

## Why Susanne K. Langer Needed Wittgenstein: An Early Challenge to Analytic Philosophy

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### Abstract

Early analytic philosophy is often portrayed as progressing from the logical analysis of language toward the program of scientific philosophy associated with the Vienna Circle. Yet the philosophical landscape of the late 1920s and early 1930s was shaped by several intersecting developments, including Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of symbolic representation in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. This paper examines a largely overlooked point of intersection between these traditions through the early work of Susanne K. Langer.

I argue that Wittgenstein plays a structural role in the architecture of Langer's *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930). His theory of symbolic representation provides the analytic foundation for her account of meaning. However, the trajectory of Langer's argument reveals a fundamental tension within the Tractarian framework: while logical symbolism is necessary for the analysis of meaning, it remains insufficient for accounting for symbolic understanding. In developing this point, Langer transforms the distinction between saying and showing into a broader theory of symbolic forms grounded in insight, Gestalt, and non-discursive modes of meaning.

By situating Langer within both the transatlantic reception of analytic philosophy and her intellectual engagement with Cassirer, the paper reconstructs her as a mediating figure between logical analysis and a more expansive philosophy of symbolism. Her work helps explain the notable interest it attracted among members of the Vienna Circle, while also revealing an alternative trajectory within early analytic philosophy – one in which the limits of formal analysis are not merely acknowledged but actively reworked.

Langer's engagement with Wittgenstein thus emerges as an early and systematic attempt to move beyond the Tractarian framework from within, anticipating later philosophical developments in which meaning and rationality are understood as embedded in broader symbolic and historically mediated practices.

### Introduction

Why did Susanne K. Langer need Ludwig Wittgenstein? At first glance, the question appears puzzling. In *The Practice of Philosophy* (1930), Langer relies extensively on Wittgenstein's theory of symbolic representation as developed in the *Tractatus*. Yet the trajectory of her argument leads well beyond the Tractarian framework toward a broader theory of symbolism that bears striking affinities to the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. Why, then, did Langer begin from Wittgenstein at all?

This paper argues that Wittgenstein plays a structural role in the architecture of Langer's book. His theory of symbolic representation provides the analytic foundation for her account of meaning, but the development of her argument exposes a structural limitation within the Tractarian approach itself. In pursuing the analysis of symbolic representation, Langer shows that logical symbolism is necessary yet insufficient for explaining symbolic understanding. The very attempt to ground meaning in formal symbolic relations generates questions—concerning insight, form, and the organization of experience—that cannot be resolved within the limits of logical analysis alone. In this way, her engagement with Wittgenstein becomes an early and systematic challenge to the limits of the analytic project.

Langer's engagement with Wittgenstein becomes even more striking when placed within the broader intellectual landscape of the late 1920s and early 1930s. During this period, several philosophical developments were independently grappling with the limits of formal systems and the conditions of meaning and knowledge. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* had introduced a rigorous account of symbolic representation grounded in logical form; at roughly the same time, Cassirer was developing a philosophy of symbolic forms that emphasized the plurality of symbolic structures through which human understanding is organized; and the emerging sociology of knowledge associated with Karl Mannheim raised new questions about the historical and social conditions under which knowledge claims arise. Although these developments are usually treated separately, they converge on a common philosophical problem: how symbolic structures shape the conditions of meaning and understanding. Langer's *The Practice of Philosophy* occupies a largely overlooked point of intersection between these traditions.

Recent scholarship has begun to recover Langer's role in the early development of analytic philosophy in the United States (Verhaegh 2024), yet her engagement with Wittgenstein has not been fully understood as an internal critique of the Tractarian framework. This broader context also helps illuminate a historical puzzle surrounding the reception of Langer's book. Despite developing a theory of symbolic understanding that ultimately moves beyond the logical framework of the *Tractatus*, *The Practice of Philosophy* attracted notable attention among members of the Vienna Circle. Figures such as Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap engaged with Langer's work at a time

when the interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophy was still unsettled. Why would philosophers committed to a program of logical analysis find Langer's project compelling, given that it expands the analysis of symbolism beyond purely logical representation? The answer, I suggest, lies precisely in the role Wittgenstein plays in the architecture of her argument.

To understand the philosophical significance of Langer's project, therefore, is not merely to trace an influence, but to reconstruct a transformation. Wittgenstein provides the analytic foundation; Langer reveals its limits; and her turn toward symbolic form—shaped in part by her engagement with Cassirer—reconfigures the problem of meaning beyond the propositional domain. Within this broader transatlantic milieu—one that would later find a distinctive articulation at Harvard—the problem of symbolic understanding becomes inseparable from the historicity of rational frameworks.

