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Susanne K. Langer's Philosophy of Mind

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I find it significant that Susanne K. Langer's earlier work on art and symbolism, particularly *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942) and *Feeling and Form* (1953), received a significantly more positive reception than her three-volume work *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967-1982). Her earlier works were very enthusiastically received and even now, many years later, continue to have an influence.[1] On the other hand, her later work explicitly dedicated to "mind," received, it seems to me, a decidedly less enthusiastic response. Apart from some who appreciate her work as prefiguring recent advances in biological science, there has not been a significant response from the philosophical community.

Why is this? Why the different reception? In a short paper on Langer's "philosophy of mind" I can only give a brief account of my own analysis; but I am convinced that her later work is not about mind but rather about the biological conditions for the emergence of mind. On the other hand, her earlier writings on art and symbolism gave more scope to what is specifically human in human mentality, and that is the source of the continuing interest in those early writings.

My presentation will consist in three parts: first, the intellectual character of artistic consciousness in her early work; secondly, her writings on "mind" in her later work; and finally, an overall evaluation.

1. The Centrality of "Understanding" in Langer's Early Work

There were several basic philosophical influences on Langer's early

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work. The first was the modern studies of logic epitomized by the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of Wittgenstein. Throughout Langer's writings I find the ghost of the early Wittgenstein: philosophy is a clarification and construction of concepts with the aim of arriving at one unifying language, one "conceptual system," that somehow will relate all our various languages to science. "Science," never explicitly analyzed, is the one outside limit of our knowledge. This assumption that we can construct some basic language that will logically unite all the various sciences and all the various languages, I find throughout Langer's work. Wittgenstein, of course, abandoned this view of philosophy in favor of incommensurable "ordinary language games," and in the last pages of *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* Langer complains about his "despairing resort to behaviorism."[2]

This idea of philosophy as the "logical construction" of basic concepts to bring them in line with science is connected in Langer's thought with a commitment to a certain type of naturalism.

> That man is an animal I certainly believe; and also that he has no supernatural essence, "soul," or "entelechy" or "mind-stuff," enclosed in his skin. He is an organism, his substance is chemical, and what he does, suffers, or knows, is just what this sort of chemical structure may do, suffer, or know. When the structure goes to pieces, it never does, suffers, or knows anything again.[3]

At the same time, in Langer's early work her *praxis* is not just one of conceptual clarification in order to bring other languages into line with scientific language. In fact, she is intent on standing up to those who would say that science alone represents the intellectual character of the human person and she seeks to vindicate the intellectual character of symbolic and artistic consciousness.

And here we find a further influence on her early work and that is the neo-Kantian, Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* helped her to focus on what she called the "unlogicized" areas of life, such as myth, ritual and art. Thus, in her 1942 *Philosophy in a New*

Key Langer sought to extend the vision of "logical philosophy" by insisting on the "intellectual" character of these non-scientific areas of human life. Contrary to "empiricist," "positivistic," behavioristic" positions, Langer held that artistic creations were not merely emotive expressions of present feelings; they are symbols of what transcends the present. Far from being "signals" of immediately present objects, they mediate meanings that are beyond the here and now.

This analysis of symbols as properly intellectual and not reducible to immediate sense perception or emotive response is extended to all art forms in ***Feeling and Form***. There two elements stand out. On the one hand, Langer emphasizes the fact that each area of art involves an "aesthetic illusion," that is, as she puts it, the very being of aesthetic forms is ***to be perceived***. "They exist only for the sense or imagination that perceives them;" their perceptible character is their entire being.[4] Events recounted in a story are "as bad as they sound." As T.S.Eliot put it: "You are the music while the music lasts."

But ***Feeling and Form*** makes another point with equal emphasis. The creation of a work of art involves, not just feeling-influenced aesthetic experience, but also the ***idealization*** of experience, the grasp of what is important in experience ***as important***, and its objectification in a work of art. Such objectification is a properly human and necessary element in art. Prior to this creative act of symbolization the aesthetic patterns are not fully and humanly known.[5] Objective expression is necessary for the artists to "hold," to "fix," to "contemplate," to "understand," the forms of their free, feeling-influenced, aesthetic experience.[6]

Art, therefore, belongs to the same category as language. It is intellectual. The appreciation of a work of art involves a mental shift as radical as the change from hearing noises to hearing speech.[7] The work of art effects the same sort of reorientation. Just as sounds become words by reason of their "meaning," so colors on a canvas become a painting because of their artistic significance or "import." This import permeates the whole structure of the work and separates it from the host of surrounding "insignificant" objects.[8]

Consequently, the "otherness" of the artistic is due not only to

its aesthetic character whereby experience, liberated from other more practically oriented patterns of consciousness, lives its own life; but also to the fact that it has been "created" by human intelligence and invites human intellectual apprehension. Langer is quite clear in asserting that art involves not only the level of perception and experience, but also the level of insight, understanding, contemplation.

