

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Encompassing And Enacting Dialectic: Kenneth Burke's Theory Of Dramatism



The work of American self-described “wordman”, Kenneth Burke, is having tremendous impact on rhetorical and literary theory and criticism, speech communication, sociology, and many other academic areas, including in some small ways argumentation. Despite this recent attention, particularly in the work of Arnie Madsen (1989, 1991, 1993) and James Klumpp (1993) as well as the recent special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* on “Dramatism and Argumentation” (1993) and occasional argument criticisms which invoke Burkean perspectives, Burke’s work still remains relatively unknown to many argumentation scholars, and potential contributions of Burkean theory to argumentation studies remain to be developed fully. Moreover, as Madsen (1993) observed, “the works of Kenneth Burke have gone relatively unnoticed in the field of argumentation theory” (164). And although it is certainly true that “Burke offers no systematic and complete theory of argument” (Parson, 1993, 145), it is also nonetheless equally the case that Burke’s work on human symbol systems and motives, summarized as his theory of “dramatism,” encompasses the traditional domains of rhetoric, poetic, and dialectic, thereby at least by most traditional accounts encompassing as well argumentation (See van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Kruijer), subsuming, re-defining, and re-positioning “argument” within the orientation of “dramatism.”

The current study attempts to “locate” argumentation within Burke’s theoretical edifice, dramatism, and, more generally, to examine how “dramatism” transforms traditional approaches to “rationality.” As “rationality” is transformed, so too, necessarily, is argumentation. The specific objectives of this paper are per force more restricted. I will sketch, generally and broadly, dramatism’s *encompassing* argument move, with its attendant transformations of “rationality.” Second, and a bit more specifically, I will offer a description of Burke’s theory of dialectics, before concluding with some remarks suggesting how, via the agency of Burke’s

“psychologized” rhetoric of identification, dialectic becomes enacted as what Burke calls the “great *drama* of *human* relations” (1955, 263).

I

Burke’s “Dramatism” is set forth broadly in his informal *Motivorum Trilogy: A Grammar of Motives* (1945), which treats generally of dialectics and transformational processes, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), which treats of rhetoric as “consubstantial” with “identification,” and *A Symbolic of Motives* (unpublished), which treats of poetics and ethics variously (depending upon which design for the unfinished project is featured) from within the orientation of “dramatism.” A related manuscript, *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* (unpublished), is a relatively complete treatment of precisely what the title promises; it may be a re-titled version of what began as *A Symbolic*.**[i]** Burke’s proposed “trilogy” of “a grammar,” which centered generally and paradoxically on dialectics, “a rhetoric,” and “a symbolic,” which subsumed both poetics and ethics, parallels in many ways classical formulations including the *trivium*,**[ii]** but Burke’s interests, lying at the intersection of language, psychology, and circumstance, focus concern on human motives rather than upon probable truth, “right” action, or divine telos. As such, “‘finding’ a theory of argument, or positions that inform argument theory,” in Burke’s writings, Parson suggests, “will be an inferential process” (146; see also Madsen, 1993, 165). But given the sweeping nature of the *Motivorum* project, the process is not one of merely extending the domain of “dramatism,” a theory derived most explicitly from literary studies, to the domain of “argumentation,” for “dramatism” in subsuming and re-defining “dialectic” and “rhetoric” has already positioned itself atop much of the traditional “argument” domain. And in so-doing, it transformed the nature and function of argumentation itself. As Klumpp (1993) puts it, a “rapprochement” between mainstream argumentation studies and Burkean studies takes one more “toward adapting argumentation rather than dramatism” (149). One important reason for this is that frequently argumentation studies appears as a Phoenix arisen amid the detritus of formal logics, remaining under the sign of “Reason” and genuflecting instinctively toward Reason’s traditional consort, Truth. Burke’s orientation explicitly re-defines “rationality” and de-privileges, indeed de-stabilizes, truth. For a “rapprochement,” to borrow Klumpp’s terminology, to occur, “argumentation” needs to be approached from within the orientations of dramatism; that is, perhaps the most productive point of entry into a “conversation” between dramatism and argumentation is not “Where

does dramatism 'fit' in argumentation?" but rather "Where does argumentation 'fit' in dramatism?"

