

Susanne Langer’s Theory of Imagination: Art, Culture, and the Sciences of Life and Mind

Donald Dryden
Department of Philosophy
Duke University

ABSTRACT

I am currently writing a book that aims to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the work of the American philosopher Susanne Langer (1895–1985), who developed a comprehensive theory of the nature and evolution of human mentality and culture that looks to the arts as an indispensable source of insights into the phenomena of life and mind that we are seeking to understand in terms of the sciences. Anticipating developments in philosophy and the sciences that have taken place since the publication of her three-volume work, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967–1982), Langer argued that consciousness, or subjectivity, should occupy a central place in the study of mind, which should in turn be grounded in the biological sciences but also in disciplined methods of phenomenological investigation, which for Langer involved a systematic study of the arts. Langer believed that a perfectly continuous evolutionary history has given rise to a difference between human and animal mentality that is “almost as great as the division between animals and plants” (Langer 1962, 113), and that a single set of cognitive capacities (which she called the power of conception, imagination, or symbolic transformation) underlies a wide range of cultural practices—including language, myth, ritual, art, and the sciences—that set human nature apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. In making an understanding of the arts central to the scientific study of mind, Langer’s work broadens and enriches the role given to phenomenological investigation in the recent writings of Owen Flanagan, Evan Thompson, and others, thereby providing valuable resources for constructing a coherent framework for human self-understanding that draws its support from the arts and humanities, as well as from the sciences.

Susanne Langer’s Theory of Imagination: Art, Culture, and the Sciences of Life and Mind

Donald Dryden
Department of Philosophy
Duke University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Susanne Langer and the Sciences of Life and Mind
2. Pieces of a Contemporary Framework for Human Self-Understanding
 - The Return of Consciousness to the Study of Mind*
 - Metaphor and Conceptual Processes in Human Cognition*
 - The Evolution of Human Singularity*
 - Causal Networks and Dynamical Systems in the Biological Sciences*
 - Phenomenology and the Deep Continuity of Life and Mind*
 - Pragmatist Epistemologies and the Philosophy of Science*
3. Central Themes in the Trajectory of Langer’s Philosophical Development
 - Symbolic Transformation, Imagination, and the Theory of Art*
 - Conscious Experience and Its Biological Foundations*
 - A Conceptual Framework for the Empirical Study of Mind*
 - The Great Shift: From Animal to Human Mentality*
 - Sketches for a Theory of Knowledge and Truth*
4. Symbolic Transformation and the Theory of Imagination
 - Perceptual Processes and the Formation of Conceptual Representations*
 - Conceptual Representations, Image Formation, and Symbolic Transformation*
 - Some Characteristics of Images*
 - Imaginative Processes as an Expression of Human Sensibility*
 - Narrative Discourse and the Formulation of Experience*
 - Imagination and the Construction of Human Memory*
 - Works of Art as Constructed Images*
 - Imagination Makes the Human World*
5. The Great Orders of Art and the Dimensions of Human Imagination
 - Form, Semblance, and Abstraction: The Imaginal Status of Works of Art*
 - Language and the Semblance of Lived Experience*
 - Literary Art: The Creation of a Virtual History in the Mode of Memory*
 - Drama: The Creation of a Virtual Future*
 - Music and the Image of Lived Time*
 - The Plastic Arts: Drawing and Painting*
 - The Plastic Arts: Sculpture*
 - The Plastic Arts: Architecture*
 - Dance: Virtual Gesture and the Realm of Virtual Powers*
 - Art, Imagination, and Living Form*

6. Art and the Changing Horizons of Human Experience

The Intuitive Appreciation of Expressive Form

The Dialectics of Art, Imagination, and Perception

Changing Forms of Visual Imagination: Representation in the Plastic Arts

The Cultural History of Narrative and Dance

7. Symbolic, Enculturated Being and Its Biological Foundations

The Origins of Life: The Theory of Autonomous, Self-Organizing Dynamical Systems

The Rise of Sentient Being: Feeling, or Primordial Subjectivity

The Emergence of Animal Mentality: Life and Consciousness as Sensorimotor Being and Affective Awareness

