

FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION. By *Anna Aragno*. Baltimore: Publish America, 2008, 428 pp.

This is not a book for the ordinary clinical analyst. Anna Aragno comes to psychoanalysis after a career as a prima ballerina. Thus, she should be well suited to know something about non-verbal communication. Her musicality shows through in the use of a musical symphony as a metaphor for listening at different semiotic levels. She has organized the book into a four movement classical symphony. Surprisingly then, the book is written in a highly dense and verbal academic style, full of philosophical terminology and history, as well as linguistics and semiotics. Here is a typical sentence: “We look to ontogenesis to analyze the micro-sequential stages in the mediation of natural expression by verbal semiotic means.” (p. 101). I would translate this sentence as follows: we use the organic growth of a living organism as a model for the detailed stages of human expression of meaning through signs and symbols in words.

This is an ambitious book. Aragno states that we lack a unified theory of affects, of the unconscious, of learning. How do we know what we know? What are the diverse forms of information and channels that are assimilated and understood? She has the aim of a general psychology. She wants to unify theory and develop an interpretive master-method. She proposes to weave into a synthesis ideas and information from the various schools of psychoanalysis and allied disciplines.

Does she succeed in her aims? The answer is mixed. I am in great sympathy with her aim to develop a topography of the unconscious and in this I think she largely succeeds.

However, I do not think a general psychology of psychoanalysis is possible at this time. Other points of view, especially a theory of drives and internal structures, remain important. The style of the writing is loose and wandering and often hard to follow. I believe the book could be edited down considerably to make it more coherent. She touches on many other points, especially ideas about supervision, but I will focus here on what I consider her original and clinically important thesis of unconscious communication.

The heart of the book is a psychoanalytic study of communication from the onset of life and the modes of communication at each stage of development, forming a complex set of non-verbal and linguistic interactions. Morphological principles of form become the template for the modes of communication and replace the spatial connotations of the structural model. The emphasis is on forms of unconscious communications that encompass the integration of verbal and non-verbal forms. Aragno calls this the underbelly of human experience. Freud's move from the topographic model to the structural model downgraded the id as a "seething cauldron" in contrast with the reality-facing, linguistic ego. This tends to privilege an ego psychology with the emphasis on words, associations and higher level defenses. Aragno intends to recast the topographic model into viable principles of how the unconscious becomes conscious. A topographic study of forms of unconscious communication will fill in what a linguistic emphasis on ego and structure leave out.

There are three philosophical thinkers whose ideas are interwoven throughout the book, but, without prior knowledge of their theories, one cannot fully comprehend Arago's synthesis. The book would have been improved with a basic summary of their theories. The most primordial and basic is Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945), a German neo-Kantian philosopher. Kant held that how we come to know the objective world results from the application of inborn principles in the mind, what he called the categories, that organize perception into an ordered whole. Cassirer differed from Kant in believing that the categories are not static but dynamic and evolving. Symbolic representation is the essential function of human consciousness. Cassirer viewed the 'symbolic function' as the common element to all areas of knowledge, but which took a specific form in each of them. We can articulate three types of reality and their corresponding symbolic form. The expressive world is organized by myth, sign and signification. The representational world is organized by language. The conceptual world is organized by science. Each of these symbolic forms expresses a structure of consciousness achieved by the internal logic of the symbolic forms and constituting a major sphere of cultural activity. To know is to elicit order through the use of symbolic forms.

Susan Langer (1895-1985) was one of the first woman American academic philosophers. Under Cassirer's influence, she was concerned throughout her career with form. Langer uses the term *form* in its most general sense to mean a complex relational structure. Knowledge, for Langer, is the capacity of the human mind to apprehend forms or patterns in the material furnished by experience. Langer's project was to attempt to unify feeling and intelligence. She developed the notion of "act" as a basic natural event that is

common to both the inorganic and organic world. Feeling, then, is a heightened form of biological activity. Feeling is matter at its most complex. Expressive form is always organic or morphogenic. Following Cassirer, Langer traced the development of forms as organizing symbolic principles in the evolution of ever more complex species.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician. One of the main influences on Bakhtin was Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms. He extends Cassirer's insistence on a plurality of symbolic forms to a plurality of discourses in society and the novel. In his study of Dostoevsky, he argues that there is no merging of voices into a final, authoritative voice as in the Hegelian absolute. In a polyphony, each character in Dostoevsky's work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. Dostoevsky does not present an abstract dialectic but an unmerged dialogue of voices, each given equal rights. In a polyphonic concept of truth, Bakhtin criticized the assumption that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. Truth is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply "averaged", or "synthesized." It is the fact of mutuality, of engagement, and of commitment to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth. Language is always characterized by heteroglossia, which can be defined as the collection of all the forms of social speech, or rhetorical modes, that people use in the course of their daily lives. Heteroglossia tends to move language toward multiplicity--not, as with the other poststructuralist theorists, in

terms of multiplicity of meaning for individual words or phrases but by including a wide variety of different ways of speaking, different rhetorical strategies and vocabularies.

Aragno's thesis is summed up in the following:

“the integration of primal and primary sensory-affective modes of transmission into a comprehensive developmental/continuum tracing the mediation of human interactive means from natural (biological) to linguistic (semiotic) forms.” (p. 60)

The psychoanalytic situation is understood as specialized semantic fields with an emphasis on unconscious modes of interaction and transmission, prior to and different from words. Her locus of inquiry is the interactive field. Her emphasis is on making conscious the unconscious by progressive symbolization. She draws from Langer the guiding principle of morphogenic forms, rooted in the biology of the brain that repeat in mind at progressively higher levels of organization. She draws from Bakhtin the complexity of polyphonic truth and heteroglossia.