Burke offers a new contextualization of *rationality* in the nexus of mind, body, language, and circumstance, all infused with the spiritual goads of perfectionism, in the betweenness of action/motion: he calls this nexus "motive" and insists that its structure and functioning can be "read" in the text or verbal encompassments of a situation. These motives are visible in the "ratios" which best encompass the discourse, and the "ratios" - to be discussed more fully below - are products of dramatisitic analysis. Burke's "dramatism" is an account of human "motives" and, ultimately, humans attitudes and actions. It professes to encompass vast chunks of the classical domains of dialectic, rhetoric, ethics, and poetics, as well as much of more contemporary psychology, sociology, and philosophy. While not discounting the biological, psychological, or material, dramatism privileges the linguistic in its account of motives; certainly, for Burke, *motives* per se are linguistic: they are to be located in the accounts people give of why they did what they did (1945, x). In other words, Burke, the word-man, begins always with "logos," the word. In "Curriculum Criticum," an appendix to the second edition (1953) of *Counter-Statement* (1931), Burke writes of his proposed trilogy: "The whole project aims to round out an analysis of language in keeping with the author's favorite notion that, man being the specifically language-using animal, an approach to human motivation should be made through the analysis of language" (218-19). "Dramatism" is an explanatory and critical theory which works through language to better understand human motives; in its sweeping embrace of rhetoric, dialectic, poetics, and ethics dramatism also includes in its embrace the traditional domain of argumentation.

Argumentation's break from logical formalism has moved the field toward Burke's orientation. As Klumpp notes (1993), "Through Wallace, and Toulmin, and Perelman, and Fisher, and Scott, and others, we have treatments of argument that seek to return to the root of 'logic' in '*logos*', in the linguistic power of humans. The resources of dramatism with its commitment to a dialectical working of text and context, permanence and change, identity and identification, and dozens of other tensions resolved in linguistic acts may point argumentation more clearly to the constructive appeal of argument" (162). Yet this return to "the root of 'logic' in '*logos*'" has not meant a purging of formal logic; indeed, "argumentation" may be seen as an encompassment of formal logics, and as an

encompassment it both *retains* (or preserves) and *reduces* logic. Logic is now a part of the whole, no longer a metonym standing in place of a larger dynamic. Logic is never repudiated: it is retained, yet transformed. Just as the nascent field of argumentation has moved to encompass formal logic, so too does Burke's Dramatism move to encompass argumentation itself.

From within a dramatistic perspective, the association between rationality and probability is, well, problematic: probability begs the questions, probable relative to what? That progressive linkage between the probable, the rational, and, often at least implicitly, the true, viewed from the dramatistic frame, is necessarily only a partial explanation, and hence a reductive one. A more comprehensive perspective would from the Burkean framework be the more "rational" (that with the maximum self-consciousness); that is, rather than emphasizing the *probable*, with its implicit this rather than that, either/or orientation, Burke emphasizes *situational encompassment*, "testing" the adequacy of a explanation relative to both the social and the material recalcitrances it encounters: progressive encompassment, rather than precise differentiation, becomes the desired end, the telos of the rational from within the dramatistic frame (See 1940, 138-167). That is, there is a situational encompassment via a perspective; the "rationality" of the perspective is evaluated relative to the adequacy of the orientation to the structure, including exigencies, of the rhetorical situation (See Burke, 1973).

From the Burkean orientation, a productive approach to "argument" is not simply how it functions in the constructions of formal appeals but rather how it operates from within a given motive structure. That is, questions of "validity" must be framed within the Weltanschauung of the audience; only then can how such appeals operate be seen in the full conspectus of their function. To appropriate Burke's admonition in "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" (1940, 191ff), it is not sufficient to dismiss an argument as being 'unscientific' or lacking formal validity when that argument is holding popular sway. Along these lines, Burke writes somewhat sarcastically in 1940, "We thus need not despair of human rationality, even in eruptive days like ours. I am sure that even the most arbitrary of Nazis can be shown to possess it; for no matter how inadequate his chart of meaning may be, as developed under the privations of the quietus and oversimplifying dialectical pressure, he at least *wants* it to tell him accurately *what is going on* in his world and in the world at large" (114). From the perspective of dramatism, it would appear that argumentation's central concern with reason-giving or justificatory behavior is retained, yet the "rationality" of the reasons/justifications

