

Language and art

Of what can and what cannot be said.

How often do we hear something like this „I have a feeling that I cannot really put into words.“ It could be the sinking feeling one gets when the sub-consciousness is telling us that we have something unresolved or fear of losing something precious or dear to us. We sometimes just feel things that cannot be rationally explained, and are therefore hard to put into words. Not that these feelings are weak, in fact they can be extremely strong and can manifest themselves physically in laboured breathing or pounding heartbeat, but still cannot be accurately described. It seems there are two questions to consider; can't we communicate these feelings because we cannot identify them yet, or can we blame the language in some way?

We might even ask if the language gets in the way of us identifying and communicating our feelings. One of the first things we need to learn in order to learn a language is to allocate meaning to the words we hear so that we know the right words to use to describe a thing or a phenomenon such a feeling or thought. We also learn to coherently describe a set of feelings or circumstances we face. But what do we do when we feel something we don't have words for we cannot phrase in a way that accurately describes what we feel? If the reason we cant phrase or put our feelings into words is that we don't understand what we feel, the cause of the feeling, if it is repressed it is reasonable to suppose that it would be difficult to communicate in any language, spoken or musical. But here we might must realize that spoken language is a loaded with preconceived meaning and is designed to communicate thought as precisely as possible. This is only natural and necessary and in fact likely the reason for mankind's success among the species. Our capability to communicate complex thought allowed man to plot hunting in groups, share knowledge and develop our cognitive skills. Chimps who share 98% have not been as successful. Gestures and sounds simply don't do the trick. Neither does birdsong, as beautiful as it is. I do not pretend to understand the way other animals think but the gift of language is overarching in all our being. We think almost exclusively in our language because it is easy and effective. We may feel we hear and see things in our minds but

the conscious processing is all done in language. Therefore, since language is learned it becomes a rational activity and it is rationally shaped and used according to our knowledge of the languages rules and vocabulary.

Here is the catch; feelings are not always rational (or at least do not always seem to be) and feelings, needs and impulses often seem to outweigh the rational choice.

Individuals we are, but man is still a social animal that cannot thrive in solitude and we feel a need communicate these feelings to others, even what cannot easily be put into words. We seek understanding, support and advice. Furthermore, understanding ones own emotions, feelings or oneself for that matter is more often than not a dialectical process where we seek the help of trusted friends. Most of us know how just discussing a problem with a friend can seem to help, even though she can give no advice or help except a patient ear. So what do we do when we can't put it into words?

We have the arts if we are open to them. We don't even have to be experts. We can convey feelings improvised dance, drumming, colours, playing musical instruments. We may also know of a song or piece of music that "sounds" just the way we feel and play it to friends and say „Do you hear the sadness (or the gladness), this is what I am feeling“ to start the dialogue about what you are experiencing.

Often we are in the same situation towards in regard to our feelings as Bill in his story about the Bach piece, we just need the antenna. Sometimes all it takes is a new approach. That is, to use another language, the language of art to open us to our own inner workings, to open the box and step out of it so that we can see it from the outside.

Let us boldly conclude that Wittgenstein was wrong. We must not be silent.

May 25. 2010.

Bifröst University