

## Political and Field-Being Implications of Susanne K. Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*

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In the last chapter of *Philosophy in a New Key*, “The Fabric of Meaning,” Susanne K. Langer suggests that the philosophy she has constructed has implications in concepts of freedom, “freedom of mind” and freedom as the alembic in which human values are acquired—freedoms which become political in the field of lived experience. While what she claimed in 1942 was insightful then, now, it seems prescient. Hence, the claim that, while the effect of this philosophy has been noted for its importance to aesthetics, this philosophy as well should be observed as important to the political creativity toward which it points.

As early as her 1930 *The Practice of Philosophy*, Susanne K. Langer reasons that questions bring epochs of philosophy into being.<sup>1</sup> When questions are answered, new ones surface, and new inquiry begins. The questions for this inquiry are three: First, what is “this philosophy”? Second, how does it imply “freedom”? And third, how does the freedom implied in this philosophy become important to “political creativity”? While this inquiry will attempt to provide answers, it will as well, as they surface, also lead, perhaps, to new questions. But in the process, this inquiry aims to provide an understanding of Langer’s philosophy not only in itself but as Field-Being philosophy as well, and to offer insights into its political meaning.<sup>2</sup> Observing the philosophical questions of the mid-twentieth century, Langer recognized the questions underlying those now coming to the fore at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Langer articulates to an extent some of the implications of *Philosophy in a New Key* in her 1953 *Feeling and Form* and in her 1962 *Philosophical Sketches*. So for three decades she observed the relation of her theory to world events, and her thinking remained consistent as this triumvirate of her work demonstrates.

I. The “new key” in Susanne K. Langer’s philosophy is “symbol.” She sees “symbol” first as the reason why mathematics has endured throughout time, both respectably and fashionably, and why science has become less a discipline of observation and more a discipline of symbolic calculation. The symbol, too, is the reason for advances in technology, for it rests upon the symbolic in mathematics and science. Having established the persistence of symbol, Langer asks, but where is the “field” of inquiry in which symbol and meaning reside? Her response to this epistemological question is that in addressing humanistic problems, the answer points in two directions, logic as a “quest for certainty” and psychology as it involves emotional need, or “human response.”<sup>3</sup>

Symbol is not only persistent but is a function differentiated from the function of sign. While both sign and symbol are mental functions, sign does not require the abstract function of symbol. The abstract function of symbol is to form and retain concepts.<sup>4</sup> Forming and retaining concepts is necessary to human thought, hence is basic to the human mind, and following that to human experience. Langer explains that while we share sign with the other animals, symbol is what allows for human understanding, human meaning, and human intelligence. In making possible sacrament and serious art and drama, symbol fulfills human needs. It makes possible fulfillment of the organism of man’s need for value and holiness. Symbolization is needed to activate the functioning of fulfillment, that is, the “act essential to the mind.”<sup>5</sup> Langer gives the example of the blind and hearing impaired Helen Keller, who began human experience, when she finally understood the symbol for water, “water” as a word spelled out tactilely on her hand. Thereafter, Keller did not have to have her hand under the water pump, but with the mere spelling of the word could henceforth think about water. Langer maintains that the mark of humanity results from such symbolic transformation—be it speech, ritual, or art.

While symbol provides the roots of sacrament, myth, art or music as “significant form,” meaning of signification rests on its logical condition.<sup>6</sup> But meaning also has always present the psychological aspect as well as the logical, for symbol has meaning only to someone, i.e. “the ‘I’ mean” accompanies “the ‘it’ means.” The interplay between these two provides meaning-relations. While the essence of meaning lies

in the logical relations, the problem of logical relations comes with interpretation. Experience gives us interpretation of signs, while conception of objects offers symbols. Traditionally, a logic of terms meant power or capacity for meaning, i.e. denotation and connotation, but in this new philosophy, a logic of terms as well means signification, or function of terms. What Helen Keller experienced was first water as sign, cooling to the touch on a summer day, but then, the abstract seeing of water by its symbol—w-a-t-e-r, gave her the value of the word as a functioning symbol signifying water.