is not separate from the motivational Weltanschauung from which it emanated. That is, motives are “rational” relative to their own structural/functional design and adequacy to the situations they encounter rather than to any a priori or non-contextualized form. Form, for Burke, is in the psychology of the audience (1931, 30-31); definitionally, “form” as such cannot exist apart from “situation” and “audience.” Through this process, the “tests” of “rationality” are radically transformed. For instance, “that which is ‘rational’ is that which satisfies or would satisfy an aroused appetite, remembering always that in Burke’s interpretation ‘logical’ structures are one of the forms of appetite and desire. It is precisely here that we have the ‘psychologizing’ of rationality, for the operative ‘logics’ in his system of rationality are the logics of desire, of the appetites” (Williams, 1990, 185). The “rationality” of desire is not to be confused with inchoate yearnings or impulsive actions: “That which is rational within a given order of desires may be seen in contrast to that which is incongruous with that order. That is, rationality is, above all else, an ordered structure of relationships; to ‘be rational’ is to operate within the structure or order of relationships apropos to one’s time and situation” (Williams, 1990, 185). It is also, as Madsen emphasizes, to operate within the constraints of a particular terministic orientation (1989, 11; see also Jasinski).

Burke tends to equate “rationality” with but an aspect of human’s symbol-using capabilities, and then he views rationality as the human genius for tracking-down the implications of our creations, linguistic and otherwise, for “perfecting” and “purifying” our categories, our dialectical desire for not just difference but opposition. In “Variations on ‘Providence’” (1981), Burke writes, “The Logological concept of our species as the ‘symbol-using animal’ is not identical with the concept, *homo sapiens*, the ‘rational’ animal – for whereas we are the “symbol-using animal” all the time, we are *nonrational* and even *irrational* *some* of the time. Somewhat along Freudian lines I take it that the very process of learning language long before we have reached the so-called ‘age of reason’ leaves upon us the mark of its necessarily immature beginnings; and only some of these can be called ‘childlike’ in the idyllic sense of the term”.**[iii]** And overly diligent pursuit of the rational proper, as with any such purification, may bring about its obverse, and it certainly brings about something different. From Burke’s dramatic perspective, “rationality’s” penultimate perfection is ultimately a transformation into something new, different, other. From a more well rounded account of human motives, such genius, as Burke is fond of citing Santyana as saying, is almost always a catastrophe, culminating in scapegoating, wars, and

ecological destruction, for instances. Burke continues, "But implicit in its [language's] very nature there is the principle of completion, or perfection, or carrying ideas to the end of the line, as with thoughts on first and last things - all told, goads toward the tracking down of implications. And 'rationality' is in its way the very 'perfection' of such language-infused possibilities. And what more 'rational' in that respect than our perfecting of *instruments* designed to help assist us in the tracking-down-of-implications, the rational genius of technology thus being in effect a vocational impulsiveness, as though in answer to a call?" (182-83). Burke's alignment of traditional rationality and technological prowess, each containing its own genius for catastrophe, offers fruitful parallels to Habermas's critique of technical rationality, parallels which must wait another day for further examination. Burke's alternative in "maximum self-consciousness," however, may diverge significantly from Habermas's "life world." What is needed instead of more "rationality" is what Burke calls "maximum self-consciousness": an awareness of the very framing and structure of our own motives (and hence of alternative motive structures), a state of mind in which we use language rather than letting language use of, in which we think through the categories of language rather than letting the categories of language do our thinking for us. **[iv]** In expounding upon the educational and political value of dramatism, Burke maintains that dramatism "contends that by a methodic study of symbolic action men have their best chance of seeing beyond this clutter, into the ironic nature of the human species" (1955, 269-70).

