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## Was Kenneth Burke a Pragmatist?

Critical and imaginative works are answers to questions posed by situations in which they arose. They are not merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers. ...These strategies size up the situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them.

This point of view does not, by any means, vow us to personal or historical subjectivism. The situations are real; the strategies for handling them have public content; and in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance.<sup>1</sup>

— Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*

Kenneth Burke's recent death has spurred academics in a variety of disciplines to reassess the import of his prolific output. As a specialist in American philosophy, I have begun to make inroads on a question I have heard thus far only in English and Communication departments: Should Kenneth Burke be considered a pragmatist? This paper seeks to persuade specialists in Pragmatism and American Philosophy that Burke's work has enough in common with the epistemological and metaphysical doctrines of Classical Pragmatism to merit renewed consideration by philosophers. Cautious of declarations re-

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garding the “essence” of pragmatism, this paper restricts its ambit by sketching first those points in Burke which many of us pragmatists would happily call central and then those which would give us pause. Ultimately, the decision as to whether or not Burke is to be defined as a “pragmatist” is the reader’s; what I hope to show conclusively is that the intellectual temperament and brilliance in Burke’s writings offer compelling reasons to focus attention on this important contributor to American philosophy.

### I. Affinities Between Burke and Pragmatism

#### Burke’s Pragmatic Epistemology

Throughout his career, Burke sought to undermine the view that an antecedent reality is mirrored, via logic and language, in the mind or individual ego. He rejected the implication that successful living requires that we name, refer to and define objects according to some divine and transcendent standard, miraculously present to a faculty of intuition. He opposed philosophies which measure truth, goodness, justice—virtually all values—by investigating how faithfully such values conform to an ideal and antecedent reality because he believed they were obstacles to productive living. In addition to challenging old ways of thinking, Burke spent his life charting how a myriad of rhetorical positions lay behind all forms of language, especially those with a pretension to neutrality. With this said, I will present evidence for the first area of fundamental agreement between Burke and pragmatism: Burke’s critiques of the purported “objectivity” of definitions, traditional logic, and correspondence theories of truth.

#### Definition

Burke’s chapter “Antinomies of Definition” in *A Grammar of Motives* is a focused assault on the neutrality feigned by scientific and philosophical definitions. Because all definitions are created by particular individuals to serve unique situations, Burke argues that no privileged standpoint for issuing perfectly representative descriptions of reality is possible. Burke writes,

Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality. Insofar as the reality meets the needs of reflection, we can say it has the necessary scope. In its selectivity, it is a reduction. Its scope and reduction become a deflection when the given terminology or calculus is not suited to the subject matter which it is designed to calculate.<sup>2</sup>

He sifts through the language of the most influential metaphysical systems in Western philosophy, ferreting out the key phrases (or “god-terms”) around which they are built.<sup>3</sup> Burke and the Pragmatists are offering two warnings. First, that we remember that even the most “scientific” propositions are transactions between a particular agent and a unique environment. Second, that in order for the scope of most inquiries to be adequate to their situation, full consideration by the inquirer of *non-rational* aspects (e.g., emotive, aesthetic, etc.) is necessary. All agree that a pitfall of the correspondence view is that it hypostatizes definitions and makes them seem relevant to *all* contexts, mistakenly equating what is known with what is experienced.

Burke does not proscribe definitions, though he insists that they be recognized as provisional, limited to the context for which they are constructed. His qualification in the above citation, “Insofar as the reality meets the needs of reflection,” pragmatically undercuts the universalist pretension of traditional epistemologies, which sought to name the essential attributes of antecedently real objects. Again, Burke’s strategy is consonant with those of pragmatists such as Dewey, who argued that scientific definitions should be conceived as tools for the prediction and control of nature, rather than laws which faithfully mirror nature.<sup>4</sup>

What sets the standards for the success of definitions (vocabularies, categorical schemes, etc.)? For Burke, success should be evaluated using functional criteria. What comes to constitute our functional

criteria depends upon the results we want, upon what we count as valuable. Pragmatists such as Dewey evaluated criteria in a similar way (though in terms more congenial to science) by asking whether or not the use of a term makes “possible the institution of interactions which yield results in control of actual experiences of observed objects.”<sup>5</sup> In Burke’s view, modern science evolved by focusing upon those methodological improvements that could augment humanity’s power over nature; this revolution engendered the belief that facts and values were separate things and that science’s language of fact was ethically neutral. Such a presumption, according to Burke, is fundamentally erroneous. He writes,

Scientists attempted to make a *neutral* vocabulary in the interests of more effective *action*. They learned that by “suspending judgment,” by inventing a non-moral vocabulary for the study of cosmic and human processes, they could get a much clearer idea as to how these processes work and could establish a more efficient system of control over them.

