

# **Making Space for Meaning\***

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**ABSTRACT** John Macmurray was one of the few philosophers to go against the positivist-reductionist trend of the 1930-1960 period. This paper follows up one of his many threads of enquiry. He questioned the popular Cartesian ‘visual’ model of knowing and focused on simpler senses, such as touch. This enabled him to stress how skills and feelings, as well as reason, characterise personal action. Michael Polanyi, who also worked against the current, articulated a view of how scientific discoveries are actually made and built on his own personal knowledge of skill-acquisition and research. Susanne Langer, in a profound, parallel enquiry, was more concerned with the arts (music especially) and was deeply interested in the occasional sudden dawning of meaning (e.g. Helen Keller’s experience). She clarified the dynamic connotations of ‘symbol’ in what I term ‘the Winnicott approach’ to all those meaning-making things, including words, toys and the probes with which we create and recreate a living culture. Winnicott was able to see, more clearly than Macmurray, the need for conceptual ‘space’, not only between evolving animal and human systems, but also for what he termed ‘potential space’ in the zone of play which mothers create around their infants—areas of limited freedom in which all culturally transmitted skills have their root. These concepts have an important bearing on newly emerging ways for thinking about education, culture and technology.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The rhythm of human life swings to and fro between the withdrawal from action into reflection ... and the return from reflection into action ... . The reality of religion consists in their living union (Macmurray, 1936, pp. 110-111).

This is an essay which touches on several thinkers who, like John Macmurray, broke away from the prevailing mechanistic, reductionist paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s. This world view had come to dominate English-speaking universities and was even more influential among school teachers and young people who were, and still are, very susceptible to fashionable versions of ‘nothing buttery’. The dissidents - and Macmurray was a great trail-blazer - were courageous and creative mavericks. We will focus first on one of the key ideas which Macmurray isolated: that our sense of touch can tell us more about how we know than can our very sophisticated senses of sight and hearing. Similar ideas make a crucial appearance in the works of several of his contemporaries whom I shall quote. The reader will certainly think of others from that same small cloud of witnesses and will probably share with me an awareness that we, their successors, still have much to do in this dry 20th-century land.

After Macmurray, our first witness will be Michael Polanyi. He opened up the meaning of 'personal'; first of all in terms of the phenomenology of skilled action and scientific research. He spoke much of the 'tacit knowledge' that accumulates, much of it unawares, as we try to learn to swim or cycle or - more specialist examples - as we study the shadowy arts of reading X-ray pictures or arriving at judicial decisions[1]. Polanyi's greatest achievement was to create an original, overarching view of how science is actually done: essentially, in an atmosphere of skilled exploration, undertaken, not with predominant assumptions of critical scepticism but with belief - wit trust that Truth and order are many-levelled and discoverable. Susanne Langer, roughly a contemporary, explored the links between logic, language and feeling. She also momentarily, in the later editions of *Philosophy in a New Key*, clarified the meaning of *symbol*-as a special sign with transforming power.

Another maverick pioneer was Arthur Koestler, a great impresario in the field. For him, as for Langer, the recovery of inner vision after acute sensory loss offered a rare but revealing key to understanding: hence the recourse of both to the Helen Keller story about her recovery of inner vision. There will not be space for more than a brief discussion of Donald Winnicott who will be our last witness. He was especially important. He brought together certain crucial, neo-Freudian insights about infancy and spliced them to the philosophy of personal becoming that we are considering. From Winnicott's ideas on inter-personal 'space' there emerge elements of a theory of education and of active culture—a theory which respects both the essential interlocking, of persons in freedom and the deep-rooted trust and discipline necessary for all competent, corporate undertakings. Winnicott's concepts not only throw light on infancy and on 'good enough' parenting (his famous phrase); they also complement Macmurray by opening up the concept of space for play and for discovery as well as highlighting the mother's role in making such space and introducing appropriate structures to shape and direct it.

