

Ontology and Philosophical Methodology in the Early Susanne Langer

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1. Introduction

Susanne Langer (1895-1985) was an American philosopher born in New York City to wealthy German immigrants. She apparently was a precious child whose formative years were consumed with literary, artistic, and musical pursuits, as well as a strong interest in philosophy. This interest led her to read the *Critique of Pure Reason* while still a teenager. She majored in philosophy in college at Radcliffe, where she graduated in 1920. After a year at the University of Vienna in 1921-1922, she returned to Radcliffe, where she received an M.A. in 1924 and a Ph.D. in 1926, both in philosophy. Among her teachers at Radcliff were Ralph Barton Berry, Alfred Hoernlé, Henry Sheffer (famous for the stroke named after him), and Alfred North Whitehead. The latter two were probably the most influential: in Sargent (1960: 94), Langer claims that her 1937 book on symbolic logic “presents symbolic logic as Sheffer taught it ...his method is all here”, and Whitehead was her official dissertation supervisor. With regard to her early work, Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein were clearly very important.¹

As the title suggests, I will focus here on Langer’s early views on ontology and philosophical methodology. The partition of a philosopher’s life into earlier and later periods is rarely precise and not always illuminating. But, in the case of Susanne Langer, a reasonable place to draw a line is in the time period immediately preceding the publication of her third book, *Philosophy in a New Key: a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*.² Let this line mark the end of her early period. It is less clear when the central the central ideas of her early period first germinated, but seeds of them can be found in 1924, two years prior to her 1926 defense of her dissertation “A Logical Analysis of Meaning”.³

Langer’s early views on ontology and philosophical methodology are not disparate topics; instead, there are intimate connections between them. First, some of her views about ontology both constrain and partially determine her views about the proper methodology for philosophical inquiry. But, second, some of her views about philosophical methodology seem in tension with some of her ontological commitments. The primary goal of this paper is to extensively describe these connections. Although I focus on her early works, I will sometimes

¹ These brief biographical remarks are based on Sargent (1960), Dryden (2003), and Lyon (2005).

² This book was first published in 1941 and by a conservative estimate has sold over half a million copies; see Dryden (2003: 195). This, suffice it to say, is an extraordinarily large number for a philosophy book published by an academic press.

³ Why 1924? While exploring the collection of her literary remains, housed at Houghton Library at Harvard University, I came across a notebook titled, “Secretary’s Notebook Seminary in Philosophic Method”, dated 1924. In this notebook, it is recorded that during one of their meetings, Langer defended the view that, “the analytic method is the only method in philosophy”. Another interesting view attributed to Langer in this notebook is that, “the choice of postulates and theorems is a personal matter, part of philosophy, but not as a field for method”. This last remark seems to contain the seed of the metaphysical anti-realism that will be one of the central themes discussed in this paper.

briefly discuss later works, including unpublished papers, when doing so either illuminates the earlier work or demonstrates the continuity of an idea through various phases of her career.

Because Langer is relatively unknown – although I imagine many readers of this paper will have at least heard of her – it’s reasonable to wonder what might motivate this project. Part of the motivation, frankly, is that she is now relatively unknown, despite the fact that she published quite a lot during her lifetime. She wrote a lot – she published nine books and numerous articles.⁴ But much of her work has not been subject to extensive critical discussion.⁵ The ratio of primary to secondary literature is surprisingly very lopsided! But there are further motivations for the project.

First, insofar as we seek an accurate understanding of the history of analytic philosophy, we cannot simply ignore those figures who are now on the margins. A good recipe for creating a mythology rather than a genuine history of a philosophical tradition is to focus on only a few members of that tradition. We mismeasure the size of an ocean if we look only at the big fish in it. And Langer was at least a “notable fish” during her own time. Schlick (1979: 219), in his 1932 piece, “The Future of Philosophy”, called Langer’s (1930) book “excellent”, even though he disagreed with Langer’s claim that philosophy could be a science. Blumberg and Feigl (1931: 281) took her work to be worth noting, along with that of P.W. Bridgman and C.I. Lewis. According to Limbeck-Lilienau (2010: 129-130), in 1933 Carnap applied for a Rockefeller foundation fellowship to visit philosophers at Harvard, and Langer was one of the philosophers Carnap explicitly mentioned in this application. Finally, Holton (1992: 53) lists her among the more “well-known” figures at an international conference at Harvard in 1939.

Second, investigating Langer’s early writings sheds light on some of the paths that the tradition of analytic philosophy took as it developed. Even if Langer was not considered a “big fish” of the analytic tradition during her time, she swam in the same waters as those we now recognize as such, and a dissection of her literary body will help discern what ideas were digested. A small example illustrates this: according to Floyd (2009: 1999), Langer’s 1926 dissertation was one of only two “Harvard” dissertations prior to 1932 to even mention, let alone critically discuss, Frege and his work.⁶ Frege is widely-regarded as the grandfather of the analytic tradition, and yet it seems likely that few participants of this tradition recognized their lineage until at least the 1930s.⁷ But given Langer’s conception of philosophy, the relevance of Frege’s work could not be ignored. By paying attention to how figures now on the margins received those now taken to be canonical, we can better understand how the analytic tradition

⁴ Nine books on philosophy, that is. She also published a book of fairytales prior to becoming a Ph.D. student in philosophy. In her literary remains, I examined what appeared to be at least one unpublished novel as well, though I did not have the time to more than briefly glance at it or them.

⁵ Campbell (1997: 133) says that it is tempting to characterize Langer as the “greatest unknown philosopher in the American tradition”.

⁶ Technically, Langer’s dissertation was at Radcliffe rather than Harvard, since the sexists running the Harvard Corporation refused to grant Harvard degrees to any women during the 20s – and the philosophy department did not grant Ph.D.s to women until decades later! (I believe that the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard proper (rather than via a Radcliffe degree) was Mary Mothersill in 1954; thanks to Gary Ostertag for discussion here.)

⁷ See Dummett (1993: 26).

developed. But we can also help trace out the history of when and how the analytic tradition split from other traditions, and in this context it is also worth noting that Husserl and Meinong are frequently (and respectfully) discussed in her 1926 dissertation as well. The extent of “continental drift” from the analytic tradition was apparently not much then. Another, less small, example can be found in Frost-Arnold’s (this volume) exciting paper, in which he discusses Langer as one of the very first users of the phrase “analytic philosophy” with an articulation of an explicit rationale for grouping philosophers together under it.⁸

Third, Langer clearly and forcefully articulates a view about the proper subject matter of philosophy and the proper methods for pursuing this subject matter. The label “analytic philosophy” itself covers a wide-range of views about these topics. According to Langer, the proper subject matter of philosophy is *meanings*, and philosophy is best construed as the *pursuit of meanings*. This conception of philosophy was articulated and defended by Langer at least as early as 1924, and is maintained throughout her early period – and arguably throughout her philosophical career.⁹ By attending to her work in this period, we can see how an early proponent of the analytic method of philosophy conceived of her work.