...But speech in its essence is not neutral. Far from aiming at suspended judgment, the spontaneous speech of a people is loaded with judgments. It is intensely moral—its names for objects contain the emotional overtones which give us the cues as to how we should act toward these objects.<sup>6</sup>

#### Traditional Logic

In a chapter of *Permanence and Change* entitled “Argument by Analogy,” Burke examines the experiential process which occurs in deduction. He questions the assumption that the premises of a syllogism are neutral toward the conclusion and selected antecedently. It is more likely, he suggests, that some nascent state of the conclusion influences the formation of the premises. He writes,

When a writer gives us a sequence of logical propositions framed to show why he got to his conclusions, he is almost reversing the actual processes of his thought. He presents

data which supposedly lead to a conclusion—whereas the conclusion had led to the selection and arrangement of the data. The demonstration is derived from the *demonstrandum*. ...From what we want to arrive at, we deduce our ways of getting there, although the conventions of logical exposition usually present things the other way round.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, logical arguments are not conceived in a vacuum; their subject matter exercises an influence over the entire process. Burke's larger project here is to show that it is impossible to definitively and categorically separate "logical" from "analogical" thought. Their continuity must be recognized so that the epistemological status of devices such as analogy and metaphor (which traditional logic typically shunts aside as un-philosophical and irrelevant to knowledge) can be restored. Literature, Burke believed, was equipment for living, capable of bridging theory and practice. In order for it to serve as such, he needs to reaffirm the stature of its chief devices. In pursuit of this role for literature, Burke, like the Pragmatists, rejects deductive logic's claim to universality by redescribing its function in the broader context of human inquiry and symbolic communication.

#### Burke's Metaphysics

Burke's challenges to traditional logic stem from a metaphysical position comparable to the process metaphysics which Classical Pragmatists generally accepted. For Burke, the universe is more akin to an active theater where countless dramas continually unfold than to a static display case to which science tries to refer. Because Burke does not present his metaphysics in the style of analytic philosophy, it is hard to stitch together a system for him. For example, though Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* is a sustained analysis of the motivations implicit in language, especially the language of Western philosophy, it is not an attempt to construct an alternative metaphysical system.<sup>8</sup> However, certain allegiances to the tenets of process metaphysics are stated quite unequivocally in many of his writings. For example, while defending his "inverted" logic, Burke writes,

I do not see why the universe should accommodate itself to a man-made medium of communication, particularly when there is so strongly a *creative* or *poietic* quality about its goings-on, and we know from our own little bits of poetry that the preparations result from the ends prepared for.<sup>9</sup>

Burke was motivated by the societal problems surrounding him to propose a new conception of reality. Like the pragmatists, he suspects that substance ontology (and attending correspondence theories) has reached the end of the road, leaving us with dualisms that create intractable problems. Burke writes,

Perhaps because we have come to think of ourselves as listening to the universe, as waiting to see what it will prove to us, we have psychotically made the corresponding readjustment of assuming that the universe itself will abide by our rules of discussion and give us its revelations in a cogent manner. Our notion of causality as a succession of pushes from behind is thus a disguised way of insisting that experience abide by the conventions of a good argument.<sup>10</sup>

According to Burke, the “psychosis” of modernity derives from Western civilization’s embrace of a mechanistic picture of the universe. Despite alluring promises of logical certainty, this picture leads to the modern person’s exaggerated sense of subjectivity which makes getting along (with oneself and with others) much more difficult. Burke diagnoses that in modern science’s causal system “...as crystallized in the Cartesian formula of ‘organized doubt,’ even human motives were to be explained by the *vis a tergo*, the force from behind. In the new perspective, men were not *drawn as to a beacon*: they were *pushed* by the compulsion of prior circumstances.”<sup>11</sup> Like pragmatists, Burke prefers to characterize humans in terms that stress practical, social and creative aspects (in lieu of the contemplative/reflective); he prefers to locate man-as-agent at the center of his metaphysics. He justi-

fies this metaphysical shift by claiming it to be more adequate to experience *as lived*:

For the *logical* rationalization has tended to shape its accounts of the universal process without regard for the most characteristic patterns of individual human experience: the sense of *acting upon something* rather than of *being acted upon by something*. The spontaneous words for human motivation all imply the element of *choice*; but the scientific words imply *compulsion*. All causal schemes for explaining our actions begin by eliminating the very quality which most strongly characterizes our own feelings with regard to our actions.<sup>12</sup>

#### Ethical-Metaphysical Systems

Historically, the ethical implications of many metaphysical systems were not explicitly acknowledged. In contrast, Burke and pragmatists begin with the ontological premise, grounded in daily experience, that humans are social beings. At the meta-philosophical level they agree that metaphysical systems are inherently ethical. Accordingly, one's metaphysics should consciously reflect and constitute life *as lived*. As Burke wrote in *Permanence and Change*, "...all universe-building is ethical universe-building. ...But our interests (in the widest sense, our vocations) are essential in shaping the nature of our discoveries, tentatives, and revisions. And our interests are ethical."<sup>13</sup> What finally constitutes reality depends upon the particular situation of the individual inquirer, a situation which inevitably includes their interests. Each creature in the universe, Burke thought, "approaches the universe from a different 'point of view,' and the difference in point of view will reveal a corresponding difference in the discovery of relevant 'facts.'"<sup>14</sup> Not only are theory and observational facts mutually constitutive, they exist in a similar constitutive relationship with one's value system.

