

Common Sense

A Journal of a wholly new type




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Common Sense

Issue No. 6 (November 1988)

Contents

The seventh issue of Common Sense will appear in March 1989. Deadline for contributions mid- January.

Notes for contributors: send articles in clean typscript, single-space or space-and-a-half (not double-space). Leave wide margin on both sides, and wide gaps at top and bottom. Start first page half way down.

Contact address: Werner Bonefeld, 16 Keir St. Edinburgh, Telephone: 031 228 1669. Richard Gunn, Telephone 031 667 1011 ext. 6660. Richard Norris, Telephone 031 442 4023.

Subscriptions: send cheques in multiples of two pounds sterling, made out to Common Sense, to the above address.

Common Sense Editorial

Previous editorials have explained in what sense Common Sense is 'a journal of a wholly new type'. The fundamental idea is that of a journal which is a relay-station for the exchange of critical ideas. Most journals (the trade-journals of academia, for example) derive their self-legitimation from resources of authority, finance or prestige. In other words they talk down. They encapsulate a division of labour as between the sacred space of academic discourse (most of which goes forward on increasingly narrow and conformist tracks) and the mundane space of the rest-of-the-world. Further, they reproduce a division of labour as between those who write and those who read.

Common Sense stands opposed to a social division of labour in all its forms. As a relay-station, it invites those who read to write and those who write to read. In the 1930's, Walter Benjamin (following Brecht) wrongly declared that the letter pages of mass circulation newspapers might have this function. Common Sense picks up where Benjamin left off.

Breaking down the social division of labour between universities and society is now more necessary than ever before. This has been demonstrated not least by the sequence of suicides amongst Aberdeen academics during the Autumn of 1988. On the other side, it has to be recognised that Thatcher's education cuts, and her government's application of managerial criteria to universities has the effect of

driving university-based debate on to ever more conformist lines. If one's job depends on productivity as to publications, and if only the academic trade-journals count as publication-forums from this productivist perspective, then the temptation is of course to contribute to existing debates as a means of ensuring that the journals concerned are interested in what one writes. Changing the terms of debate becomes a more risky business, something that the aspirating career-academic cannot afford to do. This matter would be less serious if the debates in political theory to which academics are encouraged to devote themselves were critical ones. In the event, they are debates whose agenda has been set by Thatcherism itself. Hatred of market economies is unfashionable; all that is allowed is discussion of in what way markets can be either used or abused.

Common Sense responds to this conjuncture by setting its own agenda. Its agenda is that of 'critical theory' in all the various meanings of that term. It allows itself to hate what others, conformistically, feel they have to endorse. Thus it clears a space. It opens on to a terrain where neither academic/non-academic nor writer/reader distinctions apply. You can read Common Sense and/or write for it. Better still, found just such a minimalist magazine of your own. Prise the life of the mind away from those who should know better than to want to control it. Sever truth from careers. The project of Common Sense will have succeeded when a network of similar journals covers the land.

An Introduction to Susanne Langer's Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling

Norah Martin

Susanne Langer is best known for her work in the field of aesthetics as developed in *Philosophy In A New Key* and *Feeling And Form*. Her final book, however, is *Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling*, the three volumes of which trace the evolution of mind from the earliest micro-organisms to man in the age of science and beyond. It is in this book that we find her "system" - the completed statement of her work which was only implicit in her previous works.

I

Mrs. Langer is led to the enormous undertaking of *Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling* by her aesthetic theory. In *Philosophy In A New Key* and *Feeling And Form* she finds that there are rational forms of expression which are not discursive (i.e., not expressed in speech or speech in its written form). Non-discursive presentations do not express *thoughts* because thought is discursive (i.e., linguistic) by its very nature. Instead they express *feelings* and thereby make those feelings rational. The feelings expressed in non-discursive form - in poetry, dance, painting, etc. - are not the same as those *evoked* in the observer of such a presentation, nor is it necessarily a feeling in the artist's experience as such. A work of art concerning the death of a lover, for example, does not mean that the artist has necessarily lost a lover, or that he has ever even been a lover. It may simply be an expression of the feeling evoked by such a possibility.

We often judge a person's intelligence by how well he expresses himself in the discursive mode. But there are some people who express themselves poorly in speech who express themselves very well in non-discursive forms. Bruce Springstein, for example, is seldom articulate in interviews but his music and performance belie this fact. How are we to understand such people and just what are these feelings that cannot be expressed discursively?

