

OPINION MAKING

We live in a time of instant opinions. Yet, more than ever perhaps, we need open mindedness. We need to resist the rush to judgment and the urge to be judgmental (two different things). How can we do this? That is the same question as: How can we grow?

As you will have seen, we are great believers in the power of questions and recommend forming the habit of the 'Questioning Activity' (as Collingwood calls it). An under-appreciated (although we sense 'on the way back', like Hannah Arendt two decades ago) philosopher is Susanne Langer (1895-1985). Among her books is the excellent *Philosophy in a New Key: a Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* of 1942 (Third Edition Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1957). In the first chapter (pp: 3 -4) she addresses how questioning influences our '**Orientation of Mind**', an underpinning of our opinion making. By way of opening, she says:

"Every age ...has its own preoccupations. Its problems are peculiar to it, not for obvious practical reasons - political or social - but for deeper reasons of intellectual growth. If we look back on the slow formation and accumulation of doctrines...we may see certain *groupings* of ideas ... not by subject-matter, but by a subtler common factor which may be called their 'technique' "

She continues to note that:

"It is the **mode of handling problems**, rather than what they are about, that assigns them to an age. Their subject matter may be fortuitous, and depend on conquests, discoveries, plagues, or governments; their treatment derives from a steadier source" (emphasis added).

She explains this 'subtler common factor' and 'steadier source' - the 'technique':

"The 'technique', or treatment, of a problem begins with its first expression as a question. **The way a question is asked limits and disposes the ways in which any answer to it — right or wrong — may be given**" (emphasis added).

Langer then gives an example of what she means:

"If we are asked: 'Who made the world?' we may answer: 'God made it', 'Chance made it', 'Love and hate made it', or what you will. We may be right or we may be wrong."

Next she raises a response that most of us will have experienced in discussions at some point (and, hopefully, only used ourselves when we were little children):

"But if we reply: 'Nobody made it', we will be accused of trying to be cryptic, smart, or 'unsympathetic.' For in this last instance, we have only seemingly given an answer; in reality we have *rejected the question*. The questioner feels called upon to repeat his problem. "Then how did the world become as it is?" If now we answer: "It has not 'become' at all", he will be really disturbed."

The disturbing consequence of such an encounter is described by Langer:

"This 'answer' clearly repudiates **the very framework of his thinking, the orientation of his mind, the basic assumptions he has always entertained as common-sense notions** about things in general. Everything has become what it is; everything has a cause; every change must be to some end; the world is a thing, and must have been made by some agency, out of some original stuff, for some reason" (emphases added).

What has been rejected by the other are "... natural ways of thinking":

"Such implicit 'ways' are not avowed by the average man, but simply followed. He is not conscious of assuming any **basic principles**. They are what a German would call his 'Weltanschauung', his **attitude of mind**, rather than specific articles of faith. They constitute his **outlook**; they are deeper than facts he may note or propositions he may moot" (emphases added).

It is here - 'ways of thinking' - that Langer sees the impact of questions:

"But, though they are not stated, they find expression in *the forms of his questions*. A question is really an ambiguous proposition; the answer is its determination. There can be only a certain number of alternatives that will complete its sense. In this way the intellectual treatment of any datum, any experience, any subject, is determined by the nature of our questions, and only carried out in the answers."

And, in the **form of our questions**, we suggest a connection to opinion making.

Susanne Langer - 'Good Company for the Right Journey'