The abstract seeing that Helen Keller experienced is the foundation of rationality. The logic or relationship of terms that terms make possible becomes propaedeutic to rational discourse. A logic of terms necessitates the principles of grammar, another source of significance, on the one hand, and on the other, makes possible truth and falsehood. And so grammar makes discourse possible. A proposition in discourse is a picture of a structure, a picture being a symbol of what it represents. Logical structure is the meaning-relationship that involves correlation of signs with meanings, correlation of symbols with concepts, concepts with things. Woven from this web of meaning is the “field of being” lived as human life.

Words cannot be simultaneous with each other, and so are “linear, discrete,” and proceed in successive order”...its form like clothes on a clothesline.<sup>7</sup> This verbal symbolism is known as “discursiveness” and operates according to “laws of discursive thoughts.”<sup>8</sup> What Langer points out about verbal symbolism is unique—She points out that verbal symbolism is what brings philosophy into a new key and into a more inclusive field of human activity. What this means is that, while logicians believe there is nothing outside discursive form, they fail to see that semantics is wider than language. What is often excluded, for Langer is included, for she argues that while thinking is itself symbolic, language is not the only “means for articulating thought,” rather thinking is possible in presentational forms as well as in discursive forms.

As discursive form is like clothes on a line, presentational forms are like “typical forms of vital process”—growth and development.<sup>9</sup> Form, “construed by the sensitive and intelligent organ” is both an experienced thing and a symbol.<sup>10</sup> The tendency to organize the sensory field into form is, according to Langer, the beginning of mental life, and it begins in the physical. Sensitivity bears with it mentality; the senses have their logic, their categories of understanding. Hence, mental life is larger than reason. Logical projection extends where language fails the unspeakable—in short, there is music!

Seeing symbolically gives rise to the desire for language, yet its earliest forms are presentational. Symbol is evident as abstractive seeing in the linguistic achievement of metaphor. But sacrament, myth, and music as well as language, inhabit the symbolic field. Such non-discursive forms are “charged with logical possibilities of meaning” that underlie their significance.<sup>11</sup> The recognition of symbolic field broadens the field of epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of art, to include the discursive as well as the presentational, and thus the symbolic field is acknowledged as the field of meaningful human activity.

The recognition of a symbolic field deepens understanding of the human mind. A mind sensitive to meaning sees beyond common-sense knowledge to meaningful structures, to comprehensions and interpretations, adjusting continually to the “stream” of sense and emotional experience. Awareness of meaning entails a growing into and an outgrowing, an evolution of meaningfulness. It is with ever-new eyes that discovery and invention take place. Meaning, sought for in the rational as hypotheses, becomes knowledge. But meaning that rests on logical possibilities and that emerges as hypotheses, becomes meaning of values and “aesthetic pleasure.”

In summary, symbols, the new key of philosophy, “supplement our fragmentary sensations and build up around each perceptual core a structure of ideas...saying...we have ideas about what we actually see, hence “renders our world.”<sup>12</sup> This field of symbol leads to meaning. The perception of the relation of meanings is the “logical intuition” or the “factor that makes it human.”<sup>13</sup> At the center of human experience “...is always the activity of imagining reality, conceiving the structure of it through words, images, or other symbols, and assimilating actual perceptions to it as they come...”<sup>14</sup> The Field-Being nature of this

philosophy is in its field of symbolic activity at the non-substantialist turn and in its inclusiveness of all human experience, that is, activity as meaning.