II

Mrs. Langer says, "feeling in the broad sense of whatever is felt in any way, as sensory stimulus or inward tension, pain, emotion or intent, is the mark of mentality."[1] An examination of feeling could then only be an examination of mind and vice versa. She goes on to say,

> ...the phenomenon usually described as 'a feeling' is really that an organism feels something, i.e. something is felt. What is felt is a process, perhaps a large complex of processes, within the organism. Some vital activities of great complexity and high intensity, usually (perhaps always) involving nervous tissue, are felt; being felt is a phase of the process itself. A phase is a mode of appearance, and not an

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[1] Langer, *Mind*, v.1, p.4

added factor.[2]

The human mind is simply a greater intensity of feeling than is found further down the evolutionary ladder. Mind, like other forms of feeling, is a *process*, not a *thing*, it is an activity and *is* only in so far as it acts. In *Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling* Langer follows this process that will eventually become mind as we know it today beginning with the emergence of the first coazervates from the "primordial soup" and ending with the future of mind beyond the 20th century human mind for, according to Langer, the mind is still young and the process of its evolution will continue for a long time to come unless we end it by ending life on our planet.

III

Such an investigation requires Langer to use a great deal of scientific evidence. She draws heavily from the fields of biology, biochemistry, ethology and anthropology. The principle that drives the evolution of mind is, however, the dynamic tension between the tendency toward individuation and that toward involvement - a principle that is as much philosophical as biological. The tension between these two tendencies is mediated by the act. We must therefore understand her concept of the act to be able to see how this tension can lead us from isolated chemical actions to the pleuthora of life as we know it.

Mrs. Langer says that an act, when viewed from its center, has to be treated as indivisible, otherwise its center as such would be lost. The act also cannot be homogeneous but must have an internal structure. "The many relations among acts," she says, "form the intricate dynamism of life which becomes more and more concatenated and intense, until some of its elements attain the phase of being felt..."[3] Mrs. Langer calls this phase of being felt "psychical" and says that "the domain of psychology develops within the wider realm of biology, especially zoology."[4] In other words, it is the increasing complexity and intensity of the relations between acts that gives rise to higher and higher forms of life, including man. She says that to ask where life begins is to ask what the most primitive full-fledged acts are.

In order to ask the question in this way the act cannot entail the assumption of an agent. The agent is, in fact, constituted by acts which are involved with one another. She says that to construe the agent in terms of acts "allows one to inquire into the origin and development of life, the rise of psychical phenomena in the animalian branch and the evolution of the ... mind, in a scientific way that the initial assumption of a physical, psychical or 'psychophysical' entity, the subject, agent or indvidual does not lay open."[5]

The question of how these acts become agents and how agents are able to acts gives rise to the concepts of individuation and involvement. She finds that to trace the

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[2]Ibid, p.21

[3]Ibid, p.261

[4]Ibid, p.261

[5]Ibid, p.307

mind from the earliest forms of life she requires a functional concept rather than a categorical one such as individual, self or organism. The most promising operational principles for this are individuation and its converse, involvement. Both of these are exemplified everywhere in nature in processes that eventuate in the existence of self-identical organisms.[6]

We can now see how agents are formed by the concatentation or linking together of acts. An agent is a complex of actions and all actions that belong to that complex are acts of that agent. Non-vital chemical transformations themselves are not acts because they do not enter into the constitution of an agent. The involvement of the acts at the same time individuates the agent from its environment. Such an involvement creates a structure or matrix which allows the newly constructed agent to individuate itself further by new acts which arise from the matrix of acts that is the agent. The principles of individuation and involvement are, as is already becoming clear, opposed, yet interdependent, in more ways than simply balancing each other or alternating. This rather complex relation will perhaps become clearer when we consider the origin of life.

IV

Mrs. Langer says, "The question of the origin of organisms is how some of the chemical actions on the surface of the earth or in its surrounding gaseous envelope ever became involved with each other so as to form centers of activity which maintained themselves for awhile amid the changes of forming and dissolving compounds around them."[7] In other words, how did these chemical actions ever become involved with each other so as to form agents (and thus become acts)?