The metaphysical picture Burke is describing entails that in addition to the achievements of reflective inquiry, our values, desires, feel-



ings—and our awareness of them—must all be included as basic ontological entities. Like the epistemological shift which inverted the causal order of premise and conclusion, Burke’s metaphysics illustrate a similar insight. He reminds us that “...in the simplest kinds of action or esthetic production, we see initial steps being shaped by ultimate intentions—and our awareness of such processes is as truly a ‘fact of experience’ as any meter reading, hence requires inclusion in our metaphysics.”<sup>15</sup> Burke, along with more systematic metaphysicians such as Peirce and Dewey, is trying to create a critical perspective one might call “practical.” Such a perspective questions the ultimate nature of dualisms such as subject/object, mental/physical, and organism/environment. He argues that:

the entire attempt to distinguish between organism and environment is suspect. An environment gets its quality, nature, or meaning from the demands which a particular organism makes of it. All told, it seems hard to understand how we can select the environmental as the distinctly prior factor. ...What we do find is a universal texture of some sort—and in it there are some events manifesting sufficient individuality to be classed as separate organisms. ...And a point of view also must be considered as belonging to the universal texture, as *actually existing*.<sup>16</sup>

In considering whether or not to call Burke a “pragmatist,” it is important to return to the question of criteria. One must ask Burke, “How can we judge that an explanation or schema is of value? By what standard is a solution, be it practical or theoretical, successful?” Appropriately, he argues that the criteria must be pragmatic. Burke takes as an example a medieval thinker’s use of cosmological schema to foretell events and guide conduct. How successful is such a schema? He answers “If a people’s growth and multiplication is not proof of a doctrine’s rightness, what is? We cannot say that their doctrines were not tested, when there was daily corroboration in the satisfactions of prayer, popular festivals, and artistic exaltations.”<sup>17</sup> Literature, too,

can instruct as well as amuse, and the tools that we develop to help us “use” literature can also be applied to the diversity of symbol systems which shape various facets of our lives. Burke comments that his

general approach to the poem might be called “pragmatic” in this sense: It assumes that a poem’s structure is to be described most accurately by thinking always of the poem’s function. It assumes that the poem is designed to “do something” for the poet and his readers, and that we can make the most relevant observations about its design by considering the poem as the embodiment of this act.<sup>18</sup>

Burke’s insistence on pragmatic criteria applies to the criticism of literature as much as deductive reasoning. The supposition that either kind of symbol system might be analyzed in a purely intrinsic manner (i.e., ignoring that system’s interdependence with a larger practical arena) restricts the scope of the analysis and makes it inadequate to our experience.

#### Countering “Relativism”

Like other thinkers who endeavor to construct a metaphysics that seeks to steer a course between materialism/realism and idealism, Burke anticipates critics who try to impugn pluralistic systems by labeling them “relativistic” or “subjectivistic.” He, like the pragmatists, tries to outflank those critics by affirming that there is a tenable position intermediate to realism and idealism. Burke writes that

Such a position does not involve us in subjectivism, or solipsism. It does not imply that the universe is merely the product of our interpretations. For the interpretations themselves must be altered as the universe displays various orders of *recalcitrance* to them. ...the “discoveries” which flow from the point of view are nothing other than revisions made necessary by the nature of the world itself. They thus have an objective validity. ...We are emphasizing the fact that the

ethical bent from which one approaches the universe is itself a part of the universe, and a very important part.<sup>19</sup>

For Burke, acknowledging that our interactions with the world really changes it does not erase the fact that a recalcitrant world may resist our efforts, perhaps even changing us. We are both part of the mix, as it were. Facts and values cannot be categorically separated, for however reality is defined, the definition inevitably reflects our interests and values. Because Burke and pragmatists make practical action their philosophical starting point (rather than the Cartesian starting point of individual reflective knowledge), charges of relativism grounded in such Cartesian assumptions cannot apply. As Greig Henderson points out in *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke's dramatistic system

approaches human reality in terms of *action* rather than *knowledge*, viewing language as "primarily a species of action, or attitudinising, rather than an instrument of definition." Whereas a "scientific" approach to the nature of language "begins with questions of *naming* or *definition*," a "dramatistic" approach begins with the attitudinal or hortatory...<sup>20</sup>

In the foregoing, "pragmatism" could easily be substituted for "dramatistic." But though Burke is constantly stressing the interrelations between knowledge and action, theory and practice, it seems fair to ask how Burke may be distinguished from, say, a Nietzschean whose project is mostly the negational "transvaluation of all values." Here, I believe the most important distinctions are Burke's eagerness to offer positive (i.e., reconstructive) metaphysical statements while reiterating the social and ethical goals of such projects. To help illuminate this reconstructive aspect of Burke's work, it is worthwhile to look at the specific tools he develops, such as "perspective by incongruity."

