 2017).

By keeping these levels properly ordered, unconfused and distinct (not identified with each other), we will more and more consistently remain aware that what we know, understand, and believe is not the same thing as whatever it is we are knowing, understanding, and believing (our inferences do not exist on the same level of abstraction as the entire universe itself nor any of the other lower orders of abstractions).

Our resulting 'heightened awareness' will better enable us to remain unconfused. This is part of what can result from being 'conscious of abstracting'. We will also gain clarity by remaining aware that no truth is the whole truth (no level of abstraction higher than the first level, the universe, is identical with that first level, the universe as a whole). All our inferences are based on noticing some things while leaving others out. This is not a problem. It is our nature as human beings. It is not correctable. It is the way our human nervous systems normally operate in their natural and healthy state. To remain aware of these distinctions is to become 'conscious of abstracting' to some degree. This requires practice to achieve and discipline to maintain.

Abstracting

Abstracting is generally understood as 'taking away from', 'summarizing', 'leaving out', and so on. Yet abstracting typically begins with recognizing or noticing, selecting or focusing on, emphasizing or highlighting certain objects, perceptions, and events. The structure and

functioning of the human nervous system assures that overlooking or dismissing and leaving out or ignoring, are also part of the process. Part of becoming conscious of certain things involves remaining unaware of other things, as we are never able to be conscious of everything in the entire universe all at once.

All general principles qualify as abstractions, and this includes the master principle of 'consciousness of abstracting'. These principles refer to particular orientations we can, with practice, gradually learn to apply to all (or nearly all) our abstracting. To be rigorous, whatever we say about abstracting also applies to these principles. As such, general principles can be regarded as abstractions about abstractions, thinking about thinking, speaking about speaking, and the like. Principles in all other fields of study or activity, including what is sometimes labeled 'common sense', also qualify as abstractions.

All human activities involve various abstractions. Our seeing, hearing, imagining, thinking, feeling, believing, interpreting, understanding, opinions we develop, knowledge, talking, remembering, expecting, wanting, rules, policies, regulations, doctrines, creeds, ideologies, explanations, theories, sciences, mathematics, psychotherapies, philosophies, religions, and so on, all involve abstractions and/or systems of abstractions. Hopefully our opening claim that 'consciousness of abstracting' can serve as a tool for development, improvement, and progress in virtually every field of human endeavor and activity seems more plausible now.

Alfred Korzybski defined consciousness of abstracting as “*awareness* that in the process of abstracting we have *left out* characteristics”. In other words, consciousness of abstracting implies that we remain aware of leaving out a great deal in our seeing, hearing, thinking-feeling, imagining, remembering, theorizing, believing, explaining, expecting, desiring, and so on. This is the way the human nervous system works. Even once we become aware of it we can't stop doing it. We can't suddenly stop leaving things out because we've reached some super-enlightened state of being or awareness. Our ability to perceive anything remains embedded in our inherent nature—we don't perceive everything *else* at the same time—leaving things out comes along with noticing certain things specifically.

Furthermore, one of the things we often leave out in our abstracting is *the fact of ourselves as abstractors-interpreters-theorizers*. We typically 'leave out' the unavoidable contributions we make to our own distress and to our own accomplishments. We remain embedded in indefinitely many relations with indefinitely many factors and influences, breath by breath, moment by moment, tick-tock-tick....

Conscious Abstracting—Precursor to Consciousness of Abstracting

One way we can practice consciousness of abstracting involves first practicing 'conscious abstracting'. Conscious abstracting involves being aware of what we are doing and how we are doing it in the moment (sometimes referred to as 'witnessing'). We will find this of utmost importance—if we desire to improve—since we first have to be aware of what we are doing and how we are doing it, in order to make deliberate changes.

To practice conscious abstracting: Every now and again, silently talk to yourself about what you

are seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, doing, and so on. After a while, without any further disciplined effort, conscious abstracting will become habitual for you. You'll eventually do it automatically by reflex. You will not only notice more—in noticing more you will also become more aware of how much you have been leaving out, and can't help but to continue leaving out.

If we diligently practice conscious abstracting we can develop a particular self-aware-self-correcting-self-improving attitude and approach to life. In being aware that we have not included all, we do not identify our abstractions as being the same as whatever we are abstracting from or about.

If we study conflicts, disagreements, problems in communication, diverse beliefs, and the like, at many levels (personal, familial, community, state, country, international, ecological, political, and indefinitely many more), we will notice many examples of 'allnessing', 'identifying', and 'elementalistic' compartmentalizing. With an 'elementalistic' attitude, we separate things in our views, evaluations, opinions and verbalizations that are not separate in our actual experiences. We tend to view things as independent, unrelated 'separate elements', thus masking many of the connections, relations and interactions that bind them together in dynamic living processes.