**II.** What is significant, if sign is the warp and symbol the woof of the fabric of meaning, with facts being its knots, is that the creative process lies in the “threads of unrecorded reality” or the connotations that run between. Furthermore, it is the creative process “that makes human life an adventure in understanding.”<sup>15</sup> Langer defined the “adventure of understanding” in her earlier work as “appreciation of all-connecting orders in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

In our realistic age obsessed with knowledge as “knots” of scientific and historical facts, the problem is, Langer claims, that old symbolisms have collapsed and with it nature—moon, sun, and stars as they have become so much natural law and natural facts. But sunsets and starlight present multiple meanings, meanings beyond the “facts,” and beyond facts, sunsets or stormy seas in retaining connotation offer the possibility for spiritual support. Hence, the environment contains, for those who seek them, symbols for sustenance, meaning and sense of the world, and so supplies a “unified conception of life whereby it can be rationally lived.”<sup>17</sup> So it is in this connotative field of “historic fact and significant form” that a balanced active intelligence lives and the creative process ventures.

In such a field is the freedom, which necessarily accompanies life and pursuit of happiness.<sup>18</sup> This is not the freedom of taking license or shocking a generation. Rather it is the freedom that comes from not inhibiting the symbolic process, the worst being hindering ritual or whatever gesture is needed to provide assent to meaning or “mental anchorage.” Freedom of conscience being the basis of personal freedom, if constrained, strikes at one’s “whole world, humanity, and purpose.”<sup>19</sup> If the “field of our unconscious symbolic orientation is suddenly plowed up” we “lose our hold, our convictions, and therewith our effectual purposes.”<sup>20</sup> Since the world is all we have from which to draw sustenance, a civilization which makes nature-symbols alien to our minds and which makes the personal activity of work meaningless, inhibits the symbolic process, the creative imagination, and thus freedom.

While human freedom has evolved, Langer believes that “men have held to their symbols of that essential and good human bondage that keeps the tiny death-bound life a part of the greater life of our kind.”<sup>21</sup> Moral freedom “derives largely from the imagination”...with a conscious moment of intention before the body goes into action.”<sup>22</sup> This is “freedom from the narrow confines of animal reactions in which there are only small options and immediate decisions, no resolutions, policies, or obligations” or freedom of the will.<sup>23</sup> It is also imagination that “frames and supports and guides our thinking.”<sup>24</sup> That means, faced with fundamental issues of moral principle, the terms in which one thinks, need a world image.

Forms evolve from symbols, “somewhat as tissues in a developing organism.”<sup>25</sup> The evolution of forms resides in the freedom of the creative process within the weave of sign and symbol. Forms are expressed as discursive or presentational. The discursive involves language; the presentational feeling. Feeling rather than a polarity with form is “merely associated with it,” its presentational form indirectly referring to “logical picture.”<sup>26</sup> Feeling itself is “an activity, not a product.”<sup>27</sup> “Imagination is probably the greatest force acting on our feelings—greater and steadier than outside influences,” therefore it is imagination that makes a person’s world, and hence, the world of the imagination is bigger than the stimuli around a person.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, in the creative process between sign and symbol of the symbolic field, lies freedom. The creative process involves our world; our world sustains freedom in the ethics of personal freedom and in the imagination, which guides that activity. It guides the epistemological activity in both discursive and presentational forms as well. Hence it is in this freedom that we live and evolve meaningfully and therefore humanly.

**III.** Meaning can become political in lived experience only as objectified existence in the field, or as component of karmic matter in our environmental heritage. The political implications for lived

experience of Langer's "philosophy in a new key," are amplified in each of Langer's three books, in which the last chapters articulate the consequences of her theoretical exposition: *Philosophy in a New Key*, the chapter title is "The Fabric of Meaning," *Philosophical Sketches*, "The Growing Center of Knowledge," and *Form and Feeling*, "The Work and its Public. The areas of political implications are essentially two: epistemological as manifested in educational institutions and ethical as manifested in individual and global relationships.