Fourth, Langer’s early views on ontology arguably anticipate the anti-realist views of important figures in contemporary metaphysics, such as Eli Hirsch (2002a, 2002b, 2005) and Ernest Sosa (1993, 1998).¹⁰ Insofar as these views are live options for us today, Langer’s version of them will be of contemporary (rather than purely antiquarian) interest.

Here is the plan for the remainder of the paper. Section 2 discusses Langer’s views on ontology. Sections 3 and 4 detail the relevant aspects of Langer’s views on philosophical methodology; section 3 focuses on the nature of analysis and section 4 on Langer’s views about the constructive project of philosophy. Section 5 summarizes the account of Susanne Langer’s early philosophy offered here.

2. Langer’s Early Ontology

Given that the early Langer has been both described as being a logical positivist or at least as being “undeniably influenced by logical positivism”, one might worry about ascribing ontological views to Langer.¹¹ But Langer was never resolutely against metaphysics. On the

⁸ See Langer (1930: 17). See also Innis (2009: 11).

⁹ Hart (2004: 241) claims that Langer believed that all of her later works are still based on her earlier works. As I will occasionally illustrate in what follows, there are many doctrines persisting from the earlier period of her work to much later episodes. See also Innis (2009: 1-3).

¹⁰ Sosa is in turn responding to Putnam; see Putnam (1985 and 1990) for representative discussions of Putnam’s version(s) of anti-realism. And all of Putnam, Hirsch, and Sosa are cognizant of the position of Carnap (1956). Readers of this article will no doubt see many similarities between the positions attributed to Langer and those often attributed to Carnap. I have not found evidence of direct influence of either Carnap or Langer on each other. Both philosophers were influenced by Russell, Frege, and Wittgenstein.

¹¹ Moore (1938: 81) flat-out calls Langer a “logical positivist”, while Hart (2004: 242) claims that Langer was undeniably influenced by logical positivism. Nelson (1994: 277, 290) claims that Langer’s work “emerges” from two traditions: idealism and logical positivism. Blumberg and Feigl (1931: 281) claim that Langer’s work “exhibits related tendencies” to the work of European logical positivists such as Schlick and Carnap. It seems to me that this is because of the common influence of the work of Russell and Wittgenstein on both the logical positivists and the early

contrary, Langer (1930: 36) thinks that metaphysics properly construed is a central part of philosophy.

But what is the proper construal of metaphysics? Langer (1930: 32) claims that metaphysics is the attempt to comprehend all the working notions of science and of common life as implications of a few very general tenets. For Langer (1930: 35), the aim of metaphysics is to discover the meanings of words such as “unity”, “time”, “causality”, “reality”, “truth”, “infinity”, and “god”. According to Langer (1930: 35), “the proper method of metaphysics, like logic and mathematics, is close attention to implications; all philosophy is a study of what is implied in the fundamental notions which are our natural unconscious formulations of experience”. For Langer (1930: 36), philosophy is the search for implications or logical connections between concepts or propositions, while empirical science attempts to establish causal connections. This conception of metaphysics is maintained in later works; for example, Langer (1951: 80) asserts that metaphysics is a study of meanings (as are all philosophical pursuits), and should not be abandoned.

It is not however obvious that Langer’s ontological views are the consequences of any particular study of meanings; at the very least, she does not seem to explicitly derive these ontological views from a conceptual analysis of various terms. It is possible that her metaphysics does not match as closely as she might have hoped with her views on philosophical practice. In any event, in what follows I will articulate her ontological views but not assess any considerations in favor of them; the connections between her views in ontology and philosophical methodology are my primary concern.

Let’s explore Langer’s early ontology. I understand *ontology* to include both *first-order ontology*, which focuses on what there is, and *meta-ontology*, which focuses on philosophical questions concerning first-order ontology. One meta-ontological question is what the various ontological vocabulary, such as “there is”, “exists”, “some”, and “being”, mean.

I’ll focus primarily on Langer’s first-order ontology. But discerning a thinker’s first-order ontology can be tricky if that thinker thinks that ontological expressions are not univocal. Langer (1930: 49) claims that the sense of “existence” which is appropriately ascribed to what she calls “abstract elements” is “entirely different” than that which is appropriately ascribed to physical objects. Langer (1926c: 113) claims that properties do not enjoy the same type of existence as their bearers.¹² And in her unpublished notes, there are hints that she recognized other senses of

Susanne Langer rather than via direct influence of the logical positivists on Langer. Langer’s conception of philosophy was already developing in 1924, and is in full bloom during the writing of her 1930 book. (Thanks to Greg Frost-Arnold for discussion here.) Reichling (1998: 12) characterizes Langer (1930) as a “radical departure from positivism” but even with respect to her much later work, this characterization is too strong.

¹² It is important to carefully separate the question about whether “existence” is univocal from the question of whether there are types of existence or modes of being. (See McDaniel (2009) and (forthcoming) for extensive discussion of both views.)

“exists” as well: she indicates that *options* – things that could be done by an agent – do not exist in the same sense as the actions actually made by that agent.¹³

The view that “exists” is ambiguous was not uncommon in the early 20th century.¹⁴ But it seems to do little explicit work in Langer’s early philosophizing; it is a thesis that she accepts but does not use as an explicit premise in further arguments.¹⁵ Nonetheless, I will understand “ontology” capaciously: one’s ontology includes whatever one thinks that there is, in whatever senses of “there is” one recognizes.

In what follows, I will discuss in turn Langer’s views on the nature of *events*, *facts*, *forms*, and *concepts*.

2.1 Events

Plausibly, events include happenings such as earthquakes and presidential elections. But Langer’s (1926c: 161) considered view seems to be that we and other physical objects are relatively stable, long-lasting events.¹⁶ Whitehead, whom she studied under, is probably an influence here. In any event, she does not seem to invoke a separate category of *thing* or *object* distinct from that of events, although in 2.2. we will briefly re-examine this assertion. As we will see momentarily, the more interesting (and puzzling) contrast is between the categories of event and fact.

According to Langer, events do not have the same structure as facts; they are not projections or reifications of propositions in the way that facts are.¹⁷ Events do not correspond to true declarative sentences, unlike facts, but can be referred to only by way of sub-sentential denoting expressions, such as proper names or demonstratives. Roughly speaking, events can only be named.