A.P. Oparin, in his *Origin Of Life* (1936), made three novel hypotheses:

1. The origin of vital processes was a heightening of chemical actions rather than a "living spark"

2. Past, not present, conditions of the earth's surface was the environment for such changes

3. The phenomenon of "life" is a wide, varied and unbelievably complex functional pattern rather than a single attribute or essence which either is or is not possessed by any given physical object.[8]

Oparin says that the first pre-requisite for complex structures is an isolated and bounded region in which chemical changes can happen to a self-identical substance. The first such particles are called 'coazervates' and are a sort of colloidal gel (which is a non-crystalline substance with very large molecules forming a viscous solution). According to Oparin, as recounted by Langer, coazervates are quite likely to have

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[6]Ibid, p.310

[7]Ibid, p.315

[8]Ibid, pp.316-17

formed in the earth's early hydrosphere and to have possessed many properties and potentialities to make them forerunners of primitive living things. In coazervates, unlike other colloidal particles, the water molecules are drawn to and collect around their envelope of equilibrium liquid thus creating a real shell around the little two-phase particle.

Here we have a bounded, inwardly active particle - a self-identical substance that eventually increases in complexity. We then have the formation of "patterned activities and their more and more perfect integration until they constitute a matrix in which their own form becomes modified or even entirely blurred, so it can only be found again in analytic abstraction."[9] These are living matrices and are self-sustaining and self-propagating systems in which every "event is prepared by progressively changing conditions of the integral whole. Every distinguishable change, therefore, arises out of the matrix, and emerges as an act of an agent, for such a vital matrix is an agent."[10]

At this stage the principle of involvement was clearly dominant. Mrs. Langer goes on to say,

> there must have been strong ruling tendencies toward organization, which led to increasing formation of biological mechanisms. The most important factor in that process, the main source of all functional continuity, must have been the establishment of rhythms. Rhythmic concatentation is what really holds an organism together from moment to moment, it is a dynamic pattern, i.e. a pattern of events, into which acts and act-like phenomena readily fall: a sequence wherein the subsiding phase, or cadence, of one act (or similar event) is the take up for its sucessor. It occurs in non-vital as well as vital processes, but in the latter it is paramount, and reaches degrees of differentiation and intensity unrivaled by anything in the animate realm. [11]

Mrs. Langer calls this rhythm "dialectical rhythm" - it is characterized by contradictory actions such as push and pull. "Dialectical rhythms," she says, "are the essential mark of living form in nature."[12] From the moment of initiation the agent performs vital acts in systematic ways thus making its more and more deeply involved matrix, its life (as agent).

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[9]Ibid, p.322

[10]Ibid, p.322

[11]Ibid, p.323

[12]Ibid, p.324

V

> Heredity is the primary involvement of every organism with other organisms; not with a 'kind' distinguished by characteristic traits, but with a stock defined by its own actual descent and its resultant common ancestry with some - possibly all - others of its taxonomic 'kind.' The stock is the largest natural unit of life.[13]

In the dynamism of these continous stocks the act form exhibits not only the principle of progressive involvement, but also the converse principle of individuation because each 'member' of the stock has to some extent individuated itself. The history of the stock proceeds by cycles of sucessive individuations all exemplifying the general pattern of acts.[14]

"The internal involvement of acts, with each other, known as 'integration of functions,' is the most important factor in individuation, i.e. in the establishment of self-contained, stable, vitally active systems."[15] There is often, however, debate as to the single or colonial status of an organic complex. A Portuguese man-of-war, for example, is thought of by the layman as a single creature but it is actually a complex of separate creatures working together. A termite colony, on the other hand, is considered a colony of separate organisms even though the functions of the individual termites are so specialized that they can exist only as a community. The termites are, in fact, only semi-indivduated organisms.

Progressive individuation is not the sole principle of evolution. Individuation can only occur in a framework of active involvements with the generating stock and with the ambient world. The means of individuation, such as aggression against other individuals, often lead to new involvements which become paramount, as with organisms that exploit others to the point of becoming completely dependent on them.

VI

Evolution is then primarily a development of acts which are always both individuating and involving. An organism is built up by its own acts and any situation in which it finds itself is the result of all previous acts while its present acts create a new or changed situation. Langer says that the living organism is not a "pre-designed object" but an "embodied drama of evolving acts, intricately prepared by the past, yet all improvising their moves to consummation."[16]

The outer surface of an organism is what both separates it from, and connects it with, its surroundings. This outer surface is kept in constant action. Mrs. Langer says that this constant activity is probably what engenders the first acts of such intensity that

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[13]Ibid, p.330

[14]Ibid, p.328

[15]Ibid, p.342

[16]Ibid, p.378

they enter a psychical phase, "a moment of intraorganic appearance as sensation."[17] Sensory acts are then the first acts to be felt and it is here where feeling, which was implicit from the beginning, becomes explicit as sensation.