### **1. Wittgenstein as the Structural Foundation of Langer's Theory of Symbolism**

To understand why Langer begins from Wittgenstein, it is necessary to examine the role that the *Tractatus* plays in the architecture of *The Practice of Philosophy*. Langer does not merely cite Ludwig Wittgenstein as one influence among others; rather, she adopts his theory of symbolic representation as the analytic point of departure for her own account of meaning. In this respect, Wittgenstein's framework is not external to her project, but constitutive of its initial structure.

At the center of Wittgenstein's early philosophy lies the claim that meaningful representation depends on logical form. Propositions are able to represent states of affairs because they share a structural correspondence with the reality they depict. This picture theory of meaning establishes a strict distinction between what can be said—that is, expressed in propositions with determinate logical form—and what can only be shown, namely the conditions that make representation possible but cannot themselves be stated within language. Logical form, on this view, is not an object of description but a condition of intelligibility.

Langer takes over this framework as the starting point for her own analysis of symbolism. Her early chapters reveal a sustained engagement with the idea that meaning arises through symbolic structures that mediate between thought and world. Like Wittgenstein, she treats symbolism not as a secondary

feature of language, but as the very condition under which meaning becomes possible. As Langer emphasizes in her early discussion of philosophy's relation to science, philosophy should not be understood as imitating the empirical methods of the sciences. Instead, she reflects on what she calls the "scandal" of philosophy's apparent lack of empirical results in order to articulate its distinctive methodological role (Langer 1930, 8–10). This initial distinction between philosophical inquiry and empirical science prepares the ground for Langer's subsequent emphasis on symbolic structure, which can be fruitfully compared to the Tractarian conception of representation.

Yet Langer's appropriation of Wittgenstein is neither passive nor merely exegetical. What distinguishes her project is the way in which she mobilizes the Tractarian framework to pose a further question: whether the logical conception of symbolism is sufficient to account for the full range of meaningful experience. While Wittgenstein sharply circumscribes the domain of sense by distinguishing between what can be said and what can only be shown (Wittgenstein 1921), Langer treats this distinction as the beginning of a problem rather than its resolution.

This becomes particularly evident in her treatment of symbolic understanding. If meaning depends on symbolic form, then the analysis of logical propositions captures only one dimension of symbolic activity. Human understanding, as Langer presents it, also involves forms of insight, pattern-recognition, and non-discursive articulation that cannot be fully reduced to propositional structure. The Tractarian framework, while indispensable for clarifying the conditions of representation, proves unable to accommodate these broader dimensions of meaning.

In this way, Wittgenstein's theory of symbolic representation functions in Langer's work as both foundation and limit. It provides the conceptual apparatus through which the problem of meaning is initially articulated, but it also reveals, through its own constraints, the need for a more expansive account of symbolism.

## **2. From Logical Form to Symbolic Insight: Langer on the Limits of Propositional Meaning**

If Ludwig Wittgenstein provides the analytic foundation for Langer's account of symbolism, the subsequent development of her argument reveals the limits

of this framework. These limits emerge from within the very attempt to apply the Tractarian conception of symbolic form to the broader domain of human understanding.

In the *Tractatus*, the distinction between what can be said and what can only be shown serves to delimit the space of meaningful discourse. Logical form, while indispensable for representation, cannot itself be represented; it is exhibited in the structure of propositions rather than stated within them. For Wittgenstein, this distinction marks the boundary of language and, with it, the boundary of sense.

Langer adopts this distinction, but she does not treat it as a final delimitation. Instead, she interprets it as an indication that meaning cannot be exhausted by propositional articulation. The domain of what is “shown” in symbolic activity becomes the focal point of her analysis. The Tractarian limit is thus transformed into a philosophical problem: how are we to understand those forms of meaning that are not discursively stated, yet nonetheless cognitively significant?

It is in this context that Susanne K. Langer introduces the notion of *insight* as a mode of understanding that is not reducible to discursive, propositional reasoning. As she puts it, “through the symbolic act or image, an important past event plays into the later history of the organism, without being discursively known” (Langer 1930, 164). This form of understanding, she insists, is nonetheless genuine knowledge, for “there is no knowledge without form,” even where such form is not reducible to discursive inference. Langer’s analysis of insight is closely connected to her engagement with Gestalt theory, where meaning arises through the apprehension of structured wholes rather than the aggregation of discrete elements (Langer 1930, 164–166).

Langer’s analysis of insight is closely connected to her engagement with Gestalt theory. The recognition of form is not the aggregation of discrete elements but the apprehension of an organized whole. Meaning does not arise solely from the logical arrangement of symbols, but from the structural relations that give those symbols their significance within a broader configuration. Logical form thus appears as only one instance of a more general phenomenon of form.

