

Susanne Katherina Langer (/ˈlæŋər/; née Knauth; December 20, 1895 – July 17, 1985) was an American philosopher, writer, and educator and was well known for her theories on the influences of art on the mind. She was one of the first women in American history to achieve an academic career in philosophy and the first woman to be popularly and professionally recognized as an American philosopher. Langer is best known for her 1942 book entitled, *Philosophy in a New Key*. In 1960, Langer was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.[4] (Wikipedia)

The basic misconception is, I think, the assumption of feelings (sensations, emotions, etc.) as items or entities of *any* kind, whether produced by physiological processes, or independent of them, non-physical “genuine functions” of a “life” or “soul” casually “making use of” bodily mechanisms. This is a genuine metaphysical fallacy; yet those theorists who have tried to treat it as semantic had an essentially right idea, for the conception of such psychical “factors,” which is expressed in the question of how something called “feeling” can enter into physi-

cal processes, probably is essentially of linguistic origin. The fact that we call something by a name, such as "feeling," makes it seem like a kind of thing, an ingredient in nature or a product. But "feel" is a verb, and to say that what is felt is "a feeling" may be one of those deceptive common-sense suppositions inherent in the structure of language which semanticists are constantly bringing to our attention. "Feeling" is a verbal noun—a noun made out of a verb, that psychologically makes an entity out of a process. To feel is to do something, not to have something; but to "have" a feeling, a sensation, a fear or an idea, seems a perfectly equivalent way of conceiving the fact expressed by the verb. The supposed equivalence is given in the syntax that governs our intellectual processes. It is, perhaps, not as purely a product of language as current doctrines make it appear; there is a deeper reason, of course, why language (despite considerable variations among different tongues in this respect) tends to hypostatize acts as entities. That reason should become apparent in a later chapter. Just now the effect, not the source, of the reifying tendency of our grammar presents the philosophical challenge. It is the concept of feeling—the modulus of psychological conception—that I propose to reconstruct.

In the first place, 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 added factor. Ordinarily we know things in different phases as "the same"—ice, water and steam, for instance—but sometimes a very distinctive phase seems like a product. When iron is heated to a critical degree it becomes red; yet its redness is not a new entity which must have gone somewhere else when it is no longer in the iron. It was a phase of the iron itself, at high temperature. Heat is not a thing, but an agitation, measurable in degrees, not amounts, and when the iron is no longer hot there will be comparable degrees of heat, or of some equivalent process or sum total of processes, outside the iron. But the redness simply disappears; it was a phase of heated iron.

A striking demonstration of how constituents of one kind, brought together in a special combination, may seem to produce a new ingredient which is, however, a phase of their own occurrence, is given by Rutherford Boyd in the design shown (Fig. 1-1).

Unlike many other aspects of vital processes, which are propagated outward with the processes themselves beyond the organism as effects on its surroundings, the phase of being felt is strictly intraorganic, wherever any activities of life attain it. It is an appearance which organic functions have only for the organism in which they occur, if they have it at all. Millions of processes—the whole dynamic rounds of metabo-

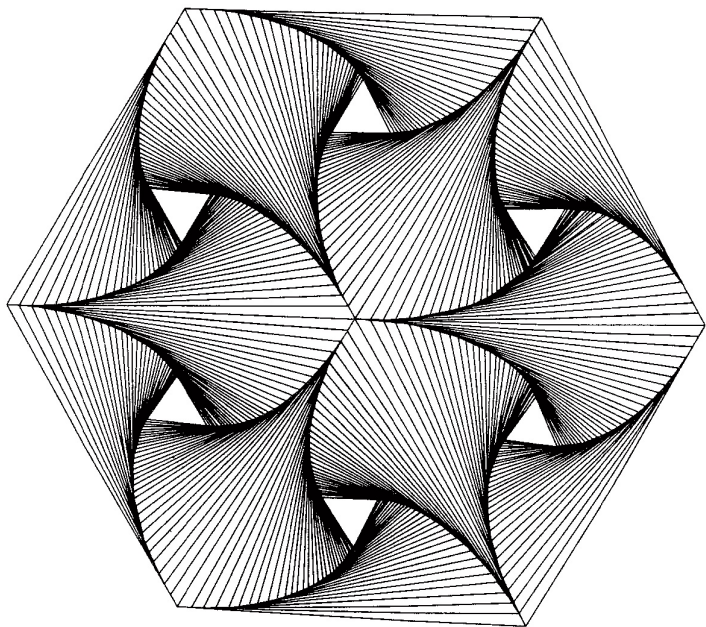


Figure 1-1. Mystery of the Vanishing Triangle. (Design by Rutherford Boyd, "Mathematical Ideas in Design," *Scripta Mathematica* 14 [1948]. Reprinted with permission of Yeshiva University.)

lism, digestion, circulation and endocrine action—are normally not felt. One may say that some activities, especially nervous ones, above a certain (probably fluctuating) limen of intensity, enter into "psychical phase." This is the phase of being felt. It may develop suddenly, with great distinctness of quality, location and value-character, as in response to a painful stimulus; or, only with less precise location in the organism, like a shock of terror; or a deeply engendered process may go gradually, perhaps barely, into a psychical phase of vague awareness—come and gone—a sense of weariness or a fleeting emotive moment. The normal substrate of "feeling tone," from which the more acute tensions build up into specific experiences, is probably a dynamic pattern of nervous activities playing freely across the limen of sentience.