There is some doubt about how far our witnesses knew about, and influenced, each other. The cross-references are surprisingly few. My guess is that their reading was a good deal wider than their citations sometimes suggest[2]. What does seem to have harmonised them, however, were several common themes and preoccupation, two of which form the thread of ideas below: (a) a disenchantment with the bright Cartesian picture of the person as essentially an isolated ego, observing self and observing the world in detachment; (b) a corresponding interest in those people who had difficulty in making sense of their world-people with impaired sensory or motor faculties, for example, or vulnerable human children and infants, struggling to find meaning in a world of shadows and problems. There were other, important common threads on which I scarcely touch: the more than organic nature of community, the genesis of religions, how reason and emotion must be harnessed and the acceptance of evolution as being true but not the whole story.

### **The skilled'agent': Macmurray**

In the first volume of his Gifford Lectures, *The Self as Agent*, Macmurray outlines one of his key ideas: that our less sophisticated senses, especially that of 'the tactual' are a better guide to understanding how we know the world than are the more neurologically complex senses of vision and hearing[3].

Unimpaired, mature seeing, for example, operates most impressively 'at a distance. It is, indeed, marvellous; but for most people it is still fairly mysterious—waves? photons? the very nature of light? The are all almost as problematic as they were in Faraday's time (see Zajonc, 1993). On the other hand, manual groping or probing, perhaps with the eyes impaired or blindfold, involves the knower much more intimately with what is being investigated. Here the doing and the knowing, the sensing and the feeling all interact. In the sophisticated model of seeing, our bodily involvement is more deeply hidden, deep within the eye and brain. That traditional model—isolating a sharp image in an ego-centred 'camera obscure' inside the head—was influential for Galileo and Descartes and for much enlightenment epistemology[4].

In his chapter III, 'The rejection of dualism', Macmurray concentrates on the exercise of our simple senses and actions. If we *touch* a thing, we act on it and it will change though perhaps only slightly; and touching it also changes us. Complete detachment is not possible; though scientists, in their experiments, try, quite properly, to get as near to that ideal as possible. Macmurray goes on to show that the visual model not only over-emphasises detachment but also minimises immediate feelings.

The influence of the visual model is very clear ... in visual perception we ... stand over against the object we see; it is set before us, and our seeing of it has no causal effect upon it. Seeing is ... pure receptivity; to exercise it attentively, we withdraw from action altogether.

We stop to look in consequence, the visual model tends to instigate a strong contrast

between knowing and acting, which in abstract theory passes easily into conceptual dualism... .

But from the standpoint of the Agent the case is different. We are not here concerned with sense perception as a [supposed] lower limit of thought, but as an element in action... . Sight operates only at a distance, touch only in contact. ... I can only become aware of anything tactually by doing something to it. Tactual perception is *necessarily* perception in action. To touch anything is to exert pressure on it, however slight, and therefore, however slightly, to modify it. (Macmurray, 1957, pp. 106-107)[5]

Later, in *Persons in Relation*, Macmurray turns to the question of skill-acquisition. He starts an important discussion about play and its occurrence at the interface (not his word) between mother (or teacher) and infant (or learner) (1961, pp. 45-50). He is at pains to emphasise the profound differences between children who are *persons* and young animals which are not. The latter, he says, are in the pre-

personal domain of *organisms*. Macmurray's strong emphasis here is, I think mistaken; the transition is not so sharp, nor of the kind, that he implies. In the 1970s, psychologists such as Bruner, Bower and Trevarthen mapped this transition in considerable detail. It is partly on this that Winnicott builds. Their work on the subtlety and 'sharedness' of an infant's hypothesis-making and initiation into skills would certainly have intrigued Macmurray without seriously weakening his argument. In the passage below, from *Persons in Relation*, he turns to *play* and defines it as being, in essence, the practice required in skill acquisition. Here again, perhaps because he is trying to squeeze the transition to personhood into too tight a space, he fails to see the richness and extent of play; nor does he recognise how play can be, and indeed should be, transitional into other modes of action.