Language, which articulates thought, is not an inherent knowledge. Rather it is learned by example, hence is dependent on "family." Langer believes that the desire for language is manifest in babyhood babble.<sup>29</sup> The epistemological nature of language attainment, therefore, necessitates communal activity from the start. Hence, knowledge as language begins in the political institution of family but becomes, Langer believes, that which was "designed by hypotheses."<sup>30</sup> What is necessary for hypotheses is freedom of the mind. It is freedom of the mind, then, that is indispensable for education of the thought and imagination to form hypotheses. Certain kinds of knowledge, thus formed, then form views of reality, for example, science defined as, "an intellectual scheme for handling facts"<sup>31</sup> and history, defined as an epochal scheme for submitting temporal events as facts, contribute to a reduced conception of reality as "practical vision." This "practical vision," or "momentary adjustment to our surroundings," Langer explains, "makes symbols for thought out of signs for behavior," and it is "practical intelligence," which has roots in "practical vision" and means "conception anchored in reality."<sup>32</sup>

The reality of civilized societies, where nearly everyone can read, "and the radio spreads new ideas"—though Langer would add television and the internet were she alive today—is the great "mental adventure," and in this everyone learns of what is going on in scientific thinking.<sup>33</sup> The problem is that while that education is moving forward, what is occurring at the same time is an "intellectual collapse," she believes, that takes place in the failure of "old metaphors" and in the despair of reason in the light of "facts." Disappearing myths, questioned rites, new arts, and vision with reasonable sense yet unformed, leaves the "mental adventure" in this regard in a void. What is then needed for the imagination that fosters freedom is a vision in the making of "new political order, suited to a worldwide economic system and an essentially footloose, mingling world population."<sup>34</sup> Langer's notion is that, "Both actual life and theoretical thinking have outrun our powers of imagination; so the average person...is unable to picture the universe" the truth here more true, I suggest, given recent world events.<sup>35</sup>

The world now, no longer a collage of self-sufficient cultural groups, is composed of a cultural internationalism with no symbols to express it. Culture, "the objective record of developed feeling," will not happen until a great imagination is liberated and yet disciplined.<sup>36</sup> The word "freedom" itself is a meaning in progress, the question is, how is the imagination that fosters freedom educated? Langer believes that educational institutions which consider only deductive or inductive logic as reason and class all other human functions as "emotive," or "irrational" draws a bifurcating line that is detrimental to symbolic function of significance and freedom of inquiry. For an education of the imagination there must be as importantly as education in reasoning, education in feeling as well. Langer maintains in *Feeling and Form* that, "Artistic training is...the education of feeling, as our usual schooling in factual subjects and logical skills such as mathematical "figuring"...is the education of thought."<sup>37</sup> So, without the "tacit, personal, illuminating contact with symbols of feeling," which lack of art education would bring about, not only will the imagination and thus freedom suffer, but the worst art, bad music, sentimental fictions will impinge on the minds.

Why is that important? Artistic symbols inform us about who we are and what our culture is becoming. Langer asks, "What would the European know of Chinese culture, with its vast reach into the past, if Chinese feeling had not been articulated in sculpture and painting?"<sup>38</sup> How would we know of each other's cultures, she asks, if there had been no artistic symbols? Artistic symbols inform our imaginations which in turn, inform our freedoms, which in turn inform our lived experience. While science is universal and "belongs to all humanity," it is not likely to "beget a culture;" art, however, "which formulates and fixes human ways of feeling, is always the spearhead of a new culture."<sup>39</sup> We experience life as thought,

action, and passion, as Richard P. McKeon advanced in his book of that title. How we do that, Langer explains depends on education: “Life as we see, act, and feel it is as much a product of the art we have known as of the language (or languages) which shaped our thought in infancy.”<sup>40</sup>

The symbolic field of Langer’s philosophy not only fosters freedom of the mind but freedom of human interaction with human values. For Langer, the consequences of lack of education based on this epistemological theory are serious. If the breadth of symbolic formulation in the understanding of human experience is not present in human relationships, the danger is that humankind will engage in waging war, rather than in creative resolution in both the microcosm of personal relations and in the macrocosm of world community. In the continual pursuit of meanings, error and “insight is bought with the life of an older certainty,” and thus the despair of traditional philosophy and standards of science. Its hope lies only in the “wider philosophy of symbolism” where freed activity of thought and new possibility are brought into being. Beginning with the new questions and the understanding of the nature of the symbolic that Langer provides, hope becomes part of the pursuit of meaning in the field of freedom, and with hope, political advance.