> The aim of art is *insight*, understanding the essential life of feeling.[9]
> The artistic symbol, *qua* artistic, negotiates insight, not reference.[10]

Analyses of art very frequently fail to take into account this intellectual character. On the contrary, they consider art chiefly in terms of immediate experience and/or, most frequently, immediate emotion. The insufficiency of this tendency is in fact the major emphasis in the chapters on art in *Philosophy in a New Key* and in *Feeling and Form*. Art is the intellectual creation for our contemplation of an affect-laden image that liberates us from the demands of practical life and immediate emotion.

2. *"Mind" in Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*

It would seem that Langer's work on art confronted her with the following dilemma: how are we to reconcile intelligence, operative in artistic creativity, with "feeling," somehow involved in artistic expression? That these two realms could be reconciled represented her faith in "the unity of science, one and the same scientific framework underlying all areas of empirical research."[11] A cardinal assumption of *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* was that ultimately that one framework would form a logical continuity with the science of physics; for "any science," she notes, "is likely to merge ultimately with physics as chemistry has done."[12] This is a major assumption behind Langer's work: that there is a logical and conceptual continuity between all the sciences.

According to Langer the function of philosophy is to clarify lan-

guage in an effort to unify the languages of the different sciences.[13] As physics deals with matter, *res extensa*, so also do the other sciences, although at a higher degree of complexity.[14] In biology Langer's major adversary is vitalism:

> the conception of 'life' as a special essence different from 'matter,' something that pervades 'living matter,' and sets it apart from 'mere matter' which obeyed the laws of physics.[15]

In order to attain the logical coherence of biology with physics, Langer assumes from the latter realm the basic concept of "natural event;" on this foundation she is able to construct the basic biological notion of "act" as a particular sort of event. This concept has the advantage of not implying the prior notion of "agent," and thus allows one to trace the origins of life in the inorganic world; for "action," the formal aspect of "act," is common to both living and nonliving beings.

If Langer's basic argument for the reduction of biology to physics is the *a priori* conviction that this must form one conceptual framework around the one object, "matter," she feels called upon to proffer particular evidence for the biological status of "feeling." She finds this evidence in art. Invoking her own artistic studies, she comes to the conclusion regarding feeling:

> the fact that expressive form is always organic or "living" form made the biological foundation of feeling probable.[16]

For the work of art is the objective realization of a mental image; and images reflect the biological sources from which they spring. Psychologists, therefore, must go to artists to learn about feeling, because art is a final symbolic form making revelations of truths and facts about feeling, precisely the truths and facts that literal scientific statement distorts. Once the artist has created the work of art, the image of feelings, we may talk about them scientifically; "but only artistic perception can find them and judge them real in the first place."[17]

In my doctoral dissertation on Langer's philosophy of art and an extended review of the first volume of *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* I analyzed Langer's deeply held assumptions concerning the nature of human knowing.[18] Basically, in her view knowing is a bipolar activity in which the "concepts" of scientific or philosophical thinking are the subjective pole, "matter" is the objective pole, and some type of vision or "looking" is the mediating activity.

Thus we "see" forms of feeling in works of art; and in metaphorical activity we "see one thing in another," life in the candle flame, death in sleep, etc.. This, she asserts, is the basis of all "higher" differentiated activity. But she never analyzes "higher" differentiated activity to verify whether it is indeed a fact that human knowing consists essentially in "seeing." Every example of mind Langer uses is of undifferentiated consciousness, that is, mythical, metaphorical and symbolic understanding. In these activities feeling and imagination obviously blend into the pronouncements of intelligence.