Events are constituents of “the” world – more on why scare-quotes here are necessary in a bit – but “the” world is a world not of events (or things), but rather, as Wittgenstein claimed, it is a world of facts. But for Wittgenstein, there are simple objects that play the role of the “substance” of the world. One thereby wonders whether Langer’s events, or at least some subset of them, play a similar role. We’ll return to this question (in 2.2.) once we are clearer about her theory of facts.

¹³ It was Langer’s practice to record summaries of the works of others and summaries of her own ideas on notecards, many of which are preserved in Houghton’s Library at Harvard University. Sargent (1960: 75) briefly discusses Langer’s system of notecards.

¹⁴ See McDaniel (2009) and (forthcoming) for references.

¹⁵ But see the discussion at the end of section 2.2 for a possible place where Langer’s recognition of multiple senses of “exist” might matter.

¹⁶ See also Langer (1933: 186). This is also the judgment of Innis (2009: 5), who claims that Langer’s world is “a processual world”, a world of events and relations, not “stable ‘things’ embodying ‘essences’”.

¹⁷ I doubt whether her ontology contains propositions construed as mind-independent, intrinsically representational bearers of truth-values. Propositions might rather be a *form* common to many sentences, but as we will see in 2.3, forms are not language-independent; and there are passages, which I’ll mention later, in which Langer seems to identify propositions with a species of concepts. (As we will we discuss, concepts in turn seem to be a species of form.)

2.2 Facts

Like many philosophers in the early analytic tradition, Langer's ontology included facts. But she had serious disagreements with her fellow travelers about their nature and structure.

Some commonly held positions views on facts include:

1. There are facts.
2. Facts are not true propositions but rather are what make true propositions true.¹⁸
3. In general, facts have the same structure as propositions; for each fact, there is a proposition made true by that fact that has the same structure as that fact.
4. Everything that is not a fact is a constituent of some fact or other.
5. Each fact has a unique structure, i.e., each fact has a unique decomposition into its constituents. The objectively correct analysis of a fact reveals its unique decomposition.
6. The structure of a fact is independent of both minds and languages.
7. The world is the sum of facts rather than things.

Langer, however, explicitly accepts only 1-3. Langer (1951: 225-226) tells us that logicians understand facts to be hypostasized propositions, and that they are convinced that the form of the fact is the form of the proposition. Langer (1933: 186) tells us that propositions are concepts and that the formulated bits of reality that they "apply to" are facts. Langer (1937: 50) tells us that propositions are logical pictures of states of affairs.¹⁹ Langer (1982: 205) notes that it is generally agreed that facts are truth-makers for true propositions.

I think Langer probably accepts 4, though the textual evidence is not great. Note that, if there are some elements of the world that are not part of facts, then the world does not *divide* into facts – the world is not made up of facts – but rather the world would be a world of facts along with other things. Admittedly, Langer (1933: 185) does deny that "facts are complexes of real objects", which suggests that she denies that real objects are ever constituents of facts. But it is not clear what she means there by "real object". And a natural understanding is that a real object is an object that has a nature that can be described by us but is wholly independent of that description. For reasons that I hope will be soon clear, I doubt she believes there are any real objects in this sense; but I also doubt that she disbelieves in objects. So my inclination is to still ascribe 4 to Langer, but with caution.²⁰

¹⁸ This is stressed by Russell (2004: 182-183), who writes, "I want you to realize that when I speak of a fact I do not mean a particular existing thing, such as Socrates or the rain or the sun. Socrates himself does not render any statement true or false. What I call a fact is the sort of thing that is expressed by a whole sentence, not by a single name like 'Socrates'."

¹⁹ In this text, Langer (1937: 50) says that a state of affairs is a "complex of related objects". It does not seem that she is drawing a distinction between states of affairs and facts in this context, which is after all an introductory logic textbook. Her conception of facts seems to be more "Russellian": a fact is an arrangements of objects rather than the existence of such an arrangement.

²⁰ Christopher Pincock has suggested another possibility, namely, that when Langer denies that facts are complexes of real objects, she is denying that objects are parts of facts in the way that, e.g., a table leg is a part of a table. It is plausible that Langer believes this as well, but I am not sure this fully accounts for what Langer means. On this interpretation, for example, it's not clear why Langer discusses "real objects" as opposed to just "objects". My

Langer explicitly denies 5-6, and much more will be said about how momentarily. Finally, Langer (1926b: 436) denies the presupposition of 7 that there is a unique of totality of facts, but Langer (1962: 148) does say that *our* world is a not a collection of things but rather a collection of facts.²¹ Suffice it to say that her view of facts is non-standard in several respects.

Let's explore her denial of 5. According to Langer, a given fact can have multiple complete analyses that do not conflict with each other. They do not conflict with each other because neither is *the* objectively correct analysis. Langer (1933: 181) thinks that her fellow fact-finders frequently falsely assume that, "a complete analysis is exhaustive of the possibilities of analysis in its object". There is more than one possible analysis of any fact.

These analyses do not conflict because an analysis of a fact is correct only relative to what Langer calls a "logical language". This claim constitutes her denial of 6. Langer (1933: 182) claims that no "structure is absolute" and that no analysis of a fact is the only true analysis. What Langer (1933: 182) means by "a logical language" is not crystal clear, but the idea seems to be this: a logical language consists of a set of relatively primitive expressions – that is, terms that are not defined by any other expressions in that language – and primitive rules for combing the primitive expressions. According to Langer (1933: 182), a logical language divides "material" into relations and the relata of those relations. (Although this is not explicit from the text, Langer's (1933: 179-181) discussion of Ramsey's views on particulars and universals suggests that one-place properties are among the entities that Langer calls "relations".)

Logical languages can thereby differ either with respect to which terms are primitive or in the primitive forms of combination. Langer (1933: 182) tells us that there is "more than one possible base", which seems to mean that there is more than one possible set of primitive expressions adequate for describing the actual world. And that which is a relata of a relation in one language might appear as a relation in another language. Langer (1930: 143) claims that facts might be "differently formulated according to the notions through which they are apprehended". Langer (1951: 230) holds that our world divides into facts "because we so divide it". Langer (1933: 186) also tells us that, "it is highly probable that relations occur only in perspectives".²² Although Langer is not explicit about this, it seems to me that a "perspective" or "logical perspective" is what is shown by a logical language.²³

But for Langer, there is no logical language that is *the* objectively correct language to employ; she seems to reject the claim that certain logical languages have terms that *carve at the joints*, or are natural in the sense of David Lewis (1986), or structural in the sense of Ted Sider (2011). Langer (1933: 182) tells us that "no structure is absolute, no relation peculiar to the

preferred view is that objects are not parts of facts in the same way in which they are parts of other objects, but they are still nonetheless in some way parts; see McDaniel (2009b) for an explication of this kind of compositional pluralism.