Macmurray starts with a clear 'integrative' or 'constructionist' picture of how we build up a range of skills. 'Each lower level skill becomes ... the automatic basis of a higher-level skill to be acquired. In this way a hierarchical system of skills is developed' (1961, p. 54). He then speaks, slightly confusedly, of the difference between animal instinct and habit in humans. Then he turns to play. Here again, there are interesting problems of definition which stem mainly from his over-sharp disjunction between animals and humans.

Play is activity carried out for its own sake. It is not, however, random but goal-oriented activity. It has a goal but the goal is for the sake of the activity. Play is therefore essentially concerned with skill—with its acquisition, with its improvement and its manifestations. The goal is not *substantially* intended. It functions rather as a test or verification of the skill. We contrast it with work ... in which the interest centres on the goal to be achieved ... But the play of children and young animals though it is in this fashion [sic], activity for its own sake, is not therefore functionless.

This is an extremely interesting passage, as well as being problematic. Is play goal-directed or is it not? Is the main purpose of play to test or verify skills? There is not space to deal with these questions fully. In my opinion, however, the way out of most of the difficulties (a way which Macmurray could scarcely have seen) is to introduce the idea of 'potential space' from what I call 'the Winnicott model' and see play itself as essentially goal-less and happening in such created psychological space; also to recognise that play is two-faced. It merges both into repetitive practice where it usually *does* acquire goals (competitive or otherwise)[6]. Play also develops in a contrary direction, into exploration of domains where the goals are, by definition, unknowable in advance. The only goals then likely to be suggested will either be 'wrong' ones (e.g. Columbus's 'the East Indies') or ineffable ones such as Polanyi's "universal intent" - the principle of constantly trying to find the Truth. We shall return to this when we come to consider Winnicott.

We can see from this analysis why there is frequent confusion about measurable objectives in education. Easily identified objectives are usually related to the practice of skills, and can often be measured; while

ineffable goals, original insights and guiding principles which may, indeed, have to be clarified and articulated can *not* be measured. They can only be realised in the whole free process of responsible enquiry and exposition[7].

Macmurray's emphasis on the hierarchy of skills is important. However, it inevitably raises problems about the relationship of 'higher' and 'lower'. A conceptual grasp of just how the 'boundary conditions' between a higher and lower system operate (e.g. between human and animal skills) still needed clarifying. How is it that the higher level seems to involve new principles and relations *not* present in the lower—principles which do not negate but transcend those operating below? All this was clarified by Polanyi, especially in regard to the hierarchical structure of signs and language (1969, chapters 11, 12 and 13). Similarly, a wide range of experimental and ethological work has been necessary for us to begin to understand the nature of the gap between our animal inheritance and, transcending it, our personal-cultural inheritance and of the infant's assisted passage across this gap. None of this was available to Macmurray's partial but seminal understanding of an infant's powers. His view was indeed prophetic but inevitably restricted. There are still very important unanswered questions in regard to this problem—this mystery—of becoming.

### **The blind man, probing: Polanyi**

It is reasonable to assume that Macmurray and Polanyi were familiar with each other's Gifford Lectures, as well as with some of the widely-known, shorter books, which, in each case, preceded them. Polanyi's lectures were given in 1951-1952 and Macmurray's in 1953-1954. Publication occurred towards the end of the decade, with Macmurray's *Persons in Relation* not appearing until 1961. Why, then do they never quote each other? In my view, both authors were shy about referring to anyone who, like themselves, might be regarded as quirky[8].

By the 1960s Macmurray was certainly familiar with Polanyi's writings. I know this because I spent much of a summer evening with him at Jordans, in about 1963. We discussed Polanyi's ideas about tools and skills and the potentialities which they enable. A tool which one has thoroughly mastered or which one 'indwells'—living in it and making it part of one's life—will always be enveloped in powerful feelings. This was an idea both men understood, and which has great importance for education. This was an idea both men understood, and which has great importance for education. For example how should reason and emotion be harnessed in our learning? Among young adults, in industrial countries, there is usually an acute mismatch between a passionate, youthful yearning for freedom and 'authentic' action on the one hand and an understanding of the manifold constraints and responsibilities which real competence always entails.