Beyond science and art, what “fulfills and establishes culture” is the “tacitly felt life of overt action,” in “ways of living and things produced.”<sup>41</sup> Philosophy and marital virtues are among those productions and ways that have informed our past cultures. Now, with “runaway technological civilization,” “outward violence,” and “inward uncertainty”—the “price of our truly international possession—scientific thought,” Langer believed, “tacitly felt life” is in such tension, that it will necessarily break.<sup>42</sup> Langer foresaw that it had already broken with the “atomization of society” into isolated individuals, the idea of state as a “higher organism” aging, no more a Platonic “man writ large” or Hobbesian “Leviathan.”<sup>43</sup> And whereas man has become identified more and more with the animal kingdom in evolution, man is even more so identified with the unique function of symbol use. The function of “symbolic conception” is what allows us to know the ambiguity of life—that we will die yet live, becoming more and more self-realized individuals differentiated from the long line of heritage. She does not mean that we become therefore a “complete individualist,” lonely in private and irresponsible in public. Within us is the feeling of need for collaboration; our social symbols are testaments in rituals of the divine world order and moral law.

Langer eloquently states her idea thus:

We are like leaves of the palm tree, each deeply embedded in the tree, a part of the trunk, each opening to the light in a final, separate life...we are not masses; we are the public.<sup>44</sup>

She puts it in another way, “The world is something human;” that is, “it hangs together, its events fit into each other.”<sup>45</sup>

Hence, it is individuation and involvement, which become the terms of negotiation, no matter the context, private or public. Physical individuation is incomplete, for human procreation is dependent on conjoint action, and maintenance and preservation are also dependent on social activity. However, the individual is actually “essentially a mental being.”<sup>46</sup> It is our “development of symbolic expression and understanding” that gives rise to the need of symbols to gain “the conceptual frame of a world much larger than the environment we sensuously perceive” and then to communicate that “frame” to others.<sup>47</sup>

It is on the symbolic expression of symbol, Langer argues, that our common sense notions of morality are built:

Our ideas of moral qualities, good and evil, blessing and bane, seem all to have been attained with the help of concrete imagery, often of a very earthly sort. The expression of values is so consistently metaphorical that words like...’straight’ and ‘crooked,’ have almost more readily a moral connotation than a geometrical one.<sup>48</sup>

“Moral freedom” is in the conscious moment of conception in which we intend the body to action. Societal moral action, however, is also evolutionary, verified in the West in churches, marriages, and families, but this evolution has contributed to fragmentation, to individuation in the extreme, and the shattering of natural symbols as well. Again, regaining loss, must come from exploration and growth by “modification and stretching...mentality itself,” the “activity of imagining reality” enlarging human awareness, i.e. “human feeling and emotion.”<sup>49</sup> So, Langer suggests in *Philosophical Sketches* that the “problem of restoring mental balance...lost in this age is not psychical...but philosophical.”<sup>50</sup> Philosophy, Langer argues “must go forward...[and] construct the morality of a new age, a new world, and that means a new morality” by analyzing and redefining the nature of life itself, the individual and society, and human relationships therein.<sup>51</sup> The only philosophy capable of this, at this point in time, is one that is as encompassing as her philosophy of symbolism.