> The power of seeing one thing in another, which begets our metaphors and conceptual models (the oldest of which are myths of nature and human life), leads also to a characteristically human thought process known as abstraction. By logical intuition we see not only what is "the same" in two widely different things, as for instance a burning candle consumed by its flame and a living body consumed by its life, but also what makes them different. As soon as the differences are clearly recognized, the common element stands out against them and can be conceived alone as that which both of those different things exhibit. In this way the concept, e.g. "matter being consumed by its own activity," is abstracted.[19]

It is on the basis of her assumptions regarding scientific knowing, therefore, that Langer arrives at the hypothesis that feeling, globally including all subjective, conscious, mental activity, is merely a heightened form of biological activity, itself a complexus of reducible to electro-chemical events. Feeling is matter at its most complex.[20]

It is not another "thing," "entity" or separate "substance," but rather a phase of biological process which passes above a certain limen of intensity so that the living tissue "feels" its own activity.[21] To clarify the assertion that feeling is not a "thing," she notes that it is similar to the reflection of a tree in a pool of water; just as the reflection is not another "thing," but the tree's appearance, so feeling is merely the appearance which organic functions have for the organism in which they occur.[22]

By defining "feeling" as "appearance," she apparently believes that she has "solved" the problem of consciousness. My own conviction is that rather than solving the "problem" of consciousness, she has merely(by a bit of conceptual legerdemain) "defined" it away!

As Langer reaches the end of her three-volume work, she seems to be aware that she has left something out — a dimension that because of age and failing eyesight she is not able to treat.

> This study of mind should culminate, of course, in a well-constructed epistemological and possibly even metaphysical theory, at least as firmly founded on other people's knowledge and hypotheses as any earlier parts of this essay which have been written in preparation for such a reflective conclusion. But the hindrances of age — especially increasing blindness — make it necessary to curtail the work at what should be its height...[23]

The final short section that does complete her work continues what she has been emphasizing throughout her work: her effort to show the origins of differentiated thought in undifferentiated activity. That is, our human awareness of "number," the origins of mathematics, originates in dance as the "number sense" is transferred from feet to hands by the beat of the drum. These types of analyses are, I would say, symptomatic of her whole work: that is, it is an effort to explain all human "higher level" activities — mathematics, science, morality, religion — by a single-minded focussing on the biological conditions that prefigured the emergence of those higher level activities.

3. Evaluation of Langer on Mind

The Canadian philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, was once asked about "the biological basis of thought." He replied:

> The biological basis of thought, I should say, is like the rubber-tire basis of the motor car. It conditions and sets limits to functioning, but under the conditions and within the limits the driver directs operations.[24]

Lonergan's own work, especially his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, is a generalized empirical method that explores not just the data of sense, as is Langer's exclusive emphasis, but also the data of human consciousness, *especially* the data of scientific consciousness. By *beginning* with the analysis of scientific method, you are in the best position for framing the question of what in fact you are talking about when you speak of "mind." By highlighting the structure of scientific consciousness right from the beginning Langer might have been in a better position to highlight what she had emphasized in her early work, the intellectual and creative activity of human consciousness.

If Langer had followed this path, she might have clarified right from the start the fact that the sciences are not linked purely logically, but rather methodologically: they involve operations that go beyond logic. Scientific method includes more than the logical operations of describing, formulating and deducing concepts; it moves beyond this group to include the activities of inquiry, observation, discovery, experiment, synthesis, verification. A careful analysis of this set of human operations illustrates the fact that modern science derives its distinctive character from the grouping together of logical and non-logical operations. The logical tend to consolidate what has been achieved. The non-logical keep all achievement open to further advance. The conjunction of the two results in an open, ongoing, progressive and cumulative process.[25]

I am not saying that Langer herself was not a very intelligent woman. Nor am I denying that in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*

she has made some contribution to analyzing the biological systems and activities that provide some of the conditions for the emergence of "mind" from underlying levels. I would leave it to the biologists to determine her contribution. But as Arthur Danto noted in the Foreword to the abridged edition of ***Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling***, Langer's commitment to survey all the relevant science,

> ...resulted in an unwieldy book and one, moreover, in hostage to its empirical materials, which in the nature of scientific advance went out of date...[26]

Nevertheless, although much of what Langer relates of empirical science might in fact go out of date or be set within a new context, still "there is no revising the reviser." That is, there is a structure to scientific method according to which some positions will be judged inadequate and other new ones will be judged more on the mark. Underlying scientific advance there is the invariant yet dynamic structure of scientific consciousness.[27]

In other words, one cannot feel one has "explained" the human mind when one has elucidated the underlying biological conditions for the emergence of mind. "Mind" is a level of functioning and reality in its own right and one should analyze that functioning before assuming that it can be "logically" assimilated to "feeling" and the levels of biological research.

