

ABSTRACTS (Authors in alphabetical order)

Carolyn Bergonzo

Caring What Happens: Individuation and Involvement as Susanne K. Langer's Social Philosophy

I will examine Langer's conceptualization of individuation and involvement as foundational biological principles and interwoven processes at the core of her social philosophy. Focusing on two lectures published in Philosophical Sketches (1962)—“Man and Animal: The City and the Hive” and “The Ultimate Unit”—and their further refinement in chapter nine of Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling, Vol. 1, I will present an overview of this dynamic aspect of Langer's social philosophy; explore its connections with the political perspectives she expressed in articles and unpublished manuscripts; and speculate as to how her ideas might help us confront our contemporary entanglements.

Lawrence Cahoon

What Langer Didn't Know

Susanne Langer is on the short list of major systematic philosophers of the American 20th century, working from logic to aesthetics to philosophy of mind, biology and anthropology. Unfortunately, much of her career was spent outside mainstream research communities (somewhat reminiscent of the career of Marjorie Grene). Working largely outside the centers of the Anglo-American tradition meant not only that her thought was neglected, but that some concepts that might have advanced her interests remained unknown to her. We can recognize these while marveling at her unique accomplishments.

Donald Dryden

How Does Religion Figure in Langer's Understanding of Human Culture?

In Philosophy in a New Key, Susanne Langer devotes a chapter each to myth and ritual and acknowledges that both play essential roles in the formulation of what she calls “a religious universe” (PNK, 49). And though she mentions that “religion is a gradual envisagement of the essential pattern of human life (PNK, 155) and calls it “the most typical and fundamental edifice of the human mind” (PNK, 42), she never offers a systematic, detailed discussion of religion as a cultural form. Furthermore, there are passages in which she seems to suggest that religion, to the extent that it relies on mythical modes of thinking, will be superseded by a more “realistic turn of mind” (PNK, 274) as part of “our coming-of-age as a race” (PNK, 274).

In order to supply what is missing from Langer's own work, I would like to offer a view of religion, first proposed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, which I think is largely compatible with Langer's understanding of the nature and evolution of human culture, but which does not treat religion primarily as an expression of a “primitive” stage in the evolution of human society, destined to be outgrown as we gradually mature into a more rational, scientifically-oriented civilization.

In Geertz's view, the defining feature of a religious perspective is not the belief in a supernatural realm that lies beyond the visible world, but “the conviction that the values one holds are

grounded in the inherent structure of reality, that between the way one ought to live and the way things are there is an unbreakable inner connection" (Geertz 1968, 97). A religion is then a cluster of symbols, regarded as sacred, that links a view of how things are with a vision of what things matter, in such a way that they support and confirm one another. Seen in this way, religion represents an expression of the human need to make sense out of the world and of human conduct within that world, an expression of what Langer calls "man's ceaseless quest for conception and orientation" (PNK, 157) and for "a world-picture that fills all experience" (PNK, 158). In order to illustrate the value of Geertz's definition, I will look at several writers who have explored the possibilities of a perspective that combines a naturalistic worldview—in which the sciences are the source of our most reliable knowledge about the world, including the origin and evolution of life and the nature of the human species—with some of the ideals, perceptions, attitudes, and values that have traditionally been associated with many religions, while rejecting a belief in a transcendent supreme being or a supernatural realm that lies beyond the natural world—a perspective that has been called religious naturalism.

Paul Guyer

Langer on Architecture: Ethnic Domain, Virtual Space, and the Feeling of Life

This talk will explore the three central concepts of Langer's approach to architecture: that works of architecture paradigmatically constitute an "ethnic domain," or site for the public life in a society; that their form of "illusion" is "virtual space," or a determinate space carved out of the theoretically endless, featureless space of mathematics and science; and that their emotional impact is to capture the feeling of life. I will suggest that these are valuable concepts for thinking about architecture but that they should not be taken to have sharp boundaries: the line between public and private is not sharp; the line between virtual and real space, between indoors and outdoors, need not be sharp, both in some classical architecture but especially in some of the best architecture of the last century or so; and that the feeling of life can at least sometimes be promoted precisely by the fuzzy boundary between virtual and real space in some of the best architecture.

Tereza Hadravová

An idea of the city in Langer's philosophy

*This talk is going to be a reconstruction of what the late Susanne K. Langer thought about the society of her days and what kind of history she thought that society was a part of. First, since I am going to talk about Langer's knowledge of the society, or her theory of it, I will briefly explain what it means, for Susanne Langer, to understand something, to come to terms with it cognitively. I will then review what she says about the society she was living in and suggest that the image she uses to think about it is the city. I will conclude that, unfortunately, instead of deriving and developing the knowledge of the society from that of the city, she, eventually, understood the city by means of her somewhat narrow-minded and conservative image of the society. In the last volume of *Mind*, she developed a more nuanced and complicated image of the city; she did not, however, extrapolate it as a symbol of the society.*

KEYNOTE LECTURE

Robert E. Innis

The Symbolic Mind and its Breakings: Psychological Dimensions and Cultural Consequences

Susanne Langer sees human life as a stream of felt tensions and resolutions that are ordered in different ways. But such orders are not always stable, compatible, or reconcilable with one another. She sees the cultural world of symbolic forms -- language, ritual, myth, visual art, music, dance -- as systems of expressions or articulations of felt life in dynamic and evolving states of tension, not just with one another but with the human world of civilization. Civilization, on Langer's account, is constituted by forms of instrumental and pragmatic rationality realized in and informing political and legal ordering systems. It also encompasses the material structures produced by technological and scientific inventions and their forms of abstraction. The symbolic structures of the cultural world and their world views, with their distinctive logics, not only clash with one another but with forms of civilization. Culture and civilization are in conditions of perpetual adjustment to one another. Langer held that the varieties of felt significances embodied in cultural and civilizational structures entail deep affective commitments, effects, and consequences involving processes of individuation as well as interactive involvement. The psychological outcomes of these processes, effected by symbolic activities, are not easily reconcilable. They are marked by forms of felt imbalance, experiences of 'breakings' of their experiential contexts by encounters with other contexts, leading to consequential intra-psychic and intra-social conflicts. Langer sees such a breaking exemplified in the drive to higher forms of scientific and formal rationality and abstraction that characterize modernity and its destruction of traditional forms of life. She offers a way of understanding the nature of the socio-cultural effects of these 'breakings.' But one can ask, are such 'breakings' and their consequences not novel, but actually a permanent feature of the symbolic mind? In what ways does Langer offer us an analytical scheme with normative implications as a guide and a warning for informing our life practices and for creating rich and diverse cultural worlds and the civilizing supports that are worthy of the types of beings she has shown us to be capable of being?

Melvin Woody

World Federalism: Langer's Critique of Nationalism

First, I'll indicate how Langer's thinking about international diplomacy and history is an outgrowth of her views about logic, symbolism and art. Then I'll discuss why Langer regarded the nation-state in a global economy as obsolete. To the problem of the rule of law and institutional justice in a world clinging to nationalism, she found an answer in world federation.