That which is most "rational" within a dramatisitic orientation (if not within others) is that which opens-up the linguistic possibilities, that which interferes with perfection and forestalls genius's fulfillment in catastrophe, that which moves us toward "maximum self-consciousness." The objective of such dramatisitically "rational" argument is not its fulfillment as truth, or victor over dialectical opposition - "the stylistic form of a lawyer's plea" - , but rather as full an understanding as possible of what Burke at times calls a "calculus" of human motives: "An ideal philosophy, from this point of view, would seek to satisfy the requirements of a perfect dictionary. It would be a calculus for charting the nature of events and for clarifying all important relationships." Or, in other Burkean language, it encompasses the situation. Burke continues, "...the only 'proof' of a philosophy, considered as a calculus, resides in showing, by concrete application, the scope, complexity, and accuracy of its coordinates for charting the nature of events." "What, in fact, is 'rationality' but the desire for an *accurate chart for naming what is going on?*" (1940, 113-14). In dramatisitic rationality, of

course, accuracy is encompassment, not precise differentiation; it is a “heaping up,” not a purification (1940, 143-49). For Burke, dramatism’s reflexive analytic methodologies - e.g., so-called pentadic analysis - force us toward preservation of the dialectic, toward a disavowal of the absolutism of relativism and an acceptance of the encompassing nature of paradox and irony (1945, 503-517). Burke’s encompassing, or transcending, move culminates in dialectic, which is also where it started.

## *II*

Traditional approaches to dialectics constructed dialectics as a method toward discovery of the True or probably true; it was a method of resolution toward a category of the true. Burke’s approach stands the traditional orientation on its ear: for Burke, categories of the true or apparently true (e.g., the terms or categories of the pentad) become “resolved” into unnamable dialectic constructs, into “ratios” which define motive (e.g., a “scene/act” ratio). The dialectic is not resolved; instead, it is the resolution: human thought - symbolic action - is always dialectical. From this framework, “reason” must be understood not as a product of the dialectic (as a dialectically produced “sign” of the true) but rather as perpetually intrinsic to the dialectic, as itself always dialectical (1945). Again, in a Burkean orientation, a “ratio” (an explicitly dialectical construct) is a “reason” or, once ‘psychologized,’ a “motive.” As Klumpp notes (1993), “the etymological root of ‘ratios’ and ‘reason’ are the same” (162) (sic). They share an “alchemic” core: what can be “thrown up” as a “reason” at one moment may appear distinctly as a “motive” at the next (see Burke, 1945, x). There is, of course, a close and necessarily relationship between the motive structures (ratios) and dialectics: Motives are dialectical. “The elements of the pentad constitute human motives only when they interact, which is to say only when they found dialectical relations with each other: a scene/act ratio, for instance, is neither scene nor act but rather the betweenness of scene and act which allows for transformation, for symbolic action, for motives” (Williams, 1992, 3). Given this, it is instructive to flesh-out Burke’s approach to dialectics before suggesting how “drama” may be seen as the “psychologized” enactment of dialectics via the agency of rhetorical identifications.

Perhaps the most complete treatment of Burke’s dialectic qua dialectic is in the report of a seminar on “Kenneth Burke as Dialectician,” from the 1993 Triennial Conference of the Kenneth Burke Society (Williams, et.al.). The report offers

“nine over-lapping assertions concerning Kenneth Burke as dialectician” (17) which, in summation, offer a brief summary of Burke’s orientation:

1. “Burke’s dialectic is, among other things, *linguistic* in character” (17). The ineradicable negative lurking within any linguistic demarcation of difference renders dialectic and meaning virtually co-terminus: for Burke, essence or substance is always paradoxically dialectic (1945, 21-35). As the Seminar report continues, “From the dialectical structure of language emerge characteristic features of linguistic processes, e.g. merger and division (identification and difference), transformation, polarization, hierarchy, transcendence, etc.” (17). Various “incarnations” of this “dialectical spirit” may be seen in various forms of social enactments.

2. “Burke’s dialectic allows humans to draw distinctions - but not to reify categories” (17). By being ineradicable, the negative always provides the resources to de-construct any hermetically sealed and protected linguistic construct.

3. “Dialectic can be converted to drama via psychological identification with linguistic distinctions” (17). I will elaborate upon this assertion in my conclusion.

4. “Burke’s dialectic is not one of oppositions but rather of *betweenness*. Burke’s dialectic does not operate in the realm of either/ or but rather the both/and; the dialectic is in the ‘margin of overlap’ between the two. The betweenness of the dialectic facilitates transformations of one term into another; it does not promote oppositions or polarization. Dialectic ‘dances’ in the betweenness of two terms or concepts. In this sense, the ‘attitude’ or ‘spirit’ of Burke’s dialectic is ironic, not contradictory or antagonistic: Burke’s dialectic is the ‘essence’ of the comic perspective” (17-18).