We find individuals (including ourselves), experts, authorities, politicians, managers, groups, etc., acting as if they know the absolutely 'right thing', 'best thing', 'only thing' to do, often resenting advice or suggestions and generally behaving as if all there is to know about particular areas of human interactions, diverse topics and various fields of activities, is already fully known. These things will never be fully known. Human beings are structurally incapable of knowing everything about anything; our learning, knowledge and awareness inescapably involve leaving things out. We also seem to possess the incredible ability to continue to learn more, indefinitely, apparently without end.

Benefits

We can benefit a great deal by continuing practice of conscious abstracting and our potentially resulting 'consciousness of abstracting'. In being aware that we have not included all, we have an immediate, palpable incentive to learn more. We have continuing motivation to become better listeners—more attentive and more restrained in making judgments. *With practice, we become improved evaluators.* In being more attentive to what's going on inside us and around us, we notice more. We develop skills in recognizing patterns, repeated activities, and similarities of structures at different times and on different scales of size, generality and importance. We learn to remain aware that we live in a multi-dimensional world with unending abstractions about the multi-dimensional universe out of which we have emerged and in which we remain embedded.

In being more attentive, we notice more how things are different and similar. *We notice change.* We notice the moment-by-moment subtle transformations of ongoing dynamic processes. To notice that something has changed we must also have some awareness that aspects of this something have remained recognizable, so 'change' typically involves both differences and similarities. In being more skillfully appreciative of differences we become more open to, and more interested in, other points of view. As our appreciation of differences grows, we appreciate that the more perspectives we have, the more differing points of view we're able to entertain and

understand, the better and richer our ability to recognize patterns, trends, inconsistencies, connections, gaps, distortions, things intentionally or accidentally left out, and so on.

This also leads us to having fewer disagreements and conflicts because we're able to relate to the (necessarily partial) viewpoints of many more people and can find value in understanding their views as we learn to appreciate how other perspectives can easily serve to deepen and enrich our own. Since we find learning about others more interesting and enjoyable, *we tend to become better communicators and are able to enjoy more diverse and satisfying relationships.*

With greater skills in differentiating, with higher levels of sensitivity to both differences and similarities and developing appreciation of incessant change, we may experience inconsistency as a 'new order'; a new way of making sense of things; a different underlying structural and functional pattern. *We will tend to make more accurate evaluations and therefore make better decisions, become less confused about things, and generally orient and behave more 'intelligently'.*

In noticing more we see more and appreciate more, how things are connected and related; we learn more about relevant multi-leveled structures and their relations. By noticing relationships, structures, repeated patterns, how things interact, how things change, we become better at recognizing trends. We may become less embarrassed to ask questions. We typically become better at anticipating future possibilities. We consistently become better at dealing with new and trying situations, and anticipating, minimizing and resolving problems. *We become more functionally intelligent beings.* In becoming more sensitive to structures, processes and interrelationships, *we learn more about how ourselves, others, and the universe work.*

In being aware that we have not included all; in being aware that what we know, understand, and believe is not the same as whatever actually exists to be known, understood, or believed (our abstractions do not exist on the same level of reality as the things we abstract from or about); in being aware that no truth is the whole truth (no one can ever know everything about anything), *we become more capable critical thinkers.*

In being aware that the way we approach, think about, understand or do anything, is not the only way to think about or approach it, not the only possible orientation we can adopt, not the only way to do something (our nervous systems can never abstract 'all'), we have reason to appreciate knowing more.

We encounter additional incentives to become more imaginative, more speculative, more philosophical, more creative beings. In remembering that we don't know all, we become aware that *there are many other ways to interpret and understand anything.* We become sensitive to the possibility that there could be *many other meanings than the ones we have come up with so far.* Recognizing this, we do not identify the meanings we give to words and events as the only possible meanings, nor unconsciously assume that when others use our key terms they necessarily mean the same things that we do when we use them (we each have our own unique abstractions).

In remembering that we don't know all about how anything works, we are *not so easily*

surprised or disappointed. We do not get so quickly frustrated when things don't go our way or work as we expected because we know our expectations are only probabilities, our knowledge is uncertain and aging (becoming outdated) in every moment, so our reflexes become more resilient to unexpected outcomes and less jarred and unnerved by the surprises or shocks we experience.