As Macmurray and I discussed some aspects of these problems in 1963, a diagram was in my mind and came into our discussion: about how a skill or a competence transcends the present and can be both motivating and shaping of a person's future destiny. I had learnt the lesson in my 'teens from having succumbed to the infection of mountaineering. In the 1960s I often took my students rock climbing or

caving. My diagram of a skill envisaged an irregular cone of possibilities, stretching into a young person's future—motivating, constricting and demanding; rather like the beam of light from a head-torch which we project into the unknown<sup>[9]</sup>. Macmurray was fully alive to the idea that in demanding and adventurous situations the apprenticeship 'dyad' of teacher and learner is especially relevant (Bruner, 1968, p. 70). Such shared situations may be heavily charged with both feeling and thinking; and the 'head' and 'heart' do, indeed, educate each other.

In that decade I also came to know Michael Polanyi himself; originally through Marjorie Grene. His great book, *Personal Knowledge*, was soon to become indispensable. Polanyi carried Macmurray's interest in skills and in the levels of knowing that surround and guide a skill further than Macmurray had done. In *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) Polanyi returned to a favourite theme: the partially-sighted or groping seeker, probing a cavity or a cave. He discussed how we learn to attend *from* a tool, or *from* a probe or even from a word, *towards* the focus of our attention where a new shape or a new meaning is in process of emerging. Meaning, for Polanyi, always has this future or emergent quality. He would often speak of 'the passion' which sustains and directs research. Similarly, Macmurray and even more Susanne Langer would emphasise the deep feelings and the emotion which are present; especially at the genesis of a new meaning.

This is how Polanyi explains what he terms the semantic, meaning-making aspect of experience:

Anyone using a probe for the first time will feel its impact against his fingers and palm. But as we learn to use a probe, or to use a stick for feeling our way, our awareness of its impact on our hand is transformed into a sense of its point touching the objects we are exploring. This is how an interpretative effort transposes meaningless feelings into meaningful ones, and places these at some distance from the original feeling. ... This is also [the case] when we use a tool. We are attending to the meaning of its impact on our hands in terms of the effect on the things to which we are applying it. We may call this the *semantic* aspect of tacit knowing. All meaning tends to be displaced away from ourselves. (Polanyi, 1966, pp. 11-12).

Polanyi carried his analysis a good deal further. He cited some of the well known examples of famous discoveries of new theories, such as those of Kekulé or Poincaré (Polanyi, 1969, p. 201, or see Koestler, 1964). Polanyi agrees with Poincaré in recognising that when an intellectual discovery is being made there is usually a blend of 'arduous straining' towards a solution *and* of an intermittent and contrasting 'loosening' process. Though other have commented on this dual aspect of exploring, Polanyi himself did not press his enquiry very far.

In the final pages of *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi speaks about 'a heuristic field': a directional field in

which we are constrained both by our own skills and by the nature of reality as we grope towards a discovery. At the limit of such a field we press forward our search for a new pattern, or a new concept. Polanyi did not enlarge on this at the time, but he linked it with the whole, world-encompassing network of human minds and with Teilhard de Chardin's 'noosphere'. Arthur Koestler, who was a close friend of Polanyi's, did not follow him into this theological terrain but, in books such as *The Act of Creation*, he was uninhibited in his exploration of heuristics and in attempting to answer the question of what constitutes and what favours scientific and artistic creativity.

What we find, therefore, in the middle of the century is a chain of original investigators-psychologists, ethologists, philosophers-grappling with, and opening up, the very ancient question-what is Man? What happens in evolution when living organisms become persons? Is there a similar transformation in early infancy? Such questions are still with us. Susanne Langer who had turned from logic to thinking about symbols, posed the question afresh: what happens, she asks, when a word is new-minted or when it suddenly fills with meaning; whether for early *homo sapiens*, for an infant, or for an inspired artist?

