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***Forms of Knowledge: A Psychoanalytic Study of Human Communication.* By Anna Aragno. Baltimore: Publish America, 2008, 428 pp., \$29.95.**

*Review by:*  
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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 nonverbal communication. Her musicality shows through in her use of a 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 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 and channels of communication that are assimilated and understood? She has as her aim 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 these 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 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 outset of life and the modes of communication at each stage of development, forming a complex set of nonverbal 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 communication that integrate the verbal and the nonverbal. Aragno calls this the underbelly of human experience. Freud's move from the topographic 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 an 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.

Throughout the book are woven the ideas of three philosophers who have influenced the author—Ernst Cassirer, Susanne Langer, and Mikhail Bakhtin—and without some knowledge of their theories, one cannot fully comprehend Aragno's synthesis. The book would have been greatly improved by a basic summary of their theories. The most important influence on Aragno is that of Cassirer (1874-1945), a German neo-Kantian (see [Cassirer 1996](#)). Kant held that we come to know the objective world from the application of inborn principles of 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 element common to all areas of knowledge, but as taking a specific form in each. 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 constitutes a major sphere of cultural activity. To know is to elicit order through the use of symbolic forms.

Langer (1895-1985) was one of the first women in this country to become an academic philosopher (see [Langer 1942, 1949, 1967](#)). Under Cassirer's influence, she was concerned with form throughout her career. Langer uses the word *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 unify feeling and intelligence. She developed the notion of "act" as a basic natural event common to both the organic and the inorganic world. Feeling, then, is a heightened form of

biological activity, 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.

Bakhtin (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician, one of whose main influences was Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms (see **Holquist 2002**). He extended Cassirer's insistence on a plurality of symbolic forms to a plurality of discourses in society and the novel. In a study of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin argued 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. Embracing 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 one another. 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 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 characterizes her project as "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). She understands the psychoanalytic situation as comprising 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 the unconscious conscious by progressive symbolization. She draws from Langer the guiding principle of morphogenic forms, rooted in the biology of the brain, that repeat in the

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 her third "movement," 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 steeped in mimicry. These affects are highly contagious, transmitting feeling-patterns that are immediately recognized by the caretaker. The psyches of infant and caretaker are 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 sensorimotor signaling system consisting of nonreferential 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 what they point to. Signs announce their objects. These replications are organized around affective attachments, leading to enactments, parallel process, and imitative reproductions. This 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. *Verbal form.* 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 it. Aragno

points to the unconscious organic expresssiveness 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. 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 run counter to revelation of the part verbal, part nonverbal material. We aim eventually for a psychoanalytic narrative, which includes its disavowed parts.

Clinically, analyst and 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. On the horizontal axis, the analyst listens in time to the flow of semiotic material. The analyst must meet each patient at the functional level of form appropriate to that patient. 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. Her ideas, I believe, could have benefited from dialogue with other attempts to characterize the nonverbal. Bion on the development of thought, Daniel Stern on unformulated experience, and Henry 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. For this I would turn to **Bion** (1970), who is not referenced, though he and Aragno mine the same territory. Bion's beta elements and alpha elements roughly correspond to the coenesthetic expression and ideo-motor replication stages of Aragno. Beta elements, nameless sensations devoid of symbolic meaning or coherence, can be stored as bizarre elements in the mind, or can be evacuated from the mind by projection. They 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 emphasizes that 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 others. The self and its objects become 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 analysts with 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 nonverbal and unformulated. Applying Aragno's 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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