The heart of Aragno's theory is found in Movement Three, where she outlines a developmental sequence of communicative modes and referential forms. Each of these forms organizes communication and thought in its unique mode.

#### 1. Coenesthetic expression

The human infant is born with a signaling system and a predisposition for pattern recognition through all sensory channels. The infant has a readiness to read and express

differentiated facial expressions. Affects at this stage are somatic responses to the intensity of stimulation that are immediate, involuntary and mimicry. These affects are highly contagious, transmitting feeling-patterns that are immediately recognized by the caretaker. The psyche of both infant and caretaker is porous and exquisitely open to transmission projections. This leads to enduring primary interactive schemas, how we attune and react to others. It is not yet empathy. This form is a sensori-motor signaling system consisting of non-referential action tendencies. It requires participatory inference or empathic attunement from the caretaker.

## 2. Ideo-motor replication

The signaling system is quickly modified into subtly nuanced complex emotions, turning into signifying. Signs move toward the symbolic but continue to partake in that which it points to. Signs announce their objects. These replications are organized around affective attachments, leading to enactments, parallel process and imitative reproductions. It is not yet an identification. Presentational or enacted reproductions operate through projection or evocation. Much of what we call mutual enactments or role-responsiveness in psychoanalysis belongs to this form.

## 3. Linguistic

Starting around one year of age, language increasingly becomes the dominant mode of communication. Language is symbolic, pairing a verbal signifier with a referent. There is now a growing differentiation between symbol and experience. A word fixes something in experience, bringing clarity and abstraction, making it available to memory

and cognition. There is an immense plasticity to language, yet it does not capture well the polymorphous, ambiguous, nuanced, experiential quality of inner life. Unconscious meanings are slippery, ephemeral, and elusive. Signaling, signification and symbolization belong to functionally distinct semiotic organizations. Language is plastic and labile, it can shift and hold sign and signal functions as well. Signaling and signification do not disappear with language; they operate within and below language. Arango points to the unconscious organic expressiveness of language as the special domain of psychoanalysis.

“Psychoanalysts are trained to withstand multiple contradictory streams of information; to seize an image, feel a silence, tolerate ambiguity, forgo judgment, to curb a tendency to reach hasty conclusions, while allowing all sensory input to incubate and ripen, as it were.” (p. 227)

#### 4. Narrative modes

Narrative is the organization of language into a story-meaning. Narration always includes time, with a beginning and an ending. It means to carve out structures of value, morals, coherence and meanings. A storied narration is the opposite of what we ask in a psychoanalytic session or in a dream, where cohesion, closure and sequence is counter to revealing of the partly verbal, partly non-verbal material. We aim eventually for a psychoanalytic narrative, which includes its disavowed parts.

Clinically, the analyst and the patient establish a semantic field. The analyst listens to multileveled forms and perspectives, what Aragno calls a heterogeneity of forms as a vertical axis. In order to listen, the analyst must understand the form of communication as well as the content. Communication operates both at symbolic levels containing highly condensed and complex meanings and at subsymbolic levels of action and contagion. In the horizontal axis, the analyst listens in time to the flow of semiotic material. The analyst must meet the patient at their respective functional levels of form. The therapeutic emphasis is on making the unconscious conscious for interpretation by the analyst and understanding by the patient.

Aragno's intellectual dialogue is primarily with Freud and the Freudian elaboration of the structural theory in American ego psychology. I think her thesis could benefit from a dialogue with other attempts to characterize the non-verbal. W. Bion on the development of thought, D. Stern on unformulated experience, H. Smith on continuous enactments come to mind among others. What I miss in her description is the experience of aggression and terror in the unformulated. As an example, I would turn to Bion, who is not referenced. He and Aragno are mining the same territory. Bion's beta-elements and alpha-elements would roughly correspond to the coenesthetic expression and ideo-motor replication stages of Aragno. Beta-elements are nameless sensations which are devoid of symbolic meaning or coherence. Beta-elements can be stored but are only suitable for evacuation by projection. Beta-elements can be transformed by alpha function into alpha-elements, which are available to the unconscious for dreaming and further transformation. Alpha function is initially supplied by the caretaker, what Bion calls the

container, until the child can internalize his or her own alpha function. Aragno's focus on semiotics fills up what Bion only sketches as the alpha function. What Bion does emphasize and is missing in Aragno is the nameless terror that resides in the deepest layers of the unconscious. For Bion, the mind always has a psychotic core. The mind starts out in catastrophe. Mental space cannot be represented, leaving an immensity that is accompanied by violent and psychotic fear. In Bion, the aggression is quite vivid. Attacks on alpha-function, from envy or hate, destroy the person's ability to make contact with him or herself and others. The self and objects become inanimate, lifeless and dead. The need for love is deflected and turns into overwhelming greed. Bion's concept of container/contained fills in Aragno's emphasis on attunement between caretaker and infant.

I would recommend this book to any analyst who is interested in theory development and has a working background in philosophy and semiotics. It is of particular interest to those of us who work psychoanalytically with more primitive personality disorders and routinely listen for the non-verbal and unformulated. Applying her principles directly to clinical material would be very helpful in explicating how her theories apply to work with deeply disordered patients.

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Robert S. White  
291 Whitney Ave.  
New Haven, CT 06511  
E-mail: [robertswhite@comcast.net](mailto:robertswhite@comcast.net)

ROBERT S. WHITE, Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Yale University, School of Medicine. Faculty, Western New England Institute for Psychoanalysis.