²¹ Nelson (1994: 291) suggests that Langer also holds that a necessary condition of even thinking of a world is the engagement in a process of symbolization. I will not adjudicate this claim here.

²² See Langer (1930: 87), where she tells us that differences of forms in a structure are determined by differences of relations.

²³ Innis (2009: 21) claims that a logical perspective is "a form of symbolic projection that subsumes all the features of an object or system of objects under its own constitutive point of view".

matter in hand, no analysis of fact the only true one”. Langer (1933: 182) also explicitly extends this claim even to the logical constants that appear in a given a logical language: “If it can be proved for logic that its most precious concepts are not ultimate, surely we may not assume in metaphysics that these same concepts are reflections of some absolute character of Reality”. Langer (1930: 145) thinks that the notion of an absolute truth – a truth that corresponds to *the* structure of the world – makes sense only given a particular metaphysics, one that she rejects. And in an unpublished, undated, notecard, she writes, “There is no concept which must appear as primitive”. Finally, Langer and Gadol (1950: 123) claim that what logical language we speak “is a matter of convenience or convention” and that it is “senseless” to ask which “world picture” the world most resembles.²⁴

One of the more puzzling aspects of Langer’s early ontology concerns how facts and events relate. Most fundamentally, it is unclear even whether she takes facts to be identical with events. Langer (1933: 185) tells us that facts are not events, but rather are perspectives of events; facts are abstractions that are possible formulations of events. But she also tells us that events as they “fit in a logical universe of discourse” are particular facts, and that facts are “logically construed” events. These claims seem in tension with each other, to say the least.

Similarly, Langer (1951: 227) tells us that a fact is an intellectually formulated event. But Langer (1962: 148) also says that “facts are as much a product of conception as perception”. This latter claim suggests a contrast between things that are simply observed – perhaps these things are events – and things that are partial products of a cognitive process, among which perhaps are facts. (We’ll have more to say about what Langer means by “conception” in 2.4.)

Langer (1933: 186) also says that an event might be thought of as a matrix that gives rise to atomic propositions relative to a logical language; and she explicitly says that this view of events is a kind of “conceptual relativism”. I take it to be a kind of relativism about which facts there are, since corresponding to different (true) atomic propositions are different atomic facts. (More on this passage in a moment.) Finally, in a much later (and briefer) discussion of facts, Langer (1962: 150) asserts that “nature is a far more language made affair than people typically realize”.

So it is not an easy task to see whether, on her view, facts and events are identical. Here are what I consider the most plausible interpretative hypotheses. Both of these hypotheses appeal to forms, and the status of forms in Langer’s philosophy will be discussed in 2.3.

- H1. Events are numerically identical with facts. Which events exist is not relative to a logical language. Facts are arrangements of both forms and non-formal constituents but, for any given fact, which arrangement of these items it is identical with is relative to a logical language.
- H2. Events are not numerically identical with facts. A fact is a hylomorphic compound of an event and a form. Which facts exist is relative to a logical language, but which events exist is not.

²⁴ See also Langer (1957: 92), where she denies that one can “convey reality pure and simple”.

Many of the remarks mentioned earlier suggest H1. The claim that events as they “fit in a logical universe of discourse” are particular facts, and the claim that facts are “logically construed” events both are consonant with H1. And the claim that facts have no unique analysis fits nicely with H1.

However, there are also the passages, noted above, in which Langer flat-out tells us that facts are not events but rather stand in some intimate relation to events. And even the passages in which she appears to identify facts with events can be massaged to fit H2. Perhaps there is an “is” of constitution that can be used in sentences such as “chairs are structured wood objects” and “this statue is formed clay”. And perhaps we can read the claim that facts are “logically construed” events in a similar way: events provide the material for facts, or constitute facts, relative to a logical language. Finally, one way of reading the claim that facts are abstractions from events is that facts are conceptualized events, since, as we will see in 2.4, the object of an act of abstraction is a form, and a concept is a form that has been abstracted.²⁵

Recall that Langer (1933: 186) says that an event might be thought of as a matrix that gives rise to atomic propositions relative to a logical language. Events are something like places of production for atomic propositions. I take this to mean that, for any logical language, there is a corresponding function from events to sets of atomic propositions that are expressible in that logical language. These atomic propositions are “ways of construing” events. But which sets of atomic propositions? Presumably those that are made true by the facts that are partially conceptually constructed from these events. Note that, for each atomic proposition, there is a fact that shares its form and is a truth-maker for that proposition. And so an event might also be thought of as a matrix that gives rise to atomic *facts* relative to a logical language. That is, for any logical language, there is a corresponding function from events to atomic facts that make true the atomic propositions expressible in that logical language. This would be a kind of “conceptual” (or at least “linguistic”) relativism: what facts can be constructed out of events is a relative matter, and what it is relative to is a logical language.²⁶

Finally, there are passages in which Langer ascribes apparently incompatible properties to events and facts. I’ll mention two examples.

First, Langer holds that (1933: 185-187) we can say of events that they are past, present, or future, but we cannot sensibly say of facts that they are past, present, or future. I do not take Langer here to be embracing a metaphysical distinction between the present moment and the rest. Rather, the thought seems to be that a fact is “intrinsically dated”, perhaps by containing an interval of time as a constituent. So, for example, there is no fact that Bertrand Russell is witty,

²⁵ A third interpretative hypothesis is that facts are not hylomorphic constructions of events and forms but rather are forms themselves: they are forms of events. On this hypothesis, some forms do exist only relative to a logical language, namely those that are facts, and probably all other forms do as well.

²⁶ Dryden (1997: 171) claims that Langer argues that “facts are dependent on the notions through which they are apprehended”. For reasons that will become apparent, I think this is not quite right. Both facts and “notions” – provided notions are understood as concepts – exist only relative to logical languages on my interpretation, and there is no clear reason to take either facts or concepts to have a kind of metaphysical priority over the other. If “a notion” is understood as a psychological state – what Langer calls “a conception” – then I don’t see any direct evidence that Langer believes that facts depend on notions.

but there is the fact that, in 1905, Bertrand Russell is witty. The claim that this fact is past sounds weird, and it sounds terrible to say that it is present or future. So there is some plausibility to the claim that facts can't be said to be past, present, or future.

Second, as noted in 2.1, events can only be designated by sub-sentential expressions such as names. Facts, however, are the ontological correlates of true propositions, and hence could be thought of as the referents of the sentences that express these true propositions.²⁷ The metaphysical differences between events and facts correspond to differences in their possible modes of linguistic representation.