When things don't go well with us—we more readily learn to go well with things as they are. In being more aware that we live in a world of interconnections, interactions, and changing relations embedded in dynamic living processes, we avoid thinking in terms of 'one cause one effect', realizing that typically many causes produce many effects. We become more sensitive to which 'cause' or 'causes' we select as a starting point or important grounds for resolving our problems. In a fast moving culture where quick results are expected, we often rush to treat the 'symptoms' (or the one, single cause of one specifically or 'artificially' isolated problem) rather than spending time researching some of the many possible underlying contributing factors.

In being conscious of abstracting, we develop flexibility in shifting to higher levels of abstraction—inferences about our inferences, reflections about our reflections, awareness about our awareness, an appreciation of the power of words (power as 'ability to influence change'), and also the inadequacy of words to cover all aspects of our experiences. Being conscious that things are not what we think-feel-say they are (our words are not the things we label, describe or infer with our language about them), we develop an appreciation of the importance of 'metaphor' (this is somewhat like that) operative in our sensory-cognitive-emotional processes.

So, for example, we can say that having consciousness at varying levels of abstraction is somewhat like climbing a hill or a mountain. At the top of the hill we have a higher perspective. We can see more territory, more connections and relations among more parts of the terrain. We can see more houses and neighborhoods, roads and cars and so forth. At the same time, from our exalted height of abstraction, we cannot see what's happening on our driveway. We may not even be able to see our own house. We can't tell what's happening in the bedroom. In fundamental ways we're farther away from the actual territory. We can, however, assess a larger scope or domain, a bigger picture, clearly and easily from our elevated perch.

Halfway up the hill we may be able to see who's talking to whom. Much closer to the bottom we may be able to actually hear what's being said in some of these conversations. We may not be able to actively engage in any these conversations unless we're at ground level. If we climb too high on a tall enough peak, become too abstract, (infer too many things about our inferences about our inferences) our ability to communicate with or even see others may become compromised by the fact that we're 'floating above the clouds'. These intervening 'clouds' we rise high above, can block our view downwards and prevent those down below from seeing us up above them. This is only intended, of course, as a metaphor for abstractions at higher and lower levels of order.

In actual daily living and in executing various projects, it's important to be able to shift up and down, to view our lives and situations from lower and higher levels of abstraction in a continually shifting dance of multiple perspectives. If we chronically view things from only one or two preferred levels of order, we typically run into serious problems of oversight, oversimplification, overcomplication, leaving crucially important factors out, paying too much

attention to functionally trivial details, and the like.

Knowing the various orders of abstraction exist and being conscious of them, offers us the opportunity to keep moving among them in our assessments, and to avoid getting stuck solely on any one or few of them. We can also avoid identifying different levels as the same level, or considering our mountaintop view as more important than what's happening in the kitchen when we're interested in eating dinner. Without being able to eat dinner when it's ready, our ability to be conscious of anything may eventually become impaired. All the levels our nervous systems abstract are important. Keeping them distinct and not confusing them with each other is what 'consciousness of abstracting', as a tool or method, is intended to help us get better at.

Remembering that *words are not the processes we use them to represent*, and that in our experiences we have invariably left out a great deal, we *practice a postulational, experimental, probabilistic, let's see what happens* approach. We work at expanding our vocabulary with consciously examined and carefully chosen terms as a way to modulate our abstractions and modify some of the ways we are influenced by our culturally expected ways of thinking, talking and behaving (see 'Chalice' at miltondawes.com for additional examples of consciously chosen vocabulary).

Progress of Science

Much of the progress of science can be attributed to scientists' explicit or implicit inclusion of many of the basic principles of 'consciousness of abstracting', such as non-allness (almost nothing we can know applies to all our experiences or to absolutely everything), non-identity (no two distinguishable things can be exactly the same in every way), non-elementalism (almost everything has discoverable relations with many other things) and others. These are some of the fundamental principles that the master principle of 'consciousness of abstracting' includes.

We find indications of this inclusion in the following: Einstein's theory of relativity in emphasizing the importance of the 'frame of reference of the observer'. People see things differently depending on their point of view and the particular context in which they are viewing it. Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty in its emphasis on 'the role played by the observer in measuring physical quantities and the natural limits of measurements'. We can never be 100% percent certain that we are seeing/observing/evaluating any object or event with complete and perfect accuracy and precision and our senses, our powers of observation themselves, have natural limits. Bohr's complementarity principle proposing that 'an experiment yields only a limited amount of information since other experiments will give other information hidden by the first experiment'. The things we learn raise new questions and shed new light on previously unrecognized issues we are now able to recognize we don't fully understand, or that we thought we knew better than we now believe we do. Field theories in terms of interconnectedness showing that 'bodies modify the structure of surrounding space and affect bodies entering that space'. Our bodily and energetic presence influences our situations and interactions and in some measure we influence what we observe with our attitudes, values, biases and expectations. And in general, 'the importance of experimentation, theories, the revision and refinement of theories, and continuing experimentation to verify the accuracy of continuing revisions and refinements'.