### Perspective by Incongruity

Ameliorating conditions in one's society requires that one can understand and evaluate them, especially as these conditions are expressed in language. To do this, one needs a systematic method to help reveal the attitudes and motives underlying people's characterizations of the "way things are." (This in turn can help indicate where important alliances are so they can be preserved or attacked.) In essence, this is the aim of Burke's "dramatism." An important tool within dramatism is "perspective by incongruity." Such a

planned incongruity should be deliberately cultivated for the purpose of experimentally wrenching apart all those molecular combinations of adjective and noun, substantive and verb, which still remain with us. It should subject language to the same "cracking" process that chemists now use in their refining of oil.<sup>21</sup>

A cultural critic gains insight into her culture by challenging the customary uses of language; she sets out to defamiliarize herself from phrases (or pairings of terms) which she finds herself accepting too automatically. As Burke explains,

Imagine, then, setting out to study mankind, with whose system of speech you are largely familiar. Imagine beginning your course of study *precisely by depriving yourself of this familiarity*, attempting to understand motives and purposes by avoiding as much as possible the clues handed you ready-made in the texture of language itself. In this you will have deliberately discarded available data in the interests of a fresh point of view, the heuristic or perspective value of a planned incongruity.<sup>22</sup>

For pragmatic reasons, similar to those mentioned in the passages regarding definition, the goal of "perspective by incongruity" is not to create a language with *no* biases, nor is it an anarchic tolerance for

*all* perspectives. Rather, its purpose is to keep us reasoning as equitably and democratically as possible so that when we judge, we have done our utmost to avoid personal and cultural dogmatisms. We should try to "...evolve a conscious dialectic discipline for playing moral weightings against one another and neutralizing them at any point where such neutralization seems imperative."<sup>23</sup> By becoming proficient at constructing incongruous perspectives, we may begin to see where the biases of our vocabularies lie, and which powers (social, religious, familial, etc.) sustain them through use. Ultimately, we may develop what Burke calls a "comic frame" allowing us to gain "maximum consciousness" of ourselves by becoming, in effect, our own best critics.<sup>24</sup>

## II. Differences Between Burke and Pragmatism

Finally, I would like to consider three important respects in which Burke's project seems "unpragmatic." First, there is Burke's almost myopic distrust of science, which leads him to dismiss it as an adequate paradigm for knowledge. Burke believed that the constraints of scientific language prevent science from adequately describing experience, all the while precipitating developments in the kinds of cold-war technology that wreck our sleep with nightmares. Burke largely disregarded the model of knowledge exemplified by the experimental method, and it is plausible this was the reason he shared little of the pragmatists' optimism for the constructive uses of science. Second, the later Burke's attempt to give definitions of "human" nature (e.g., "man as symbol-using animal") has an undeniably essentialist flavor, making it, to my mind at least, a markedly unpragmatic project.<sup>25</sup> The third difference derives from Burke's belief in the entelechy of language, that is, the *necessity* with which linguistic systems strive toward a state of "perfection" through the creation of "god-terms." Burke's belief in such an entelechial motive buttresses his contention that language is not just a means to value, but may be a source as well. I suspect many pragmatists would object to this type of characterization of language.

### Science and Technology

Burke saw the greatest possibility for what D.H. Lawrence called “ethical universe-building” in the many metaphors possible in poetic language. He believed that the complex radiations of human motives demanded expression in the sophisticated yet ambiguous ways which metaphor makes possible. Because metaphor is eschewed by science in favor of the precise strictures of definition, scientific language lacks this flexibility and is unable to give an adequate account of the world. Burke wrote in *Permanence and Change* that

We do recognize that the universe can manifest orders of recalcitrance corresponding to the orders of assertion—but we held that even this recalcitrance requires specific points of view before it can be disclosed, and alters its nature when the point of view is altered. We did not consider such ambiguity subjective, however, since the recalcitrance is real, and the purposes that reveal the recalcitrance are real. ...The conclusion we should draw from our thesis is a belief that the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor.<sup>26</sup>

Science, Burke thought, was limited by its realist interpretations of the “recalcitrance” of nature.<sup>27</sup> These interpretations are implicit in scientific terms and methods.<sup>28</sup> Science’s *modus operandi* excludes ironic tools such as “perspective by incongruity” or “comic frames.” In short, science is limited in the extent to which it, *qua* science, can comment upon the human condition. He was also quite wary of the ever-growing destructive power of modern weaponry made possible by science. Because he believed physical action grows out of symbolic action (out of terminologies)—and that there is a natural tendency for symbol systems to be taken to extremes, to “perfection”—Burke feared that we would soon perfect our technological terminologies thus making universal victimage a real likelihood.<sup>29</sup> He doubted that science has the symbolic tools to defuse this danger because it lacks

the linguistic devices that can break us out of habitual perspectives. For example, about contemporary attitudes toward technology, Burke noticed that “[t]he *opportunities* to produce further and further ‘generations’ of contrivances are indistinguishable from the *compulsions* to do so.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, without a vigilant effort to subject the language which surrounds us to closer scrutiny, we may find ourselves unwittingly accepting the advertiser’s pitch for “the latest convenience” affording us the “comfort we deserve.”