In a response to the first draft of this paper I was asked if all naturalisms, including Langer's, are necessarily reductive? I would reply that a naturalism (that is, a philosophy that takes empirical science seriously) need not be reductive if it ***asks all the relevant questions*** and does not declare certain questions out of bounds: the nature of human intelligence, consciousness, etc.. After focussing on artistic consciousness in her early writings, I find that the method Langer employed in ***Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*** prevented her from focussing on human conscious activity in its most differentiated exercise. When one is treating of human consciousness, one cannot feel that one has "explained" human questioning, insight,

freedom, conscience, culture, politics, religion, etc., when one has identified some of the conditions for the emergence of these realities. In fact, these realities, as any higher level realities are not "logically" reducible to the conditions for their emergence.

Although Langer is opposed to the crass reductionism of nineteenth century determinism, hers is a less crass but still reductionistic procedure:

1) define "mind" as undifferentiated artistic, mythical or metaphorical consciousness where visual imagination, feeling and "seeing" are prominent;
2) offer as an "explanation" of mind the highlighting of the biological conditions for the emergence of mind.

I believe that it is for these chiefly methodological flaws that Langer's later work received a significantly less enthusiastic response than her earlier fine work on art.

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NOTES

1. I am told that *Philosophy in a New Key* has been the largest selling paperback in the history of the Harvard University Press. And in twenty-two volumes of *The Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, now being published by the University of Toronto Press, Langer's *Feeling and Form* holds a prominent role for its analysis of aesthetic and artistic consciousness. Cf. especially Volume 10, *Topics in Education* where the ninth chapter (pages 108-232) is dedicated to interpreting Langer's philosophy of art.

2. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* III (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 206.

3. *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1942] third ed 1957) 44. Cf. *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953) 129.

4. *Feeling and Form*, 48, 50. This is an interesting illustration of Aristotle's dictum in the *De Anima* that knowledge is rooted in identity: "sense in act is the sensible in act; intellect in act is the intelligible in act." (*De Anima* III, 431b). In aesthetic experience there is an identity of subject and object. *Feeling and Form* emphasized a type of knowing that takes place, not primarily through confrontation, but through identity.

5. *Ibid.*, 389.

6. *Philosophical Sketches* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962) 80; *Problems of Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1957) 24-25; 68; 94-95.

7. *Feeling and Form*, 84.

8. *Ibid.*, 52.

9. *Problems of Art*, 92; cf. *Philosophy in a New Key*, 188.

10. *Feeling and Form*, 22.

11. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* I, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins) 262.

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

13. Cf. Michael H. McCarthy, *The Crisis of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990) on the history of analytical philosophy.

14. Perhaps a clue to this change in Langer's own understanding of mind can be gathered from two quotes from her writings, some thirty years apart. In a very early work of 1930 she makes the statement that modern physics, Einstein's reinterpretation of nature, has made the traditional mind-body problem seem somewhat naive; it has dissolved the Cartesian division of reality into *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, since "it does not operate with *res extensa*." *The Practice of Philosophy* (NY: Henry Holt, 1930) 198. Some thirty years later, however, she has changed her mind on the Cartesian equation: "The metaphysical status of "feeling," "contents of consciousness," "subjectivity," or of the private aspects of experience generally, has been an asses' bridge to philosophers ever since Descartes treated *res extensa* and *res cogitans* as irreducible and incommensurable substances. The physical scientists have not encountered this dilemma because their entire interest lies in physical phenomena, *res extensa*." *Philosophical Sketches* (New York: New American Library, 1964) 11.

15. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* I, 316.

16. *Ibid.*, 19.

17. *Ibid.*, 81.

18. Cf. Richard M. Liddy, *Art and Feeling: An Analysis and Critique of the Philosophy of Art of Susanne K. Langer* (Rome: 1970; listed in *Dissertation Abstracts*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1971); also review of Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, Vol I, in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, n.3 (1970) 481-484.

19. *Philosophical Sketches*, 133.

20. *Ibid.*, 67.

21. *Ibid.*, 27-29.

22. *Ibid.*, 15; 30.

23. *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* III, 201.

24. Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972) 35.

25. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) 6.

26. Arthur C. Danto, "Foreword," Susanne K. Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, abridged edition by G. Van den Heuvel (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) vi.

27. Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) Chapter 11, "The Self-Affirmation of the Knower," 343-371. In this work Lonergan analyzes the structures of classical and statistical scientific questioning, outlines a world-view of "emergent probability" that flows from the combination of those structures in the various areas of scientific research and roots all methods of questioning in the consciousness of the human subject.