5. “Burke’s dialectic neither contains nor aspires toward a determined *telos*; rather, the *telos* of Burke’s dialectic is undetermined and open-ended” (18).

6. “Burke’s dialectic resides ‘in the slash’ between the terms under consideration, and dialectical freedom is enhanced as the slash is ‘widened.’ The metaphor ‘in the slash’ derives from Burke’s discussion of motives as ratios between terms of the pentad (hexad). Thus, in a ‘scene/act’ ratio, the motive is in the ‘betweenness’ of scene and act, which is to say ‘in the slash’” (18).

7. “Burke’s dialectic inaugurates/preserves symbolic action” (18). Burke insists that there is a hard and fast distinction between motion and action, such that action is a unique species of motion characterized in large part by choice, which is to say in large measure this multidimensional structure is the work of logology - or words about [symbolic, dialectical, inhabited] words” (20).



8. "Burke is a dialectician who uses dialectic in a 'strong' sense." That is, he uses "dialectic" not as a general metaphor but rather "as a *generating principle*" for much of his thinking (20). Dialectic is at the "center" of Burke's *Motivorum* project: the very "substance" of motives is dialectical. As Burke puts it in *A Grammar*, "Whereas there is an implicit irony in the other notions of substance, with the dialectic substance the irony is explicit. For it derives its character from the systematic contemplation of the antinomies attendant upon the fact that we necessarily define a thing in terms of something else. 'Dialectic substance' would thus be the over-all category of dramatism, which treats of human motives in terms of verbal action" (1945, 33).

Perhaps one of the most cogent descriptions of Burke as a dialectician is that offered by his life-long friend and confidant, Malcolm Cowley, in Cowley's review (1950) of *A Rhetoric of Motives*: Burke "is a dialectician who is always trying to reconcile opposites by finding that they have a common source. Give him two apparently hostile terms like poetry and propaganda, art and economics, speech and action, and immediately he looks beneath them for the common ground on which they stand. Where the Marxian dialectic moves forward in time from the conflict of Thesis and antithesis to their subsequent resolution or synthesis - and always emphasizes the conflict - the Burkean dialectic moves backwards from conflicting effects to harmonious causes. It is a dialectic of reconciliation or peace-making and not of war. At the same time it gives a backward or spiral movement to his current of thought, so that sometimes the beginning of a book is its logical ending and we have to read the last chapter before fully understanding the first" (250).

### III

Burke's theory of "dramatism" psychologizes his theory of dialectics through the agency of "identification," which in turn is Burke's encompassing term for "rhetoric." For Aristotle, rhetoric aims at persuasion, tempered by the ethics of rationality and, ultimately, truth; in its ideal form, rhetoric reasons through contingencies toward the probable. For Burke, rhetoric names the psychological/linguistic process by which "identification" occurs. Identification is the dramatistic counter-part of the dialectical and transformational processes of merger and division: identification with differences carved-out dialectically animates agonistically as "drama." Through drama, both "knowledge" and "identity" are constructed. "Identification" names a psychological process

whereby a person interprets/constructs his/her symbolic world through certain constructs instead of others. By inhabiting certain constructs, a sense of identity is created: identification is constitutive of identity. "Rhetoric." for Burke, is the process of identification (and alienation and re-identification, or re-birth). Identification, or rhetoric, is the internalization or inhabitation and enactment of the dialectical processes of merger and division. "Dramatism" is the theory of these enactments: drama, from the Burkean orientation, is literally the enactment of dialectically constructed agons of difference.

In Burke's interpretation, dialectic demarcates differences, which refine into the *agon* of oppositions. Human agents inhabit the symbolic world through the process of identification with various and diverse dialectical distinctions. Such inhabitation, such psychological linkages, brings the dialectic to life: it quite literally *enacts* the *agon* of difference. The "lived" dialectic is thus literally drama; and since most vocabularies are lived, dialectic and drama are frequently virtually synonymous. But since the possibilities for linguistic transformations, which is to say dialectic, are not all "lived" or enacted, drama becomes a subset of dialectic (Williams, 1992, 9-10). Burke writes, "Though we have often used 'dialectic' and 'dramatistic' as synonymous, dialectic in the general sense is a word of broader scope, since it includes all idioms that are non-dramatistic" (1945, 402). But when the dialectic is "lived," when it is psychologized through the agency of identification, it is transformed into drama. Literally (Williams, 1992, 10). And it is here that the dialectic is encompassed and transformed in its enactment as drama.