Unfortunately, I doubt that there is sufficient direct textual evidence to settle whether H1 or H2 is the correct interpretation of Langer's views about events and facts. We need to also assess the philosophical consequences of these interpretations.

If H1 is correct, we can't think of facts as simply being individuated by their constituents; the fact that Fa is not simply the arrangement of a's having F, for example. (Nor would it simply be the existence of such an arrangement.) Facts would be individuated however exactly events are individuated. Moreover, on any given language, a fact has constituents, some of which are forms, but some of which are not. But to which ontological category do the non-formal constituents of facts belong? Are they also events, which in turn are identical to facts? Or does Langer implicitly recognize an ontological category of *object* as well as *event*?

H1 leads to some hard questions. But H2 does too.

First, note that, if either H1 or H2 is correct, then Langer is committed to a further thesis: at least for those forms of events which help constitute facts, which of these forms exist (or at least are exemplified) is also relative to a logical language. I think she accepts this thesis. As noted earlier, Langer (1933: 186) thinks that it is highly probable that relations occur only in perspectives, i.e., are exemplified only relative to a logical language. Langer (1933: 182) also tells us that "constituents and relations alike depend upon a particular logical formulation of a system..." (Note that this last sentence, though, supports H1 more than H2, since if events are constituents of facts, they do not depend on the "logical formulations of a system".)

H2 also leads us to further metaphysical questions about the relation between events and facts that are not explicitly answered by anything in Langer's texts. Plausibly, some events are complex: they are composed of other events. Moreover, a complex event exists in virtue of and only because of some of the relations obtaining between its constituent events. If these relations exist (or are exemplified) only relative to a logical language, then the complex events also exist only relative to a logical language.

Given H2, we have a choice between three options. The first option is to deny that her ontology contains complex events. The second option is to deny that complex events are essentially complex: whether they are complex, and how they decompose, is relative to a logical language as well. The third option is to claim that a more accurate statement of Langer's view is

²⁷ There are many places in which Langer says that true propositions are "representations" or "expressions" of facts; see Langer (1933: 185) for one example.

that *simple* events are what exist irrespective of logical language, and that both facts and complex events are relative existences. Simple events are those things that are denoted by what Langer (1933: 187) calls “unanalyzed proper names”.

Since any of these choices commits Langer to simple events, it might be illuminating to compare the role that simple events play in Langer’s theory with the role that objects play in Wittgenstein’s Tractarian ontology.²⁸

For the early Wittgenstein, the world is a world of facts. But there are sub-factual entities, which he calls *objects*. Like Langer’s events, objects can be designated only by sub-sentential expressions; roughly speaking, objects can only be named.²⁹

Wittgenstein’s objects are *simple* and make up the substance of the world.³⁰ Does this mean that there are no complex objects? My inclination is to ascribe to Wittgenstein the view that there are complex objects – or at least sentences like “there are things like tables that have parts” are true when uttered in ordinary contexts – but facts about complex objects can be analyzed wholly in terms of facts about the simple constituents of these objects.³¹ Complex objects exist in virtue of and only because of their related parts, which means they exist in virtue of and only because of the existence of certain facts about their simple constituents. Complex objects therefore do not constitute the substance of the world; they are not that from which all facts are constituted. So far, there are striking similarities between Wittgenstein’s views on objects and the interpretation of Langer’s views on (simple) events that I am offering.

A further analogy can be noted given that Wittgenstein’s (simple) objects play the role of invariants: they are what are constant across different possible worlds.³² Each possible world contains the same domain of simple objects; but possible worlds can differ with respect to which complex objects exist at them. Similarly, Langer’s (simple) events are invariants: they are what are constant across different possible logical languages that are each adequate for describing the actual world.

If simple events are invariant across different possible logical languages, then plausibly something else besides the events in question must vary in tandem with the facts that vary. I assume that this extra something are forms. Note that Langer (1930: 76) claims that there is “a kind of relativity of abstract forms”; Langer (1930: 135-136) also tells us that there is no such thing as *the* real form of a thing or event, that all thought must have some “logical constants” but

²⁸ Especially since Langer (1933: 180) herself briefly discusses Wittgenstein’s views on simple objects and the structure of facts.

²⁹ Black (1966: 57) suggests that objects are the meanings of simple signs or “logically proper names”.

³⁰ See 2.02 and 2.021 of Wittgenstein (2001).

³¹ See 2.0201 of Wittgenstein (2001).

³² See 2.024 of Wittgenstein (2001). Proops (2013) has an interesting discussion that is worth quoting:

The *Tractatus*'s notion of substance is the modal analogue of Kant's temporal notion. Whereas for Kant, substance is that which “persists,” (i.e., exists at all times), for Wittgenstein it is that which, figuratively speaking, “persists” through a “space” of possible worlds. Less metaphorically, Tractarian substance is that which exists with respect to every possible world. It follows that the objects that “constitute the substance of the world” (2.021) are necessary existents.

these can be variously chosen, and that although all experience must have a “specific pattern”, many such patterns are possible. Langer (1930: 136) claims that all concrete reality has multiple forms and “an amorphous content”; according to her, there is never an “absolutely true description of a thing”. Finally, Langer (1930: 137-138) holds that logical perspectives exclude one another, that they cannot be “ideally put together”, but these perspectives are not “partial” in a way analogous to how a visual perspective is partial. There is nothing that is “the” form of everything, but nonetheless, in a form, the “entire thing” can be given to us. There can be several equally adequate descriptions of reality.³³

Suppose all this is correct. Then we find in Langer’s early work a striking anticipation of the anti-metaphysical worries of philosophers such as of Ernest Sosa and Eli Hirsch. Consider first Sosa (1998: 409):

Conceptual relativism can be viewed as a doctrine rather like the relativism involved in the truth of indexical sentences or thoughts. In effect, “existence claims” can be viewed as implicitly indexical, and this is what my conceptual relativist in ontology is suggesting. So when someone says that Os exist, this is to be evaluated relative to the position of the speaker or thinker in “conceptual space” (in a special sense). Relative to the thus distinguished conceptual scheme, it might be that Os do exist, although relative to many other conceptual schemes it might rather be true to say that “Os do not exist.”

The parallels between the interpretation of Langer developed so far and the doctrine Sosa calls “conceptual relativism” are clear.

But a comparison with Hirsch (2002a, 2002b, 2005) is also interesting, although in one important respect less straightforward. Hirsch believes in the possibility of alternative languages containing expressions that function syntactically and inferentially like the existential quantifier but differ in meaning from it. Many of these alternative languages are as good at describing the actual world as our language, despite this difference. In some of them, one can truthfully utter a sentence that sounds like, “There are no composite objects; everything is a simple”, while in others one can truthfully utter a sentence that sounds like, “There are composite objects; in fact, whenever there are some things, they compose a whole”. One is tempted to say that, for Hirsch, composite objects exist relative to a language. And is also tempted to say that the compositional analyses of such objects is also relative to a language.