In contrast to scientific language, literature and poetry typically contain symbolic devices with far greater flexibility. These devices make literature and poetry more adequate to experience:

The exclusively mechanistic metaphor is objectionable not because it is directly counter to the poetic, but because it leaves too much out of account. It shows us merely those aspects of experience which can be phrased within its terms. It is truncated, as the poetic metaphor, *buttressed by the concept of recalcitrance*, is not.<sup>31</sup>

For pragmatists such as Dewey, science and the power it made available could signal hopeful opportunities, but only if we could separate out the experimental aspects from three crippling vestiges of traditional thinking. First, the idea that certainty and security can only be found in a realm of fixed and unchanging essences; second, that reflective knowledge of such essences is the only intrinsically stable and certain road to truth and value; third, that practical activity is inferior to theoretical contemplation, only necessary because of humanity’s bestial side and the need to survive. Only if these notions could be eliminated from science’s self-conception could science facilitate the mastery of natural *and* ethical obstacles.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Dewey, Peirce, and several other pragmatists, Burke did not see the promise in science’s experimental legacy and never revised a rather monolithic view of science *cum* realism.

### Human Nature

Another point of incongruence between Burke and pragmatism can be seen by considering Burke's later expansions upon dramatism, his "logological" theory of language.<sup>33</sup> These later works develop essentializing definitions of man and language (still broadly conceived as a symbolic form of action). I will take up Burke's definition of man first.

In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke defines man as "the symbol using animal, inventor of the negative, separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy, and rotten with perfection."<sup>34</sup> He notes that the fundamental categories which we have used to separate humans from nature are action/motion and person/thing. With his usual prophylactic ambivalence Burke claims that the ground for the distinction between persons and things is pragmatic: humans need, at least for now, this distinction to get along in the world.

Despite the evidences of primitive animism (that endows many sheer things with "souls") and the opposite modes of contemporary behaviorism (designed to study people as mere things), we do make a pragmatic distinction between the "actions" of "persons" and the sheer "motions" of "things." ...Yet we, the typically symbol-using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion.<sup>35</sup>

Burke cautiously adds that he does not have to pronounce

on the metaphysics of this [behaviorist] controversy. Maybe we are but things in motion. I don't have to haggle about that possibility. ...All I would claim is that, illusion or not, the human race cannot possibly get along with itself on the basis of any other intuition.<sup>36</sup>

But Burke *has* pronounced on the metaphysics of the controversy by claiming that humans "cannot possibly get along" without the dis-



inction. By pursuing a definition of “man-in-general,” his pragmatic caution has lapsed, yielding to an essentialist point about how humans must use language. Burke claims that his interpretative device, the “dramatic screen” possesses “. . . the philosophic character adapted to the discussion of *man in general*, as distinct from the kinds of insight afforded by the application of special scientific terminologies.”<sup>37</sup> This is the sort of ambition I would not comfortably call “pragmatic.” Would the earlier Burke have felt comfortable embarking on a “discussion of *man in general*”? I suspect not. Compare, for example, Burke in this passage from *Counter-Statement*, happily tentative about the natural uncertainties which lay beyond language:

There is a large reserve of physical unquestioning, and until we find this reserve itself endangered by the humiliation of tentative living and unauthoritative thinking, are we compelled to reach out impetuously for set criteria?<sup>38</sup>

The Burke of *Counter-Statement* has changed; the later Burke has become less tentative, less hypothetical about ontological description. In *Language*, Burke’s penchant for essentialism is evident in an essay on the limitations of philosophical definition.

No matter how limited any particular philosopher’s definition of man may be (owing to his limitations as a person), if he speaks as a philosopher he *necessarily* speaks “in terms of” the *whole* man. For his statement is *philosophically complete* only insofar as it involves a concept of *man in general*.<sup>39</sup>

Is Burke being ironic here? Based on other claims of this kind in *Language*, I doubt it. Though his characterization of “philosopher” and “philosophical completeness” may be taken as an accurate depiction of the kind of project which has occupied most philosophers for centuries, it certainly does not describe pragmatists very well; their criticisms of traditional epistemology and metaphysics entailed that they avoid ultimate pronouncements on concepts like “man-in-gen-

eral.”

In sum, as much as the old Nietzschean Burke wants to keep the hypostatizing technique of definition at arms' length, the new Aristotelian Burke wants to give a statement of man's genus and differentia, considered *generally*. But, as pragmatists are quick to point out, the motivation to define something *in general* is often diametrically opposed to the motivation which cautiously prefaces a definition with the phrase “for present purposes.” The former motivation implies an epistemological perspective which assumes, to use Thomas Nagel's phrase, a “view from Nowhere.” This is a perspective which Burke frequently assumes in his later works, yet it is one against which Classical Pragmatism tirelessly soldiered.

#### Language's Entelechial Motive

Finally, I would like to consider Burke's characterization of language and what he takes to be an essential attribute, its entelechy. For reasons similar to the ones immediately foregoing, it is a view which a pragmatist would not share. Burke writes,

But there is also the sheerly technical fact, as regards the nature of symbolism in general, that the thoroughness of my devotion to my work with a given symbol system may lead me to this “perfect” conclusion. This I call the “entelechial” motive, a motive intrinsic sheerly to symbol systems.<sup>40</sup>

And later,

Our approach might be summed up thus: Whereas Anselm propounded the “ontological necessity for the existence of God,” we base our position on the analogous linguistic necessity for the existence of god-terms. ...And next, since language derives its materials from the cooperative acts of men in sociopolitical orders, which are themselves held together by a vast network of verbally perfected meanings, might it not follow that man must perceive nature through the fog of

symbol-ridden social structures that he has erected atop nature? ...[M]ight words be a mediatory principle between ourselves and nature?<sup>41</sup>