We could also present the master principle 'consciousness of abstracting' in the form of a mathematical metaphor: $ct/3 = f(ct/n)$ where 'ct/3' represents the 'non-all-non-identity-non-atomistic' awareness as a result of applying 'f' which represents the functioning of consciousness of abstracting, 'ct' represents a specific instance of consciousness in time, and 'n' represent a specific point or moment in time.

Let ct/1 represent an instance of consciousness at time '1', some experience, something seen or heard, an idea, a memory, etc. ct/2 represents consciousness of abstracting acting on our experience at time '2', and ct/3 represents the ongoing progression of awareness as we continue to 'abstract', to form opinions and conclusions about our experiences. The functioning of consciousness of abstracting heightens our awareness that our conclusions and interpretations occur at specific times and dates, never include everything, are never identical with previous or subsequent interpretations, and occur in a continuing, spontaneous modification of the limitations and ongoing progression of our learnings and evolving awareness.

We become conscious of having abstracted minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years after a given abstraction at a specific date and time. With practice, there is no gap in our awareness. 'ct/1' is instantly followed by 'ct/2' and 'ct/3' indicating that we remain aware of the partiality, incompleteness and 'internal personal factors' continually modifying our awareness, perceptions and interpretations. In other words, we become increasingly 'conscious of abstracting'.

We Harm Ourselves Through Our Usual Ways of Thinking

Our 'allness-identifying-non-conscious of abstracting' ways of orienting contribute to our creating political, economic, social, educational, and other institutions with shaky foundations. Similar to the fate of a bridge or building built ignoring many relevant physical factors of nature, many of our institutions can be expected to collapse or become problematic at specific times and in certain contexts.

Our governments, institutions, organizations, agencies, policies, and more, emerge from, and are usually built upon a 'firm foundation' of human beliefs, fears, currently popular values, non-scientific 'theories', untested ideas and ideologies, unconscious and/or intentionally hidden agendas, and other uncertainties. Unconscious of our abstractions and their inherent incompleteness (never all-inclusive), we reinforce, repair, and shore them up with ad-hoc constructs and related truth-defying practices, rather than reconstruct, repair, and operate following what we understand presently from science, anthropology, history, psychology and other disciplines about how humans, human societies, and 'the universe' work.

Since our problem-solving efforts are usually informed by and grounded in our usual allness-identifying-atomistic (as contrasted with 'holistic') ways of thinking, we reflexively establish more and more inefficient and ineffective institutions, organizations, agencies, and so on—often compounding our problems and multiplying the challenges we face.

Consequently, as a species, and as individuals, we find ourselves spiraling to higher and higher levels of simplistic, foolish, violent, and unsane behaviors. We could benefit from being conscious of abstracting by including in our awareness the power that the social-political-

educational-economic-media and other structures we have created, have over us (for some examples Google 'media ecology examples').

To gain the above benefits, and many others you may discover on your own, conscious abstracting and consciousness of abstracting have to be continually practiced so they become ingrained as *automatic interferers and interveners* in our sensory, cognitive and emotional processes.

Constant practice becomes necessary if we are going to minimize the harmful and distressing effects of many of our usual culturally conditioned ways of thinking-feeling-talking about things, others and ourselves. Our usual, habitually automatic ways of thinking require no practice. When consciousness of abstracting becomes habitual and we practice it by reflex, we enhance our creativity. We critique our thinking, beliefs and values, expand our intelligence and, with continuing application, become better at being human—better in terms of being 'conscious of abstracting' and in reaping the benefits we derive from practicing these specific disciplines and principles of orientation.

Engage Consciousness of Abstracting

Remember to consider all the above as abstractions *representing a 'theory' and tools/methods* based on the master principle 'consciousness of abstracting', a principle to be applied as an overall behavioral modifier *to be used* (not just talked about) as a way to improve ourselves and our social, political, economic, and other environments.

For more about 'consciousness of abstracting' including many real world examples and clear, simple diagrams, see *Unlocking The Allowable-Thought Cage Imprisoning Our Imaginations* by Michael A Green at <http://bit.ly/UnlockTheCage> or learn more at theallowablethoughtcage.com.