But these temptations should be resisted. For Hirsch, there are different possible meanings for expressions like “there is” or “exist”. It is not true that tables exist relative to the language we speak but not relative to some other language. Whether something exists is not relative to anything, let alone language. However, these alternative languages can provide

³³ Langer (1951: 85) tells us that there is no such thing as *the* form of the real world, and moreover the picture provided by physics is of one form, while the “manifest image” provides another. One “construction” may “rule out” the other, but this doesn’t mean that both can’t be in some sense true. See also Nelson (1994: 290) for brief discussion.

equally adequate descriptions of reality. We are not mandated by the world to speak a language in which the existence of composites can be truthfully affirmed.

So does Langer accept that there is one sense of “exist”, and that some of what there is exists (in that sense) only relative to some language? Or does Langer anticipate Hirsch’s view on which there are many possible meanings for quantifier descriptions, none of which is mandated by reality? Her explicit statements suggest something like the former position, although it is worth recalling that she does think there is more than one sense of “exists”. But perhaps a more charitable interpretation is the latter. After all, nothing in Langer’s texts commits her to denying that logical languages can differ with respect to what sorts of quantifier expressions they contain. We’ll revisit this question at the end of 2.3.

2.3 Forms

Although talk of forms is pervasive through Langer’s work, she seems largely indifferent to the exact metaphysics of forms themselves.³⁴ That said, we can indirectly infer constraints on what metaphysic to ascribe to her from her explicit remarks.

According to Langer (1937: 23), a thing has a form whenever it “follows a pattern of any sort, exhibits order, [or] internal connection”. Langer (1930:87) claims that differences of forms in a structure are determined by differences of relations. This suggests that Langer thinks that something has a form only if it has a kind of internal complexity; simple things would then be without forms.³⁵ My inclination is to not ascribe this view to her: it might be that simple things can have simple forms. Langer does think that concepts are always concepts of forms, and she also seems to think that there are simple or primitive concepts. This provides some reason to allow for the degenerative case of simple forms, i.e., monadic non-relational properties. (We’ll say more about the relation between concepts and forms in 2.4.) And Langer does use “form” in contexts where “property” or “feature” seem to be equally apt. For example, Langer (1937: 22) describes the taste and feeling of a scrambled egg as being among its forms.

Forms can be exemplified by things, and be discerned in things. Langer uses “abstraction” to refer to the activity of explicitly recognizing a form of a thing that can be variously exemplified.³⁶ She also recognizes an activity called “interpretation” that is the “converse” of abstraction. When we interpret a set of forms, we then search for things that could exemplify them.³⁷ The more general the forms in question, the more possibilities there are for interpretation of those forms. Consider, for example, a non-Euclidean geometry. Our understanding of this geometry acquaints us with a set of highly general forms even if we are unaware of any potential “applications” of these forms. We interpret these forms when we find applications for them: for example, we can take the path of a ray of a light to exemplify the form corresponding to “straight line” in the geometry in question.

³⁴ See Langer (1926c: 33-34).

³⁵ Dryden (2001: 276) says that “in its most general sense ... a *form* is a *complex relational structure* ...”.

³⁶ See Langer (1930: 130) and (1937: 35-36).

³⁷ See Langer (1926b: 436) and (1937: 38).

The examples provided by various non-Euclidean geometries suggest that we can be acquainted with a form without knowing whether it is exemplified. Was Langer open to the possibility of unexemplified forms? Or did she hold that whenever there is a form, there is a content for that form? (Since immaterial objects can exemplify forms, the contrast for her is not between form and matter but rather between form and content.)³⁸ In Langer (1926c: 37) she claims that there cannot be forms without content, but it is not clear whether she maintains this view in later work.³⁹ But, even if she was open to a kind of Platonic realism about forms, we should remember that this realism would be tempered by her view that forms exist only relative to various logical languages.

Before preceding further, we should pause to address a worry about the interpretation of Langer on which forms exist only relatively to logical languages. The worry is this. Langer (1937: 49-50, 53-54) claims that language can obscure the structure of a relations. For example, ordinary language can suggest an incorrect number of relata necessary to fully saturate a given relation. According to Langer (1937: 57), one of the ways in which the language of symbolic logic is useful is that we can use it to clearly present the adicity of relations. What these remarks suggest is that the relations in question have a nature that is independent of every language, that can be obscured by some languages, and that is revealed by other languages. But, if the nature of a relation is independent of language, how could the existence of that relation be language-relative?

I think this worry can be soothed. Note that there is a difference between natural languages and logical languages, as understood by Langer. A natural language might embody a logical language, or be indeterminate with respect to which of some plurality of logical languages it embodies. Langer does not hold that forms exist relatively to natural languages. Still, she should not hold that relations have a nature that is independent of logical languages either – since the nature of a relation is itself a form, and hence must also exist relative to a logical language. One is tempted to attribute to Langer the view that a logical language reveals the form of a relation if and only if both the relation and its form exist relative to that language. But strictly there is no form that is *the* form of a relation, absolutely speaking.⁴⁰ So we could attribute this view to Langer, but given her other views, it seems somewhat trivial, since only relative to a logical language could something be the form of a relation.

There is a second worry for Langer. Languages, including logical languages, are themselves abstract structures that can be exemplified by concrete collections of utterances, written inscriptions, and so on. What does the structure of a given logical language exist relative to? Itself? Another logical language? I suppose one could defend either answer, but both seem troubling to me. And note that we are now entering into the territory of some very baroque metaphysics – and the metaphysical speculations about what Langer “ought to say” would be

³⁸ See Langer (1937: 23-27).

³⁹ Nelson (1994: 292) claims that Langer denies that there can be forms without content in Langer’s (1933) paper.

⁴⁰ Recall that Langer (1926b: 437) says both that a logical form is always relative to a system and that “the form of an object” never denotes.

largely unconstrained by anything Langer actually said.⁴¹ (Moreover, these speculations do not seem supported by anything like a linguistic analysis of our ontological vocabulary.)

Note that the interpretation of Langer as endorsing an undeveloped version of Hirsch's position avoids these troubles. That view does not make use of the locution "exists relative to" at all, but rather posits different senses of "exist" corresponding to different (logical) languages. It seems to me that a better position for her to have held is this one. Whether the worry just explored provides a further reason to ascribe it to her is one that I will not judge here.