With the increase of acts which at some point in their passage enter a psychical phase, a creature's behavioral actions fall under the influence of its felt encounters and become organized to anticipate repetitions of such episodes; more and more behavior comes to be guided and developed by feeling, which at this level Langer thinks would be better termed 'awareness.'[18] The growth of behavior is the growth of acts beyond the development of the matrix of acts which is the organism itself and its internal functions. 'Consciousness' is "not an entity at all, let alone a special cybernetic mechanism. It is a condition built up out of mental acts, especially a qualitative aspect shared by all the mental acts of a particular life episode..."[19]

With this Langer takes us through the animal world of felt sensation, of behavior, of 'consciousness,' of instinct, leading us from feeling to mind, which is a more concatenated and intense activity than is feeling. For Langer mind is a specialization just as the elephant's trunk or the opposable thumb are specializations. Mind is a specialization of the brain.

According to Langer, the difference between man's mentality and that of the beast is

> the production and use of symbols and their paramount value in all our further mental functions, their distinction from the alleged 'signals' of animalian communication and from symptoms or other indicators, and the subjective-objective dialectical pattern that builds up 'experience' of the human sort.[20]

Mrs. Langer describes a bi-pedal hominid whose brain has grown and re-organized to the point where images appear to him in sleep because he is able to take in more sensory data than he is able to process during the day. These images are sometimes suddenly remembered during the waking hours. This is the first moment at which these hominids become qualitatively different from any other animal, for "in animal mentality, objects seem to figure essentially in situations, and derive their characters from them and the acts they implement or hinder. Otherwise they may not be noticed, certainly not touched."[21] Once the pure form is abstracted from these images and remembered, "it may be suggested by actual perceptions of waking life; the identity of form is seen in all possible concrete instances, even such as depart somewhat from the model. That recognition of sameness or similarity is an intuition, as form perception itself is; but while the latter is just practiced in sleep, the logical intuition of similarity, which involves sameness and differences, seems to occur only

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[17] Ibid, p.424

[18] *Ibid*, p.425

[19] Ibid, p.438

[20] Langer, *Mind* v.2, p.261

[21] Ibid, p.290

in non-dreaming states."[22] The symbolic character of a dreamer's involuntary fantasies is carried over into waking envisagement. The significance of such fantastic objects is felt at first as a power rather than a symbolic value. It is around such objects, Mrs. Langer says, that the hominid hordes first gathered in a state of excitement. The tendency to formalize runs through all acts and those of the excited hordes are no exception. It is this formalization of the emotionally engendered movements of the horde that gives rise to ritual action and speech.

VII

Geza Revesz draws a distinction between the physical contacts of animals and the mental contacts which men strike and maintain by symbolic communication. Contact between animals is almost a physiological condition, a felt communion of action, emotion and desire;

> in man that communion is progressively weakened by the growing tendency to individuation which comes with the increase in mental activity that eventuates in dream, fantasy, memory images and the mechanisms of symbolic transformation, the fatal specialty of the human brain.... But even as we lost the old empathetic bonds, the symbolic function has moved into the place of our broken instinctive unity.[23]

Mrs. Langer believes that speech is born in high reaches of proto-human activity, such as ritual dance, and "gathered form when one individual knew by the symbolic utterance of another what the other was thinking about. For with such concentrated expression came real envisagement, the beginning of reflection, thought."[24] With the development of language came its quotidian uses which contributed to further development. "The rise of language in the Homindae," says Langer, "marked the completion of the 'Great Shift' from animal to man. The power of speech transformed the genus *Homo* and every aspect of its ambient; for with speech came thought and remembrance, intuition, conception and reason."[25]

For Langer language is essential for society and social organization. The influence of language on human life goes much deeper than communication; it is intrinsic to thinking, imagining and even our ways of perceiving. Language "affects the whole mentality of each individual, making him the human being that he is..."[26] "The power of language," she goes on to say, "not only to designate things and communicate facts, but to formulate and establish what is a thing or a fact and define what perception henceforth is to illustrate, gives the human world entirely different dimensions form those of any animals present."[27]

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[22]Ibid, p.291

[23]Ibid, p.313

[24]Ibid, p.314

[25]Ibid, p.316

[26]Ibid, p.319

[27]Ibid, p.331

VIII

Langer's anthropological discussion of these speaking hominids makes it clear that they are not self-conscious, that is, they had no concept of "I". They were at one with their group mentally while separate physically. These "men," if we may call non-self-conscious hominids "men," had no idea of death as the end. To die was simply to take on the new role of ancestor to the group. Death was also not a necessity of life, for these people "life appears as an indefinite course of adventure with no foreseeable end but, like a battle, with a constant chance of death..."[28] These unreflective minds impose the same image on the living individual as on the deathless tribe.