The Transition to Humanity: The Symbolic, Enculturated Species

Art, Imagination, and the Human Dependence on Cultural Resources

8. Outline of a Theory of Knowledge and Truth

Models and Conceptual Representations in Human Cognition

Models and Mechanistic Explanation in the Sciences

Models in Scientific Reasoning

External Representations, Distributed Cognitive Systems, and Knowledge in the Sciences

History and the Shifting Horizons of Human Experience

Art and the Horizons of Inner Experience

Knowledge and the Perspectival Nature of Human Understanding

9. The Making of the Human World: Cosmos, Ethos, and the Religious Imagination

The Cosmological Imagination, the Sciences, and the Construction of a Cosmos

The Moral Imagination, Natural Moralities, and the Construction of an Ethos

Narrative Myths and the Structure of Religious Traditions

Susanne Langer’s Theory of Imagination: Art, Culture, and the Sciences of Life and Mind

Donald Dryden
Department of Philosophy
Duke University

ANALYTICAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: Susanne Langer and the Sciences of Life and Mind

2. Pieces of a Contemporary Framework for Human Self-Understanding

Recent developments in philosophy and the sciences suggest a possible contemporary framework for human self-understanding — consciousness an acceptable topic for scientific investigation — metaphorical, nonpropositional basis of human cognition and its expressions in language, art, religion, and the sciences — human mind a unique evolutionary departure from animal mentality — dynamical systems theory, network models of causal architecture, and the advent of systems biology — phenomenological methods integral to the scientific study of mind — deep continuity of life and mind at the level of basic organizational properties — structure of present-time consciousness mirrors self-organizing dynamics of brain processes — models and mechanisms rather than laws the key to understanding knowledge in the sciences — themes from pragmatist epistemology in recent philosophy of science.

3. Central Themes in the Trajectory of Langer’s Philosophical Development

Imagination, or the capacity for symbolic expression and symbolic understanding, unique to humans — its basis in the abstraction of conceptual structures from perceptual experience and their expression in a variety of symbolic forms — different symbolic forms required for different domains of experience — dreaming, myth, language, ritual, scientific knowledge, and the arts produced by the same underlying cognitive capacity — knowledge of subjective experience too complex for verbal formulation finds expression in works of art — consciousness, or subjectivity, entirely a biological phenomenon — a new conceptual framework required for a theory of mind connecting the biological, psychological, and cultural sciences — the arts provide access to phenomena of subjective experience required for an adequate biological theory of mind — dynamic patterns rather than material entities the key to understanding biological phenomena — units of analysis based on dynamic patterns and their relationships required for a conceptual framework in biology that can ground an adequate theory of mind and consciousness.

4. Symbolic Transformation and the Theory of Imagination

Perceptual categorization required for adaptive sensorimotor performance and the basis of animal intelligence — formation of conceptual representations from perceptual information a distinct level of cognitive operations and the basis of uniquely human mentality — conceptual representations essentially nonpropositional — imagination as the formation and elaboration of conceptual representations and their expression in a variety of symbolic forms, including mental images, fantasy, language, and narrative discourse — symbolic forms as vehicles of conception and thought — all symbolic forms abstract, interpretive, and derived from underlying conceptual representations — the metaphorical import of symbolic forms and the construction of larger networks of meaning — narrative structures essential to the formulation of human experience — making sense of experience, or construing reality, a primary need in humans — sense-making more fundamental than communication in the acquisition and use of language — human memory a work of imaginative construction — works of art as constructed images serving essentially symbolic or conceptual purposes — imagination constructs the coherent fabric of meanings essential for structuring human perception, understanding, and action, both individual and collective.