2.4 Concepts and Propositions

In the early phases of the analytic tradition, both G.E Moore (1899) and Frege (1980) stressed the importance of having a proper view of *concepts*. For both of them, concepts are not mental entities (although they can be the "content" of mental entities). They are not the products of the activities of a mental faculty of understanding, and they are not "predicates of a possible judgment", where judgements are understood as the mental equivalent of assertions of a sentence.⁴² Instead, concepts are abstract objects that exist independently of whether any particular mind has grasped them, and they are constituents of propositions that exist independently of whether they are the content of any actual propositional attitude.

Langer's view is harder to discern. Langer (1937: 66) does clearly distinguish *conceptions*, which are the products of private mental activities, from concepts, which are publically accessible entities. And Langer (1930: 37) claims that "ideas" – presumably in the sense of "idea" roughly common to Locke, Berkeley, and Hume – are not concepts, and that concepts are not "psychological elements". Similarly, Langer (1927: 21) claims that propositions are not judgments any more than concepts are ideas; in fact, Langer (1930: 186) seems to think of a proposition as a kind of concept. Finally, (1937: 50) she writes that propositions have linguistic statements, rather than that they are linguistic statements. (Propositions are the contents of the statements we make, rather than the statements themselves.) All this suggests that Langer accepts a view analogous to Moore's or Frege's. In fact, Langer (1926c: 37-39) favorably discusses both the views of Moore and Frege on the nature of concepts.⁴³

But her concepts do not seem as cleanly mind-independent as Moore's and Frege's. Langer (1930: 50) tells us that our concepts are elements abstracted from reality.⁴⁴ Abstraction is, as noted earlier, a mental activity. And Langer (1951: 61, footnote 6) explicitly says that concepts are abstract forms embodied in conceptions.⁴⁵ What these remarks suggest is that a concept is a form that happens to have a certain extrinsic property, namely, being the subject of an act of abstraction by a conceiver. If this is right, for any concept, the entity that is the concept

⁴¹ Compare with Sosa's (1993: 621-622) for a discussion of similar worry about the kind of conceptual relativism discussed by Sosa.

⁴² Both of these views may fairly be ascribed to Kant (1999: 204-205, A68-69/B93-94), to whom (among others) both Moore and Frege are responding.

⁴³ However, Langer (1926c: 39) explicitly distances herself from Moore's (1899) view that everything is composed of concepts.

⁴⁴ Langer says this sort of thing in several places. See, e.g., Langer (1926a: 427) and (1937: 35, 39, 43).

⁴⁵ Innis (2009: 39) briefly discusses this passage.

could exist in absence of any particular act of abstraction (albeit only relatively to a logical language) but it would not *be a concept* in absence of any particular act of abstraction. (Just as a husband can exist without being married, but if he weren't married to someone, he wouldn't be a husband.) By virtue of being an abstract form, however, it is still a publically accessible entity. An alternative interpretation takes concepts to be something like a higher-order entity that consists of both a form and a conception of it. On this view, each concept has an *essential* extrinsic property: it contains an entity that is the object of an act of attraction.⁴⁶ We'll have more to say about Langer's views on concepts in section 4.

Concepts are also the sorts of entities that can be expressed in language, although Langer (1926a: 437) also tells us that the structure of a language determines the kinds of concepts that can be expressed in that language. According to Langer (1930: 170-171), what is really interesting about a philosophical system is not its axioms or theorems, but the logical language or conceptual framework in which they are situated; the conceptual power of this framework is assessed by determining the questions that can be raised in this system.⁴⁷ Since concepts can be expressed via language, when a bit of language expresses a concept, is the concept *the meaning* of that bit of language? We'll see in the next section that there is some reason to identify linguistic meanings with concepts.

3. Philosophical Methodology I: Analysis

As noted earlier, Langer (1930: 21) holds that the "ultimate aim of philosophy is the pursuit of meaning". Langer distinguishes two philosophical methods by which this aim can be met: the analytic method and the constructive method.⁴⁸ We will focus here on the analytic method, and then turn in section 4 to a discussion of the constructive method.

The claim that a large part of the business of philosophy is analysis did not originate in the 20th century – for example, Kant (1998: 140-141, A5-6/B8-9) claims this in *the Critique of Pure Reason* – but in the 20th century we find advocates of analysis defending a range of views about how much of philosophy consists in analysis, and what analysis itself consists in.⁴⁹

As the name suggests, the analytic method is one in which *analysis* plays a key role. But analysis of what? Are the objects of analysis non-representational things in the world, such as facts or properties? Are they objective yet representational objects such as propositions or concepts construed as abstract objects? Or are they representational entities that are in some way the product of human activity, such as our conceptions, our theories, our languages, our terms, or our words? There are passages in the early works of Langer that also suggest sympathy with a

⁴⁶ I thank Chris Pincock for discussion here.

⁴⁷ Langer seems to think that some questions are not even expressible in some systems because they violate type restrictions/are category mistakes.

⁴⁸ Langer (1930: 16-17) held that a good conception of the subject matter of philosophy should also dictate a technique or method for pursuing it. See Campbell (1997: 134-138) for further discussion.

⁴⁹ See Frost-Arnold (this volume) for a wonderful discussion of various notions of "analysis" in the analytic tradition.

number of these answers. Discerning whether Langer has an unequivocal view on the nature of analysis will be the central task of this section.

Langer (1930: 35-36) tells us that philosophy is the systematic study of meanings, and hence comprises all the rational sciences. Given Langer's conception of the task of philosophy, it would be surprising if, for her, the objects of analysis were *not* meanings.

Does this imply that philosophical analysis is not about worldly entities? Some interpreters of Langer suggest this. Campbell (1997: 136) writes that, for Langer, "... the focus of philosophical enquiry is to be on *words* rather than *things* or *actions* or *beliefs*." Hart (2004: 240) claims that, in the 1930s, Langer favored an "analytic methodology that clarified terms and concepts". Hart (2004: 241) also ascribes to Langer the view that "philosophy can never penetrate through thought to reality". Finally, most recently, Frost-Arnold (forthcoming) writes that, "philosophy, for both Langer and Schlick in the 1930's, is (what we today consider) semantics".

But if meanings *are* concepts and concepts *are* forms, then meanings are entities in the world as well, albeit entities that exist relative to logical languages. Identifying meanings with concepts makes sense of a lot of passages in Langer that would otherwise be in tension. Note that Langer (1930: 28, 36) also says the aim of every philosophy is to discover fundamental relations among *concepts*, and that we do this by discerning logical implications between concepts rather than the causal connections that are investigated by empirical sciences. If meanings for Langer were not concepts, then Langer would be committed to two different fundamental aims of philosophy, and it would be unclear what bearing the satisfaction of one aim would have for the satisfaction of the other.