At this point, the logical framework of the *Tractatus* is rendered incomplete. Indeed, Langer explicitly resists the classification of such forms of understanding as irrational, insisting that even where meaning is incommunicable, it remains “the very acme of logical procedure” (Langer 1930, 166). While it correctly identifies the limits of propositional language, it leaves untheorized the positive role of non-discursive forms of meaning. Langer’s project can therefore be understood as an attempt to extend the analysis of symbolism so as to include both discursive and non-discursive forms.

This expansion leads directly toward a conception of symbolic form that resonates with Ernst Cassirer. Meaning is no longer confined to the logical structure of propositions, but is distributed across a plurality of symbolic forms. What appears in Wittgenstein as a limit of language becomes, in Langer, the opening toward a more expansive conception of symbolic understanding.

### **3. From Symbolic Logic to Symbolic Forms: Langer, Cassirer, and the Limits of Analytic Philosophy**

The tension that emerges in Langer’s appropriation of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of symbolic representation forces a decisive shift in her account of meaning. If logical form is necessary for representation but insufficient for explaining symbolic understanding, then the problem is no longer how symbols represent, but how different forms of symbolism structure experience.

It is at this point that her engagement with Ernst Cassirer becomes philosophically decisive. Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms provides a conceptual framework in which meaning arises through a plurality of symbolic systems (Cassirer 1923–1929)—language, myth, art, and science—each governed by its own internal organization. Langer’s expansion beyond propositional meaning thus converges with Cassirer’s broader claim that symbolic form, rather than logical structure alone, constitutes the basis of human understanding.

From this perspective, the distinction between saying and showing undergoes a fundamental transformation. In Wittgenstein, it marks the limit of articulation; in Langer’s reconstruction, it becomes the starting point for a broader analysis of symbolic activity. The domain of what is “shown” is no

longer relegated to silence (Wittgenstein 1921), but is reinterpreted as encompassing forms of meaning that demand philosophical articulation in their own right.

The philosophical significance of this move becomes clearer when situated within the intellectual context of Langer's work. Although *The Practice of Philosophy* emerges from the analytic environment of Harvard and Radcliffe under figures such as Alfred North Whitehead and Henry M. Sheffer, it does not align with the trajectory that would later define analytic philosophy in the United States. Its attempt to integrate logical analysis with a broader theory of symbolic meaning places it at an intersection that remained largely underdeveloped within the analytic mainstream. This marginal position is philosophically significant: it reflects not a failure of the project, but the absence of a conceptual space within early analytic philosophy for integrating logical analysis with a broader theory of symbolic form.

Seen from this perspective, Langer's engagement with Ludwig Wittgenstein assumes a significance that extends beyond its immediate historical reception. By transforming the analytic framework of the *Tractatus* through a theory of symbolic forms, she articulates a trajectory in which the limits of logical analysis give way to a more historically mediated conception of meaning. It is within this broader intellectual milieu—one that would later find a distinctive articulation at Harvard—that such questions would be taken up in new ways, most notably in mid-twentieth-century philosophy of science, the broader implications of which have been developed in greater detail elsewhere (Author 2025).

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that Susanne K. Langer's engagement with Ludwig Wittgenstein is neither incidental nor merely exegetical, but structurally constitutive of her philosophical project. By adopting the account of symbolic representation developed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Langer secures a rigorous analytic foundation for her theory of meaning. Yet the development of her argument reveals that this framework cannot fully account for the broader range of symbolic understanding that includes insight, pattern, and non-discursive form.

The movement of Langer's argument can thus be understood as a transformation internal to early analytic philosophy itself. What begins as an analysis of logical symbolism leads to the recognition that symbolic meaning exceeds the boundaries of propositional articulation. This recognition, in turn, motivates a shift toward a more expansive conception of symbolic form, one that finds philosophical articulation in her engagement with Ernst Cassirer.

Seen in this light, *The Practice of Philosophy* occupies a distinctive position within the philosophical landscape of the early twentieth century. It reveals a structural limitation within the Tractarian framework while articulating a path beyond it through a broader theory of symbolic activity. That this trajectory did not become central to the subsequent development of analytic philosophy helps explain both the limited reception of Langer's early work and its continued philosophical relevance.

At the same time, this reconstruction suggests that Langer's project forms part of a wider intellectual shift in which questions of meaning become inseparable from the symbolic and historically mediated conditions of understanding. In this respect, her engagement with Wittgenstein may be seen not only as an early challenge to the limits of analytic philosophy, but also as a conceptual moment within a larger development whose implications extend into mid-twentieth-century philosophy of science.

## References

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