The pragmatist's tentativeness, in which Burke couched his earlier proposals, is gone here: there is an essentialist, almost religious rhetoric in his characterization of symbol systems. Burke's choice of "Anselmian ontological necessity" as analogous to his own position reveals, at least, a yearning for the sort of epistemology (and transcendent source of value) found in traditional Christianity. The same "early-Burke versus later-Burke" tension found in his definition of man is present here as well. The *Weltanschauung* which here produces an essentialist account of language is identical to the one Burke labored to *undermine* in his earlier works; those earlier writings attempted to dissolve the knowledge/action, organism/environment, and fact/value dualisms by calling attention to the specific and situational nature of language and by proscribing extralinguistic perspectives. Henderson's claim is that the later Burke's concentration (*qua* logologist) on the entelechial character of language causes him to neglect his earlier discoveries regarding the real interdependence between observation and theory, organism and environment. About Burke's change Henderson writes,

...the more one focuses on the intrinsic interrelationships among terms within a system, the less one attends to the recalcitrance of reality. What starts out as an argument against the self-proclaimed innocence of the inductive method ends up becoming a method in itself.<sup>42</sup>

This criticism seems reasonably pragmatic: Burke is guilty of lapsing (after having come *so far*) into a belief in a Reality composed of language's essentially entelechial structures. The ambition with which Burke offers these definitions precludes the kind of ironic self-undercutting which made his earlier claims flexible and, to this pragmatist, attractive. Henderson's contention is that Burke's logological thesis

temporizes essence.

[E]ven though logology as a mode of analysis equips us with a vocabulary for discovering and comprehending the temporizing of essence, logology itself temporizes essence in a questionable way. This is because *logology converts methodological priority*—the heuristic method of treating communication as primary to all categories of experience and of adopting the poetic perspective of man as communicant, a dramatic method first developed in *Permanence and Change*, into *ontological priority*—the logological view that language is the source and origin of all value...<sup>43</sup>

The earlier Burke (i.e., of *Counter-Statement*, *Permanence and Change* and *Attitudes Toward History*) was living in a period of great instability in America and responded by trying to develop a critical vocabulary that would serve as a palliative, helping to “make one at home in the complexities of relativism, whereas now one tends to be bewildered by relativism.”<sup>44</sup> This vocabulary contained some shadings of the religious attitudes embodied in *Language as Symbolic Action* but any revelations were grounded with the metaphors of experimental biology, rather than language. Biological metaphors tend to direct us toward life in a here-and-now sense while still permitting us a view of how the cosmos hangs together.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, the later Burke took up a more theological project. He hoped to show us that logology could be considered more than a palliative; it could also be considered redemptive, a cure. About logology William Rueckert notes,

What [Burke] has finally done in his dramatic theory, after many years of moving steadily in that direction, is to systematize a naturalistic, linguistically oriented, secular variant of Christianity. Burke has retained the principal ideas of Christianity and worked out dramatic equivalents for them with astonishing thoroughness. The whole dramatic system

is...presented in such a way as to make perfectly clear Burke's belief that he has developed a new "scientific" religion which twentieth-century man can "believe" in, but which, unlike the old one it replaces, is designed to save man in this world.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike theologians, pragmatists do not commonly claim that philosophy's role should be to provide an explicit source of value through grand, redemptive narratives. Perhaps this is due to their refusal to privilege, ontologically, the "linguistic" mode of experience (or any other) over the practical. More likely it is because philosophy is taken to be an important tool for cultural criticism and reconstruction using the values that we cannot help but find exist around and within us. At root methodological, pragmatism claims no Original starting points or Final resting places. As Peirce wrote about the starting point of philosophic inquiry, "We must not begin by talking of pure ideas—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation—but must begin with men and their conversation." And as Dewey wrote about ideal endpoints,

[I]deas and idealisms are in themselves hypotheses not finalities. Being connected with operations to be performed, they are tested by the consequences of these operations, not by what exists prior to them. ...Conception and systems of conceptions, ends in view and plans, are constantly making and remaking as fast as those already in use reveal their weaknesses, defects and positive values. There is no predestined course they must follow.<sup>47</sup>

The spirit of Peirce and Dewey's pragmatic views is contrary to Burke's claim that language is *intrinsically* entelechial. Language as we now use it might be entelechial but there is no reason to claim it is intrinsically so. Where Classical Pragmatists retain a hypothetical stance toward their systems, Burke moves toward a kind of religious idealism explicated as "logology."<sup>48</sup> His laudable awareness of the interplay between observation and theory in earlier works is left be-

hind in *Language as Symbolic Action*. Though Burke avoids the temptation of saying that observations are *nothing but* the implications of a terminology, he occasionally comes close to making just that reduction:

Not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another. Also, *many of the "observations" are but implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made.* In brief, much that we take as observations about "reality" may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms.<sup>49</sup>

Burke has moved far from an earlier pragmatic realism, which recognized that limits on language came from experiences of nature's recalcitrance, towards something like a linguistic relativism which drastically downplays the constraint exercised by observation upon terminology.