In conclusion, if we see the world in Langer’s Field-Being philosophy of symbolic field, the “field” we see is one of meaning where the human and the scientific, logic and feeling are one in the freedom of inquiry and possibility. “Meanings,” Langer concludes, “are the object of all philosophical research. The ability to construe them is the gift of understanding; and the swift, independent, clear-sighted appreciation of meanings—in nature, in life, in ritual and art—is wisdom, the goal of philosophy.”<sup>52</sup> Freedom gives rise to the discursive and the presentational; it fosters imagination that in turn gives rise to new vision and gives guides to new morality. The political implications are that as we understand the symbolic field, we bring its epistemology to bear on educational institutions and its ethics to bear on personal and global relationships and institutions. The field is a field of activity as meaning. In *Feeling and Form*, Langer declares, that symbolic activity is necessary, “Life is incoherent unless we give it form...formulating our own biography ...and in giving form” articulating “human nature.”<sup>53</sup> And in *Philosophical Sketches* Susanne K. Langer tells us, that at the same time, our “symbolic seeking is what gives the world its fundamental unity, much deeper than the unity of causal connectedness.”<sup>54</sup> Lastly, she concludes *Philosophy in a New Key* by reminding us that the political living out of the “symbolic field” will not be without pain, “freedom of thought cannot be reborn... language, art, morality, and science have all given us pain as well as power” and will continue to do so.<sup>55</sup>

### Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *The Practice of Philosophy*, New York: Henry Holt, 1930. This work with its prefatory note by A.N. Whitehead contains the kernel of Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*.
  - <sup>2</sup> Field-Being is a philosophy founded by Lik Kuen Tong. In so far as Field-Being means being as field of activity, symbol in its concept-forming activity defines the field as one in which activity is meaning.
  - <sup>3</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, 24. Note that while Langer (1895-1985) wrote the last of her nine philosophy books, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, in her late eighties when she was a Professor Emeritus and research scholar at Connecticut College, *Philosophy in a New Key*, having sold over 500,000 copies brought her some status in the philosophical community.
  - <sup>4</sup> Langer explains, “abstraction is the explicit recognition of a form which may be variously exemplified. Such a form is conceivable in purely symbolic terms,”130 (*The Practice of Philosophy*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930).
  - <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.
  - <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.
  - <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.
  - <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
  - <sup>9</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophical Sketches*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, (1962) 1964, 16.
  - <sup>10</sup> *Philosophy in a New Key*, 89.

- 11 Ibid., 265.  
12 *Philosophical Sketches*, 126.  
13 Ibid. 128.  
14 Ibid.  
15 *Philosophy in a New Key*, 281.  
16 *The Practice of Philosophy*, 151.  
17 Ibid. 288.  
18 Ibid. 289.  
19 Ibid. 291. This view of ethics as freedom echoes the theory in Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*.  
20 Ibid. 291.  
21 *Philosophical Sketches*, 118.  
22 Ibid. 118.  
23 Ibid.  
24 Ibid. 141.  
25 Ibid. 118.  
26 Susanne K. Langer. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 17 and *Philosophy in a New Key*, 241.  
27 Ibid. 17.  
28 Ibid. 125.  
29 In humans, language is desired, and consequently learned, babble giving way to symbolic-words, parents being the teachers. Only language as signs can be taught to primates, parents not being the teachers, but rather animal care gives the teachers. So language is not passed down generation to generation in primates as it is in humans.  
30 Ibid. 274.  
31 Ibid. 275.  
32 *Philosophy in a New Key*, 267.  
33 *Philosophical Sketches*, 144.  
34 Ibid. 149.  
35 Ibid. 142.  
36 Ibid. 92.  
37 *Form and Feeling*, 401.  
38 Ibid. 410.  
39 *Philosophical Sketches*, 92-3.  
40 *Form and Feeling*. 399.  
41 *Philosophical Sketches*, 92-3.  
42 Ibid. 94.  
43 Ibid. 96.  
44 Ibid. 106.  
45 Ibid. 125, 126.  
46 Ibid. 112.  
47 Ibid. 111.  
48 Ibid. 132.  
49 Ibid. 124, 128-9.  
50 Ibid. 151.  
51 Ibid.  
52 *The Practice of Philosophy*, 221—these are the final words of the book.  
53 *Feeling and Form*, 400-01.  
54 *Philosophical Sketches*, 131.  
55 *Philosophy in a New Key*, 290.