Finally, let's also note that Langer (1933: 181) says that the objects of analysis are "conceptual constructions" that are "not realities but rather forms of realities"; she also tells us that "analysis is always of form rather than content". Now it is conceivable that she thinks that meanings, concepts, and forms are never identical and yet each is a proper object of analysis. But I have found no positive textual support for this interpretation, and the view that fundamentally one kind of thing is the object of analysis – forms – is the cleaner interpretation.

This interpretation might suggest that Langer's notion of analysis is closer to that of, e.g., Moore's notion rather than, e.g., that of Ayer's. See Frost-Arnold's (this volume) for a lengthier discussion of these two figures (among many others), but for our purposes here it will suffice to note the following contrast. On the one hand, Moore (1903: chapter 1, section 6; 1942: 661) explicitly denies that he is interested in the question of how words are to be defined, but rather in the question of what the nature of a given object or "idea" is.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Ayer (1936: 64-65) explicitly understands philosophical questions concerning "the nature of a thing" to be "linguistic questions" whose answers are "linguistic propositions" rather than "factual" ones.

But we should be cautious. Moore's conception of analysis seems based on a putative ability to examine the nature of an object independently of whatever linguistic vehicles we have

⁵⁰ I assume that "idea" should be understood more Platonically than psychologically here.

of representing it. And although Langer (1962: 150) at times asserts that we can become “directly aware” of facts, this doesn’t mean that, for her, facts have a nature independent of language. Given that the structure of a fact is relative to a logical language, even if facts can be directly observed, one still needs to study the language in which they are expressed (or the closest logical language to it) in order to provide an analysis of them.

Langer (1930: 44-45) does accept that there is something which is given in experience, and that there is a sense or faculty called “intuition” that supplies it. Perhaps this is the faculty that acquaints us with events? But Langer (1930: 44-45) also denies that the result of this faculty is knowledge, but rather the result is a representation of that which knowledge can be about.

In order to have knowledge, we require understanding, and understanding requires having a perspective. Does she mean by “perspective” what she meant by “logical perspective”? Note that, in order to have knowledge about something, we need to be able to describe it – and, for Langer, one can describe an object only once a given logical language is employed.⁵¹ To put it in Kantian terms, the employment of a logical language is a transcendental condition of experience. It seems that even in the 1930s we can find large remnants of the Kantian framework in Langer’s conception of the analytic method of philosophy.⁵²

One final remark about analysis before we move on. It is fair to say that, for during Langer’s early period, the focus is on the analysis of meanings that can be expressed in language. But in later periods of her career, Langer’s publications broadened in focus. According to Langer (1951b: 174), some abstractions cannot be made verbally at all but can only be done via works of art.⁵³ These acts of abstraction succeed in latching onto forms, and since a concept is a successfully abstracted form, there are concepts expressible only non-linguistically.

4. Philosophical Methodology II: Construction

The analysis of meanings is an important part of the pursuit of meanings. But philosophy also has a constructive task as well, namely the construction of new concepts. Not all concepts are fit for a scientific philosophy but not all of these unfit concepts should be simply scrapped. Rather, Langer (1930: 67) tells us that, “the greater part of philosophy ... is the construction of concepts which shall fulfill all the uses of those which were logically untenable, and avoid all their abuses.” For Langer (1930: 70), a good construction “never does violence to the working concept”. The importance of the constructive task was also maintained in her later work. Langer (1962: 161) tells us that it is not enough that our concepts be clear – they must also be fit for some intellectual purpose; if they do no work they should be scrapped, or at least not the subject of philosophical inquiry.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Thanks to Greg Frost-Arnold for discussion here.

⁵² As noted in the introduction, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was one of the first philosophy books Langer read prior to becoming a college student.

⁵³ See also Innis (2009: 83-85). Dryden (2001: 274) suggests that, for Langer, facts about subjectivity cannot be expressed in language; Reichling (1998: 13) makes a similar suggestion.

⁵⁴ See Campbell (1997: 137-138). See also Dryden (1997: 170), which contains an interesting discussion of how Langer thought that metaphorical language can be used in the process of constructing new concepts.

Some concepts are useful in ordinary life even though they are vague. Some of these concepts are of philosophical interest, but their vagueness makes them philosophically intractable. The thing to do then is replace such concepts with successor concepts that are not vague but agree with their predecessors on the cases in which they are most clearly applied. Perhaps the concept of knowledge is apt for this kind of replacement. Other concepts are not vague but are shown to be untenable in light of philosophical or scientific inquiry. Part of what successful inquiry produces are successor concepts. Perhaps the concept of spacetime is a constructed concept suitable to do work that its predecessor concepts of space and time are not.⁵⁵

This all seems straightforward enough. But given the ontology of concepts discussed in 2.4, what does it mean to *construct* a concept? A *conception* is something I can create, since it is the product of a mental activity, but a *concept* is a publically accessible form, albeit one that has been subject to some act of abstraction. In what follows, I will discuss a weak and a strong interpretation of the activity of concept construction. It is not clear to me whether Langer should be uniformly interpreted in accordance with either of them.

On the weak interpretation, to construct a concept is simply to recognize a pre-existing form that had not been recognized before. On the weak interpretation, when one constructs a concept, one does not literally construct or create anything new, but rather one bestows upon pre-existing material an extrinsic feature it previously lacked.

On the strong interpretation, when one constructs a concept, one does more than merely recognize a pre-existing form. Rather, in a sense, one creates a new form that did not pre-exist. Much less metaphorically, on the strong interpretation, one constructs a concept when one modifies the logical language that was previously employed by enriching (or merely changing) either its system of primitive expressions or its set of rules for combining primitive expressions. Recall that, forms exist only relative to logical languages. A form that did not exist relative to the previously employed logical language might exist relative to the newly adopted logical language. And if in the adopting of that new logical language one also (thereby?) abstracts that form, one can fairly (albeit loosely) be credited with creating a new concept.

5. Concluding Remarks

In what preceded, I detailed several interesting connections between Langer's views on philosophical methodology and her views on ontology. A common theme in early analytic philosophy is the importance of analysis. But, as noted earlier, there were many candidates for being the proper objects of analysis, the leading contenders of which were facts, properties, concepts, and meanings. Once we understand Langer's views on the ontology of these entities, we can also see why, for her, a uniform account of philosophical analysis can take each of these entities as possible subjects of analysis. We can also see why a study of language and logic is important to analytic philosophy, since the objects of analysis exist only relative to a logical language. Finally, understanding her ontology of concepts enables us to make sense of her view

⁵⁵ This example is briefly discussed in Langer and Gadol (1950: 120-121).

that philosophy has a constructive or synthetic task as well, namely, the construction of concepts.⁵⁶

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