5. The Great Orders of Art and the Dimensions of Human Imagination

Works of art essentially vehicles of conception, insight, and understanding — all conception involves formulation and hence abstraction — works of art abstract aspects of the life of feeling for our conception — feeling in the broadest sense a generic term for conscious experience — hence works of art serve to formulate various aspects of the logic of consciousness for our conception — human memory as the retrospective formulation of experience by means of the resources of language and narrative — literary art as the creation of a virtual history in the mode of human memory — drama as the creation of a virtual future by means of dramatic action — music as a constructed image of lived time — painting, sculpture, and architecture as presenting images of experiential space in its various modes — dance as the creation of a realm of virtual powers by the use of virtual gesture.

6. Art and the Changing Horizons of Human Experience

Appreciation of expressive form primitive and immediate in humans — urge to create forms expressive of feeling precedes recognition of “art” as a distinct cultural activity — impulse toward creation of expressive form allied with religion, magic, and other communal activities throughout much of human history — narrative forms initially subservient to communal purposes — appearance of personal autobiography a recent historical phenomenon — dance one of the earliest art forms in the evolution of human culture — initially a means of participation in the realm of mythic powers and forces thought to frame human existence — dialectical interactions among art, imagination, and perception — forms of art, imagination, and feeling subject to historical development and change — changing forms of visual imagination reflected in the history of pictorial art — objectification of feeling and subjectification of nature in art.

7. Symbolic, Enculturated Being and Its Biological Foundations

Life defined by distinct mode of organization — autopoiesis and the theory of self-organizing, dynamical systems prefigured in Langer’s biological framework — the arts as sources of phenomenological data guiding the work of theory construction in the sciences of life and mind — dynamic, organizational principles common to life and mind — emergence of feeling, or sentience, early in the evolution history of animals — animal behavior governed by sensorimotor representations and affective awareness rather than by conceptual processes — formation of conceptual representations and their expression in symbolic forms marks the transition to human mentality — coevolution of brain, language, and culture in humans — essential dependence of the human brain on cultural resources.

8. Outline of a Theory of Knowledge and Truth

Explanation and reasoning in human cognition essentially dependent on models — models as conceptual representations — explanation in the sciences not based primarily on laws and statements but on models and mechanisms — laws as principles used in the construction of models — mechanistic explanation as representation of causal relationships — complex causal architectures require correspondingly complex models — human reasoning as multiple constraint satisfaction rather than deductive or inductive logic — human cognition essentially dependent on external representational resources within distributed cognitive systems — models represent aspects of the world in virtue of similarity or fit (which admits of respects and degrees) rather than truth in the classical sense — representation not a two-place relationship between linguistic entities and the world but a human activity or practice involving a four-place relationship between human agents, selected aspects of the world, models, and human interests and purposes — all representation partial and selective, hence perspectival — the horizon of human experience and understanding shaped by cultural resources and hence subject to historical development and change.

9. The Making of the Human World: Cosmos, Ethos, and the Religious Imagination

Efforts of the collective imagination of a culture tend toward construction of a coherent set of cosmological and moral/ethical ideas — *cosmos* as a set of ideas about what sorts of things and forces there are in the world and how they behave, where human beings come from, what our true nature is, and how we fit into a more encompassing cosmic order — the sciences as a modern expression of the cosmological imagination — *ethos* as the moral order thought to govern human lives — a set of values and standards for human life, human conduct, and human society — how we ought to live our lives, individually and collectively; what is good for us; how we are to fulfill our purpose; how we ought to treat others; what things ultimately matter — religion not essentially dependent on a supernatural realm but the most fundamental expression of wisdom in a cultural tradition, guiding human behavior to advance the twin goals of personal fulfillment and social coherence — an integration of *cosmos* and *ethos*, often involving a core mythical narrative, in which the cosmological and moral elements of a tradition are woven together and expressed in emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, and experientially satisfying forms.