### III. Conclusions

After these many considerations, I think the most reasonable answer to the question "Was Burke a pragmatist?" is, "Yes, but not always." Though there is a substantial basis for agreement between Burke and pragmatism in Burke's earlier writings, points crucial to the direction of his later writings diverge from pragmatism; most notable of these is Burke's willingness to develop an elaborate essentializing narrative about human nature and the important redemptive—not solely instrumental—role which language can fulfill.<sup>50</sup> Though both Burke and the pragmatists build methodological systems designed to "keep us honest" by multiplying perspectives, Burke came to believe that the proliferation of perspectives that characterizes twentieth century thinking needed to be redirected with more than methodology. To serve that end, Burke sought to develop

“logology,” a theology. Philip Rieff’s introduction to Freud’s *The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement* provided me with some clues to why Burke ended up developing a “logology.” Rieff writes,

When psychoanalysis frees a patient from the tyranny of his inner compulsions, it gives him a power to choose that is not otherwise his. Thus the aim of psychoanalysis is the aim of science—power, in this case a transformative technology of the inner life. Where science is, there technology will be. This final technology aims to increase the range of choice. Yet, without a parallel range of god-terms from which choices may be derived and ordered, choice itself may become a matter of indifference or man becomes a glutton, choosing everything.<sup>51</sup>

Burke’s mistrust of technology and science is ubiquitous in his writings. If, superficially, he was spurred on to develop logology by a pessimism about the uses to which man would choose to put such technology, perhaps at a deeper and more personal level he harbored angst over how much contemporary criticism, his included, had done to help generate nihilism.

Ultimately, Burke could not rest with the idea that his methodological theories about language would merely *broaden* and not *enhance* the range of choices for those who could, by understanding his perspectivism, gain greater control of their culture. He felt compelled to offer more than therapy; he wanted men to have something categorically other than therapy: a cure. It is debatable whether or not pragmatism could be called secular therapy; what is certain, though, is that pragmatism does not cross the boundary from secular therapy to religious cure.

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NOTES

1. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 1. All italics in Burke citations are Burke's unless otherwise noted.

2. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 24.

3. One might consider, as a point of comparison, John Dewey's critique of "essence" in *Experience and Nature*. Dewey writes, "Essence...is but a pronounced instance of meaning; to be partial, and to assign a meaning to a thing as *the* meaning is but to evince human subjection to bias. Since consequences differ also in their consequence and hence importance, practical good sense may attach to this one-sided partiality, for the meaning seized upon as essence may designate extensive and recurrent consequences. ...[But] when essence is...thought to contain existence as the perfect includes the imperfect, it is because a legitimate, practical measure of reality in terms of importance is illegitimately altered into a theoretical measure." (John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* [New York: Dover, 1958], pp. 182-3.)

4. See *The Quest for Certainty* where Dewey wrote, "What knowledge is interested in is the correlation among [specific] changes or events. ...When these correlations are discovered, the possibility of control is in our hands. Scientific objects as statements of these interrelations are instrumentalities of control. They are objects of the *thought* of reality, not disclosures of immanent properties of real substances. They are in particular the thought of reality from a particular point of view: the most highly generalized view of nature as a system of interconnected changes." (John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* [New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1929], p. 128.)

5. *Quest*, p. 129.

6. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd ed. With a New Afterword (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 176-7.

7. *Permanence*, p. 98. For some comparison between Burke and his contemporaries regarding logic, see John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead. Especially, Dewey's *Experience and Nature*:



"The most 'deductive' thought in actual occurrence is a series of trials, observations and selections. In one sense of the ambiguous word intuition, it is a 'series of intuitions,' and logic is *ex post facto*, expressing a wit that formulates economically the congruities and incongruities that have manifested themselves." (*Experience*, p. 161.) and Whitehead's *Modes of Thought*: "Thus deductive logic has not the coercive supremacy which is conventionally conceded to it. When applied to concrete instances, it is a tentative procedure, finally to be judged by the self-evidence of its issues. This doctrine places philosophy on a pragmatic basis." (A.N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* [New York: Free Press, 1968], p.106.)

8. "The book," Burke writes, "is concerned with the basic forms of thought which, in accordance with the nature of the world as all men necessarily experience it, are exemplified in the attributing of motives." (*Grammar*, p. xv.) Burke's key metaphor for the study is "drama" and the basic categories of analysis are the dramatic pentad: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. But Burke is careful to stress that motives, not metaphysics, is the study's ultimate theme. He writes, "It is not our purpose to import dialectical and metaphysical concerns into a subject that might otherwise be free of them. On the contrary, we hope to make clear the ways in which dialectical and metaphysical issues necessarily figure in the subject of motivation." (*Grammar*, p. xxiii.)

9. *Permanence*, p. 99. What Burke describes as a *creative* or *poietic* quality is reminiscent of "chance" in Peirce's cosmology, or "novelty" in Whitehead's.

10. *Permanence*, p. 99.

11. *Permanence*, p. 170.

12. *Permanence*, p. 218.

13. *Permanence*, p. 256.