### **The blind girl who 'saw': Langer and the dawn of language**

Koestler, like Susanne Langer, recognised in the well-known story of Helen Keller's inner illumination an artificially heightened version of what is sometimes called the 'aha!' phenomenon, when a new concept is born. He was that this usually involved a sudden bringing together of two or more disparate elements to create a new and potent kind of sign. He called the process 'bi-sociation' -two normally separate patterns of ideas intersecting with each other at the birth of a new word, or new idea[10]. In the following section Susanne Langer tells the story of Helen Keller's sudden insight into language which she and Koestler and Polanyi all found so interesting.

Helen Keller had been born with all her senses and then, in an acute illness, she lost her sight and her hearing before she had acquired any language. But she was fortunate in having a very patient, sensitive teacher. This is how Susanne Langer describes her recovery of The Word as symbol-the word of poetic insight[11].

Of course she [Helen] had used signs before, formed associations, learned to expect things and identify people and places; but there was a great day when all sign meaning was eclipsed and dwarfed by the discover that a certain datum in her limited sense world had a *denotation*, that a particular act of her fingers constituted a *word*. Then ... her teacher took her out for a walk and the great advent of language occurred.

'She brought my hat', the memoir reads, 'and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip

with pleasure. 'We walked down the path to the well-house. ... Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed ... she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed on the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow I knew that the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul. ... I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought.' Real thinking is possible only in the light of genuine language, no matter how limited, how primitive (Langer, 1957, pp. 61-62)

A symbol, properly understood, is a dynamic sign. It is something that enlarges me, the user, and enables people, generally, to encompass new and wider meanings. This is the key idea which Langer develops, partly from Ernst Cassirer. Just as a 'play-with' designates a toy, in Coleridge's terms, so a tool can be seen as what one 'practices with'-both sharpening and using a skill, while a symbol, following Langer, would be an 'explore with'. Symbols function not only in poetry and art. In science, a hypothesis is, in essence, a cognitive probe, a linguistic device to explore with and it may or may not become part of routine practice[12]. We shall return to this below.

In the strange but well-authenticated story of Helen Keller we find several of our 'witnesses' focusing on different but overlapping dimensions of this 'enlarging' process. Langer is especially concerned with the process of denotation—the birth and power of a new concept, especially as it might have occurred in primitive language. Koestler sees the story as a delayed-action picture of how an infant integrates disparate sensual elements into meaning—in this case, patterned pressures on the hands with the much wider sensual awareness of the coolness and wetness of water. Polanyi used that chapter of Langer's (1957, chapter 3) to emphasise the *transparency* of symbols. He notes that 'little noises', written just because they have no direct (e.g. onomatopoeic) resemblance to an object, 'are ideal conveyors on concepts, for they give us nothing but their meaning. This is the source of transparency in language' (Langer, quoted in Polanyi, 1969, p. 193). Polanyi and Schrödinger both commented on how this pristine, transparent, symbolic quality of a newly-minted word will soon be lost by frequent usage. It easily deteriorates into an opaque cliché. It may then sometimes be the task of a poet or a prophet to rediscover those transparencies, those deeper, many-levelled meanings. They come after periods of sustained effort; perhaps at marginal or 'frontier' situations where our stamina and competence have been taxed or where we have suffered loss. Nelson Goodman eloquently sums up the connection between symbols, discovery and exploration at the end of his book, *The Languages of Art*:

We focus upon frontiers; the peak of interest in a symbol tends to occur at the time of revelation, somewhere midway in the passage from the obscure to the obvious. But there is

endurance and renewal too. Discoveries become knowledge only when preserved in accessible form. ... The trenchant and laden symbol [can be] incorporated in the base for further exploration. ... Moreover what we read from and learn from a symbol varies with what we bring to it. Not only do we discover the world through our symbols but we understand and reappraise our symbols progressively in the light of experience. (Good-man, 1968, p. 259)

Spiritual revelation is rarely for couch potatoes.

Why, in general terms, was the Helen Keller story so arresting to Susanne Langer and to the others who quoted it? The answer is, I think, that they, like Macmurray, were trying to speak about a spiritual threshold in human becoming for which scientifically respectable words were in short supply. Helen Keller's experience provided a dramatic, just-believable, contemporary myth; not a theory demanding criticism, but a striking event which focused the attention and posed hard questions.