Burke's theoretical framework re-situates argumentation within his 'psychologized' dialectic, his dramatism. Burke's theory of dramatism is, in his often invoked phrase, "well-rounded" in its account of human motives. Weaving together strands from dialectic, rhetoric, poetics, and ethics, Burke's "dramatism" is framed within a general commitment to individualism (and its attendant longing for communalism; working in close conjunction with the related pairs: solipsism/communication, division/merger, etc.), pragmatism (with nagging idealizing undercurrents), and "Agro-Bohemianism," Burke's personal mode of adjustment to the material and social exigencies of life. Life occurs through a series of moralized symbolic choices, constrained and impinged upon by social and material conditions, and educated by the recalcitrances of the non-symbolic world as well as by other agents, agencies, scenes, purposes, acts, and attitudes in the symbolic world too. In the classical formulation, these "sites" of these

choices could be understood as giving rise to recognizable discourse forms, e.g., poetics, rhetoric, etc., as well as recurrent symbolic genre, e.g., tragedy or deliberative rhetoric, and ultimately modes of appeal within the generic orientations, e.g., personification or such elements as the modes of artistic proof, ethos, pathos, and logos. Dramatism would analyze classical appeals such as a logos appeal not simply as a form of rational argument but rather as a form of rational argument within a broader realm of symbolic action, which must be understood as transforming the “site” of argument proper. In the dramatistic perspective, “ratios” are “consubstantial” with “motives,” In the traditional view, “reason” leads to “rational action” and perhaps even to “truth.” In the dramatistic view, “reason,” “rationality,” “truth,” etc., are all forms of symbolic action, not privileged above the functionings of language but rather as recurring forms of symbolic action themselves. Argument, for Burke, is not a linguistic process which leads toward an extra- or trans-linguistic truth but rather a dialectical process which yields greater understanding and appreciation of the resources and power of our symbol systems themselves. Burke’s encompassment and psychologized enactment of dialectics in his theory of dramatism offers a potentially productive re-situating of argumentation theory in what some fear may be the twilight of the Age of Reason.

## NOTES

**i.** The unfinished drafts of both *A Symbolic of Motives and Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* are products of the 1950s, and for the most part the early 1950s. Portions of *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* were published as journal articles in the 1950s; additional sections of both manuscripts will soon be published. See the forthcoming book, *Unending Conversations: Essays by and about Kenneth Burke*, Ed. Greig Henderson and David Cratis Williams, which includes several unpublished sections of both *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered* and *A Symbolic of Motives*, as well as essays about these manuscripts.

**ii.** Burke’s points of departure are frequently at least implicitly Aristotelian, as with the *Motivorum* project, and sometimes explicitly so, as with *Poetics, Dramatistically Considered*. But the reading should be Aristotle from a Burkean orientation, not Burke in Aristotle’s terms. Burke ‘came to’ Aristotle, at least as a serious subject of study, relatively late in his theory-building process; references to Aristotle become frequent initially in the early 1950s (See Henderson). From the ‘Dramatistic’ perspective, Aristotelian categories are simply subsumed – retained and reduced – within a broader and more descriptively accurate

viewpoint.

iii. Perhaps because of its comfortable accommodation of the nonrational and irrational as well as the rational, Burke tends to hold poetic and literary models as more representative of human action than logical models. In charting one's way through such a life, Burke's holds forth the aesthetic as the best adapted metaphor for encompassing the situation: literature - not argument - is equipment for living. But this is not an either/or proposition for Burke: argument is subsumed within the broader anecdote.

iv. Burke is often fond of citing Coleridge from *Biographia Literaria* to the effect that our linguistic categories, once 'naturalized', become self-evident 'common-sense': "the language itself does as it were for us" (Stauffer, 158).

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