It is this transiency and general lability of the psychical phase that accounts for the importance of preconscious processes in the construction of such elaborate phenomena as ideas, intentions, images and fantasies, and makes it not only reasonable but obvious that they are rooted in the fabric of totally unfelt activities which Freud reified with the substantive term, "the Unconscious." There may be a describable system of functions that terminate in felt events, i.e., something that could fairly be called "the unconscious system"; but so far I do not think we

have found more than a few lines of functional development, which may or may not belong to a single system. In this respect the theoretical basis of classical psychoanalysis is overassumptive. But the inconceivability with which it has often been charged stems from a philosophical error that is remediable—the belief that desires, ideas or emotions cannot be psychologically engendered and psychologically modified if they are essentially physiological processes, so that physiological psychology and “dynamic” psychology are rival sciences. As soon as feeling is regarded as a phase of a physiological process instead of a product (perhaps a by-product) of it, a new entity metaphysically different from it, the paradox of the physical and psychical disappears; for the thesis I hope to substantiate here is that the entire psychological field—including human conception, responsible action, rationality, knowledge—is a vast and branching development of feeling. This does not mean that all reasoning is “really” rationalization, all judgment “really” emotional, all moral intentions specious, and so on. There is not some primitive form of feeling which is its “real” form, any more than a bird is “really” an egg or water is “really” a vapor. Emotion as we know it is not even a primitive form of feeling; it is not a rudimentary nervous process, such as fairly simple organisms might exhibit, in a psychical phase. Human emotion is phylogenetically a high development from simpler processes, and reason is another one; human mentality is an unsurveyably complex dynamism of their interactions with each other, and with several further specialized forms of cerebral activity, implicating the whole organic substructure. Our knowledge of neural functions is as yet very scrappy and tentative, but I think research has reached the point at which the understanding of these specializations becomes a scientific target rather than a piece of science fiction.

As there are many distinct nervous processes, some originating at the periphery of the central nervous system, others within it, especially in its core which is the brain, so there are many ways in which activities may be felt. The most important distinction within the realm of feeling is between what is *felt as impact* and what is *felt as autogenic action*, or to alternately state the latter, *felt as action*. The existence of these two fundamental modes of feeling rests on the nature of vitality itself. The pattern of stimulus and response, the guiding principle of most psychological techniques, especially in the laboratory of the animal psychologist, is a simplified schema derived from that natural division.

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In our semantic studies we generally assume that there is a clear distinction between the literal meaning of a word or a statement and its

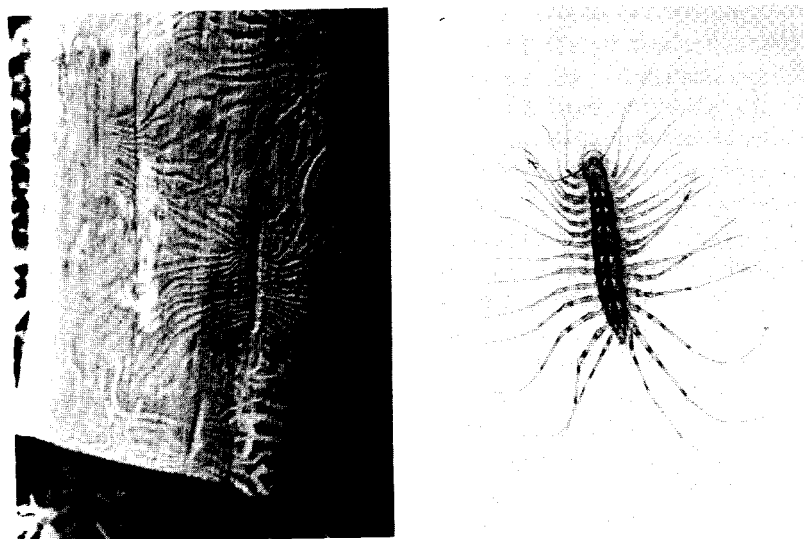


Figure 3-1. (Left) carvings of Bark Beetle (probably *Scolytus*); (right) house centipede, *Scutigera forceps*. (Left photo by Henry F. Dunbar; right photo by Louis Darling.)

metaphorical extensions. This assumption, which is almost a premise of common sense to civilized human beings, may nonetheless be unsafe in reconstructing the part language has played in the articulation not only of ideas, but of perception, the making of the world out of the fragmentary findings which prompt our overt actions and covert felt responses. The primitive use of words may have been much less bound to specifiable objects than its present use, much richer in connotation and therefore more elastic in denotation, so that literal and metaphorical meanings were not distinguishable, but the same word simply meant a variety of things which could all symbolize each other. The anthropological doctrine that primitive men knew the physical world before they were aware of mental activity, and borrowed words with physical meanings to refer metaphorically to mental states and functions, is open to doubt. On grounds of more general phylogenetic patterns it is at least as reasonable to suppose that the light of the sun and the light of reason or of joy were named by the same word because they were charged with the same feeling, and consequently taken as the same thing, and that their distinct characters only showed up in language in the course of its logical development. The physical meaning became the "literal" one because it was the most public and therefore socially the most negotiable one. Physical light is a permanent, ever-available symbol for everything that "light" may have meant in its earliest uses, which were probably quite spontaneous applications to a large vague class of things similarly felt.