The realization that death is inherent in human life is what gives rise to self-consciousness. Mrs. Langer says that the brain tends to individuate establishing "a dependent yet distinct pattern of mental life within the physical life of the organism, even while it serves that organism as a vital part."[29] The brain achieves partial individuation appearing subjectively as the mind. The mind has a tendency to become an individual being, "to emancipate itself from the organism in which it developed." But complete emancipation would, of course, be fatal so the mind can never achieve more than a partial individuation which "produces a peculiarly non-physical appearance of what seems to each person the essential agency within his own body."[30] With the development of the mind the basic feeling of life becomes centered there and "attains a distinct holistic form."[31] Each person comes to feel the rise and expansion of his life but also its decline. The individuated mental life begins to seem like a single all-embracing act. The sense of life of the subject starts to take shape as a sense of personal agency and this becomes concentrated and reduced to a sense of selfhood. With this comes the knowledge of the limit of the self - death. "A human individual feels his own agency no longer as the stream of tribal life flowing throough the limbs but as his unique, autonomous self living its unique inviolable life."[32] The change in feeling and outlook is radical for now the prime interest of each individual is no longer the communal act of the tribe but his own life.

IX

The individual life has now attained a unity that allows it to be judged as one act. With the progress of cultures towards civilization, the judging of a life gradually becomes a pattern of moral action with religious performances as its framework. Here we find the "primitive" socities that anthropologists have discovered in the last few hundred years still living in kinship groups where the unquestioned rule of custom keeps the individual from individuating to the detriment of the group. The equilibrium of such societies is what Langer calls the "ethnic balance" and societies can exist, unchanged, in such a balance for thousands of years. Indeed many societies have, for change (and thus history) requires individual action beyond that allowed by the rule of

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[28]Langer, *Mind*, v.3, p.86

[29]Ibid, p.95

[30]Ibid, p.99

[31]Ibid, p.101

[32]Ibid, p.107

custom. But "the higher the cultural expression of a society rises, the more tenuous becomes the balance.... Every behavioral act carries with it the possibility of upsetting the equilibrium of the social order..."[33] The social organization must retrieve the balance every time some act upsets it and, of course, extreme circumstances (natural disasters, etc.) would call for individuating acts beyond the norm.

The rise of civilization - of cities not based on the kinship tie - is the result of individuation from which, according to Langer, the social organization can no longer recover its balance. And it is with this individuation that self-consciousness became able to act without adhering to the rule of custom that kept it tied to acting in and for the group.

In the modern world the evolution of man has come to be primarily the evolution of his mind. One manifestation of this has been the phenomenon of physical science. At this point, however, Mrs. Langer fails to recognize that such a phenomenon of the modern world is just as much one of involvement as of individuation. She fears that with the age of science individuation has leapt forward in rapid bounds leaving involvement far behind and unable to temper these acts of individuation that have led to, among other things, the ability to destroy the world at the touch of a button.

Physical science, however, like all other human products, can only be created and advance through social effort, within a framework of active involvements - the achievements of the individual mean nothing if they are not *recognized* and taken up by his society. The products of physical science and modern technology have served to involve the peoples of the world to greater and greater extent, making the idea of one world society a real possibility.

x

The final volume of *Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling* was left incomplete because of Mrs. Langer's increasing blindness and advanced age (she was over 90 when the third volume was published). Her last chapter is but a summary of what she planned to undertake in the final section of the work. Had she been able to write the section she may well have seen the contradiction that I have pointed out. But whatever the case, this last chapter in which she voices her fears that should not have been fears at all, does not detract from her theory of mind. Indeed, to fully understand her aesthetic theory one must understand her mature system as set forth in *Mind: An Essay On Human Feeling*.

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[33]Ibid, p.124