In the 1970s, following Polanyi, Popper, Kuhn and their revolutions, the rigidities of the philosophy of science were easing. The power and agency of persons and of teams in the construction of science was being recognised. Even Roger Sperry, a Nobel Laureate in neuro-physiology, could speak favourably of 'conscious entities as *Causal*' and of 'downward causation' in the mind/brain/body. 'Such views' says Sperry, 'simply exploded in the 1970s and gave a new look to science.' So it was an appropriate time for Winnicott to articulate his views about how psychological space is created between, and by, the mother and her infant. His term 'potential space' denotes both a time and a space for the infant's innate powers to be safely developed; a space in which all the meaning-laden signs and artefacts of culture are constantly recreated-jointly by the infant and its first instructor, interacting. Winnicott speaks of the first soft comforting toy as follows:

... when we witness an infant's employment of a transitional object, 'the first not-me possession', we are witnessing the first use of a symbol and the first experience of play. (1971, p. 96)

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## Notes

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1. See note [3] on 'tacit' and 'tactual'.
2. Margaret Donaldson's reference to the wide, early interest in Martin Buber is suggestive. Several of us, for example, working at a College of Education in the Sudan in the 1940s were sharing books by Buber, Macmurray, Coomaraswamy and Jung. In Europe, there were many informal foci of exchange: J. H. Oldham's 'Moor', Arthur Koestler's Alpabach Symposia, Roy Niblett's Foundations Conferences and René Thom's Theoretical Biology Seminars were all influential.
3. When Macmurray uses the word 'tactual' he is doing so in the ordinary sense of the word-touch as representing our simpler senses. Polanyi's use of 'tacit', as in 'tacit knowledge' is made with a distinct and wider connotation. He is referring to all the hidden information in a skilled person's mind and body which contributes to his/her exercise of competence but which is not in the focus of awareness. 'We know more than we can tell' is his oft-quoted maxim. That normally, hidden 'more' often contains both 'our experience' as well as subliminal awareness of the context.
4. Marjorie Grene's *Descartes* (1985) is partly based on a critique of this ego isolation. She ends by introducing J.J. Gibson's 'ecological' theory of how vertebrates see. Gibson emphasises all the shapes and vistas (his 'affordances') which constrain and fill the visual space.
5. There are arresting parallels here with Niels Bohr in his formulation of quantum theory. He realised there was no such thing as total detachment. Even the most delicate probe or experiment interferes with what is being investigated. (Bohr, 1934).
6. The concept of *practice* in its wider sense of traditionally transmitted competence is central to Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*: close in many ways to Macmurray and Polanyi but never mentioning them.
7. Polanyi's discussion of a judge's competence-so much more than following the letter of the law-is illuminating (1958, p. 54). It could be studied with profit by those engaged in the task of what is called 'quality assessment' in higher education. They tend to focus on 'the 10% that can be measured' and ignore the rest.
8. This exemplifies what might be regarded as 'Groucho's Law': 'I would never join a club that would have me as a member'. There may have been political allegiances at work, too. Polanyi and Koestler were well known for their anticommunism. Macmurray had, once, been sympathetic; as, indeed, had many other peace activists.
9. For a primitive version of this, see my 'Skills and Safety' in *The Games Climbers Play* (1978) ed. Ken Wilson (originally 1962): for more considered versions of the same idea, see pp. 42 and 55 in my *Reconnaissance on an Educational Frontier* (1970). Both were attempting to get teachers to think in Polanyian terms about skill.

**10.** This helps to explain why a metaphor, with its dual roots, can often be heuristically important (Soskice, 1985).

**11.** Stephen Prickett, in *Words and the Word*, gives a brilliant account of the vicissitudes of ‘the Word’s’ meanings in the 19th Century.

**12.** These somewhat fanciful terms are my suggestions: to extend Coleridge’s plawiths’ for toys into the two other main categories of human techne (good making) which are skill enhancement and consciousness enlargement. See note 14 re *techne* and technology.

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