Knowledge begins, then, with the formulation of experience in

many haphazard ways, by the imposition of available images on new experiences as fast as they arise; it is a process of imagining not fictitious things, but reality, the making of reality out of impressions which would otherwise pass without record. The depth and reach of the imaginative functions in the making of human mentality will be discussed in a later part of this essay, but their very early occurrence is important here. The imposition of imagery on all materials that present themselves for perception, whether peripheral or intraorganic, enters into the most naive experience, and into the making of our "empirical" world. It is more primitive than the adoption of any "model." The use of a model belongs to a higher level of conception, the level of discursive thought and deliberate analogical reasoning. But the process of seeing things as exemplifications of subjectively created images gives us the original, objective phenomena that theoretical reasoning seeks to understand in causal terms, often with the help of highly abstract working models.

To return, at long last, to the unanswered question: who has a naive but intimate and expert knowledge of feeling? Who knows what feeling is like? Above all, probably, the people who make its image—artists, whose entire work is the making of forms which express the nature of feeling. Feeling is *like* the dynamic and rhythmic structures created by artists; artistic form is always the form of felt life, whether of impression, emotion, overt action, thought, dream or even obscure organic process rising to a high level and going into psychical phase, perhaps acutely, perhaps barely and vaguely. It is the way acts and impacts feel that makes them important in art.

In the course of projecting the forms of feeling into visible, audible or poetic material, an artist cannot escape an exact and intimate knowledge of those passages of sentience which he succeeds in expressing. He is not a psychologist, interested in human motivation and behavior; he simply creates an image of that phase of events which only the organism wherein they occur ever knows. This image, however, serves two purposes in human culture, one individual, one social: it articulates our own life of feeling so that we become conscious of its elements and its intricate and subtle fabric, and it reveals the fact that the basic forms of feeling are common to most people at least within a culture, and often far beyond it, since a great many works do seem expressive and important to almost everyone who judges them by artistic standards. Art is the surest affidavit that feeling, despite its absolute privacy, repeats itself in each individual life. It is not surprising that this is so, for the organic events which culminate in being felt are largely the same in all of us, at least in their biologically known aspects, below the level of sentience. Yet in the highest development—the psychical phase of activities hard to observe even in ourselves, except through some focusing and arresting device—individual differences may be extreme. One

cannot safely argue from uniformity at one level of vital processes to uniformity at another, that is, from physiological directly to psychological similarities among creatures of a species, especially the most highly individuated species, Man. That is why psychology is not a "branch" of physiology: there is no way in which physiology can put forth such a branch. But if we can find systematic access to the intricate and multifarious ways of feeling which build up the whole pattern of the mind in the course of human life, we may hope to trace them to their sources below the psychological level, and perhaps conjoin two sciences in a single system of facts, once we really have two sciences.

The direct perception of artistic import, however, is not systematic and cannot be manipulated according to any rule. It is intuitive, immediate, and its deliverances are ineffable. That is why no amount of artistic perceptiveness ever leads to scientific knowledge of the reality expressed, which is the life of feeling. What it gives us is always and only an image. But without this or some other image we cannot ask questions about the empirical data with which knowledge begins, because the image enters into the objectification of the data themselves. Unless they are objectively seen and intimately known we cannot formulate scientific questions and hypotheses about them.

Feeling is a dynamic pattern of tremendous complexity. Its whole relation to life, the fact that all sorts of processes may culminate in feeling with or without direct regard to each other, and that vital activity goes on at all levels continuously, make mental phenomena the most protean subject matter in the world. Our best identification of such phenomena is through images that hold and present them for our contemplation; and their images are works of art.

What makes a work important is not the category of its expressed feeling, which may be obvious or, on the contrary, impossible to name, but the articulation of the experiential form. In actual felt activity the form is elusive, for it collapses into a condensed and foreshortened memory almost as fast as the experience passes; to hold and contemplate it requires an image which can be held for contemplation. But there is no simple image of our inner dynamisms as there is of visually perceived forms and colors and of sound patterns. A symbol capable of articulating the forms of feeling is, therefore, necessarily presented in some sort of projection as an extraorganic structure that conveys the movement of emotive and perceptive processes. Such a projection is a work of art. It presents the semblance of feeling so directly to logical intuition that we seem to perceive feeling itself in the work; but of course the work does not contain feeling, any more than a proposition about the mortality of Socrates contains a philosopher. It only presents a form which is subtly but entirely congruent with forms of mentality and vital experience, which we recognize intuitively as something very much like feeling; and this abstract likeness to feeling teaches one, without effort or explicit awareness, what feeling is like.