14. *Permanence*, p. 256. For an earlier echo of Burke's suspicion that the selection of our "data" is influenced by the conclusions we anticipate, see William James's *The Principles of Psychology*: "The conceiving or theorizing faculty works exclusively for the sake of ends that do not exist at all in the world of the impressions received by way of our senses, but are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity. It is a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world, the world of our conception." (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. II [New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1890], p. 627.)

15. *Permanence*, p. 231.
16. *Permanence*, pp. 232-3.
17. *Permanence*, p. 100.
18. *Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 89. Though Dewey did not see poetry and literature as activities most emblematic of pragmatism, he nevertheless expressed thoughts similar to Burke's about their usefulness: "The saying of Matthew Arnold that poetry is a criticism of life sounds harsh to the ears of some persons of strong esthetic bent; it seems to give poetry a moral and instrumental function. But while poetry is not a criticism of life in intent, it is in effect, and so is all art. ... The level and style of the arts...do more than all else to determine the current direction of ideas and endeavors in the community. They supply the meanings in terms of which life is judged, esteemed, and criticized. For an outside spectator, they supply material for a critical evaluation of the life led by that community." (*Experience and Nature*, p. 204.)
19. *Permanence*, pp. 256-7, italics mine. Compare Burke's use of "recalcitrance" with the term's use in the metaphysics of several pragmatists, especially Peirce.
20. Greig E. Henderson, *Kenneth Burke: Literature and Language as Symbolic Action* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 18. Phrases in double quotation marks are Henderson's appropriations from Burke's article "Dramatism."
21. *Permanence*, p. 119.
22. *Permanence*, p. 121.
23. *Permanence*, p. 193.
24. See Burke's chapter "Comic Correctives" in *Attitudes Toward History*, where he states: "The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience.' ... In sum, the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational." (*Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. With a New Afterword [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], p. 171.)
25. By "later Burke" I mean the Burke who wrote *Language as Sym-*

*bolic Action* and *The Rhetoric of Religion: The Study of Logology*.

26. *Permanence*, p. 263.

27. Burke's point is not that nature's "recalcitrance" forces scientists to construct correspondence epistemologies, but rather that the scientific vocabulary limits one's ability to discuss the multiplicity of ways in which that recalcitrance can be taken.

28. It is hard to imagine that many scientists would agree with Burke's claim that "our notions of 'reality' amount to a tendentious though unstable complex of 'personal equations' that are implicit in such a simultaneously unique and socially infused 'orientation.'" (Afterword, *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 394.)

29. Consider, as an example of terminology taken as far as possible, the Nazi's phrase "final solution," a phrase which laid the ideological groundwork for what truly became universal victimage.

30. *Attitudes Toward History*, p. 396.

31. *Permanence*, p. 261.

32. As Dewey wrote, "It is because of injection of an irrelevant philosophy into interpretation of the conclusions of science that the latter are thought to eliminate qualities and values from nature. ... Drop the conception that knowledge is knowledge only when it is a disclosure and definition of the properties of fixed and antecedent reality; interpret the aim and test of knowing by what happens in the actual procedures of scientific inquiry, and the supposed need and problem vanish." (*Quest*, p. 103.)

33. Burke gives a succinct description of this complex project in *Language as Symbolic Action*: "By 'logology,' as so conceived, I would mean the systematic study of theological terms, not from the standpoint of their truth or falsity as statements about the supernatural, but purely for the light they might throw upon the *forms* of language. That is, the tactics involved in the theologian's 'words about God' might be studied as 'words about words...'" (*Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966], p. 47.)

34. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 16.

35. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 53.

36. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 53.

37. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 53, my emphasis.

38. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 105.
39. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 57, italics on "necessarily" and "philosophically complete" are my emphases.
40. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 70.
41. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 378.
42. Henderson, p. 133.
43. Henderson, p. 122, my emphases.
44. *Attitudes*, p. 229.
45. In *Permanence* Burke wrote: "What we wish to emphasize now is the fact that the poetic metaphor offers an invaluable perspective from which to judge the world of contingencies. ...[I]n a world which has lost its faith in transcendental revelation, *the poetic metaphor enables us to start from a point of reference wherein the 'revelation' is of a secular nature: the biologic assertion itself.* Projecting the metaphor by analogical extension, we find that the entire universe again takes life, as a mighty drama still in progress." (p. 266, emphasis mine.)
46. William H. Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), pp. 133-4.
47. *Quest*, p. 167.
48. About logology Rueckert notes that "One of the most striking things about Burke's system...is the insistence that the human agent cannot do otherwise than always act upon a logological scene. Whereas a Christian might say that God is the scene and operates as a motive in all men's acts, Burke says that language is *the* scene and operates as a motive in all experiences possible to man. Even if the act is non-verbal, it must be affected in some way by the symbolic ingredient that is intrinsic to the human mind and constitutes part of man's essence." (Rueckert, p. 134.)
49. *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 46.
50. Logology is most fully explicated by Burke in *Language as Symbolic Action* and *The Rhetoric of Religion*.
51. Philip Rieff, Introduction to Freud's *The History of the Psychoanalytic Movement*, edited by Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 21.