On Persuasion, Identification, and Dialectical Symmetry

Kenneth Burke
Edited with introduction by James Zappen

Note: This untitled paper was found in two typed copies among the books and papers in Kenneth Burke’s personal library in July 2006—one copy folded into a heavily used Loeb edition of Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the other in a small file cabinet in the library. The two copies are nearly identical carbon copies, probably typed by Burke’s wife Libby; the original has not been found. The paper includes brief discussions of persuasion, identification, and dialectical symmetry (hence the current title), plus brief critiques of behaviorism and general semantics, with specific reference to Alfred Korzybski’s notion of the structural differential. It was probably written in the mid-1940s, after the second edition of Korzybski’s Science and Sanity and The Philosophy of Literary Form, both published in 1941; perhaps at roughly the same time as the more extended discussions of behaviorism and Korzybski in A Grammar of Motives, published in 1945; and before the full development of Burke’s ideas about persuasion, identification, and dialectical symmetry in A Rhetoric of Motives, published in 1950. The paper might have been prepared for a public lecture or for circulation among Burke’s literary friends, as a brief commentary on some of the key concepts in A Rhetoric of Motives, while he was completing A Grammar of Motives or perhaps shortly following its publication. If so, then it might have been written as late as 1947.

This paper suggests that Burke’s concept of identification was in part a creative response to current issues in behaviorism and general semantics, formulated in sympathy with George Herbert Mead’s observations on identification, communication, and community in Mind, Self, and Society and The Philosophy of the Act and in opposition to Korzybski’s general semantics and his structural differential. Moreover, and more important, this paper suggests that the final section of A Rhetoric of Motives, titled simply “Order,” is essential to a complete understanding of Burke’s ideas about persuasion and identification since only in this last section does Burke show how competing points of view

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might be reconciled in an ultimate identification via the dialectical symmetry that he traces through the long history of Platonic thought.  

James P. Zappen  
Department of Language, Literature, and Communication  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

What, in sum, would be the salient traits of Aristotle’s Rhetoric? And what would be our attitude towards them?

His “art” is constructed about his stress upon persuasion as the purpose of rhetoric. Hence he surveys the resources of rhetoric, to the end that one might use the best means available for a given situation. To narrow down the choice of means, he makes a division into kinds of oratory: deliberative (concerned with the expediency of steps still to be taken); forensic (concerned with the justice or injustice of past acts); and demonstrative or epideictic (concerned with praise and blame, primarily involving the present). But to be effective in any of these kinds, one must appeal to the opinions of one’s audience—hence the lists of “topics” reviewing such opinions. First he considers the components of happiness, on the grounds that all men aim at happiness, hence this topic figures in all persuasion and dissuasion. For deliberative oratory specifically, he lists the topics naming men’s opinions as to the good, the expedient, and their opposites (along with relevant observations on different forms of government). His topics for epideictic, dealing with praise and blame, comprise the things men consider virtuous and vicious. And his list of forensic topics has to do with the motives and effects of just and unjust acts. Also, there are such general topics as the possible and impossible, the more and the less, the likely and the unlikely.

Enthymemes (deductions based on opinion) fit well with forensic, he says. Rhetorical induction (example) best suits the deliberative. And to epideictic, amplification (auxesis) is particularly appropriate. Indeed, “propriety” (to propon, decorum) is a universal requirement of rhetorical effectiveness. “Clarity” is a primary aspect of “propriety,” though Quintilian observes (Book VII [sic], Chapter II) that the clarity (perspicuitas) of calling a spade a spade (sua cujusque rei appellatio) may not be proper where the reference is to the low, sordid, or obscene.

One may appeal to reason, to the emotions, or in terms of character (logos, pathos, ethos)—hence Aristotle offers topics reviewing these resources (including ways of transforming an opponent’s argument for your purposes). The ethical topics can also serve to guide inventions designed to help the speaker impress the audience as a man of sound judgment, virtue, or goodwill. For though Aristotle considers at some length the appeal to the emotions, and prides himself on his great contributions to the logical aspects of proof, he says that an audience’s confidence in the speaker is the most convincing proof of all. In the treatment of stylistic appeal, the major items are antithesis, metaphor, and actualization. (“Personalization” is a rough approximate for this third term, though it has somewhat too idealistic a cast, anamistically stressing agent rather than act.)

Add his stress upon the persuasiveness of maxims, proverbs, and the like, and his remarks on stylistic texture and over-all organization—and you about have sufficient headings to cover the work (though of course many of these matters are developed in profuse detail). Fittingly, he ends his treatise by discussing the nature of endings, getting a form by a discussion of form, thus: For the conclusion of the speech, the most fitting style omits connectives, so that it be not oration, but peroration: “I spoke; you heard; you know; decide.”

Aristotle’s treatment of rhetoric as persuasion based on topics, all of which bear ultimately on the promise of happiness, provides an essentially “rational” view of linguistic inducements. Modern behaviorism, on the other hand, would treat rhetorical appeal in terms of mechanically conditioned responses to stimuli. But even if you were to prefer the purely behaviorist account as a “statement of policy” on linguistic persuasion, an Aristotelian method would seem to be needed for analyzing particular rhetorical devices in their own right. At least, we know of no “behaviorist rhetoric” that has gone beyond a few rudimentary statements about reflexes, conditioned reflexes, and “transferences.” (A “transference” would occur, for instance, if the subject, having been conditioned to feel terror at the sight of a fury animal, shows uneasiness in the presence of a cotton texture slightly suggestive of fur. Implicit here are criteria of likeness, hence modes of classification, which the behaviorist leaves unanalyzed, as a “topical” treatment would not.) A mere behaviorist translation might be quite feasible, as were each “desire” or “opinion” to be renamed a “drive” or “urge,” and the like. But beyond this point, it is hard to see how the analysis, if it were narrowed down to particular linguistic cases, could differ from that of traditional rhetoric. The same would apply to Korzybski’s “structural differential,” which is valuable for calling attention to an important abstractive process of language, but cannot of itself replace a mature linguistic analysis.

Aristotle couples rhetoric with dialectic on the grounds that both involve purely verbal manipulations. But we must look rather to the Platonist line for insights into the ways whereby dialectical symmetry itself acts as a kind of rhetorical persuasion, particularly when the dialectical form is used to depict a pyramidal social structure in which people think of themselves as participants.

Here, of course, we move into those outlying areas of rhetoric wherein an entire
vocabulary, much of it arising spontaneously and without a definitely directed rhetorical end, yet has persuasive elements in it. For the mere failure of a vocabulary to draw all the lines at the right places is to a degree malignly persuasive (and all vocabularies naming social and political relations in the large must err somewhat in this respect). Hence we take the position that a "rhetoric of the unconscious," in keeping with psychoanalytic criticism and the Marxist study of "ideology," offers the only fruitful extension beyond the Aristotelian stress. This, we believe, would be under the aegis of "identification" as key term. And it should be developed by a special emphasis upon the relation between rhetoric and dialectic.

Aristotle recognized this relation, in calling rhetoric figuratively a counterpart ("antistrophe") and offshoot of dialectic. But his clear concern with conscious purpose in persuasion made the study of "semi-conscious," "unconscious," "class-conscious," and "autosuggestive" rhetorics peripheral or irrelevant to his program. Some such term as "identification," rather than "persuasion," becomes needed as a heuristic wedge when, noting the dialectical element in the structure of a social hierarchy, we would disclose the cohesive motives implicit in the thought of oneself as a participant in it.

In all fairness, we should add that our position here is not so far from Korzybski's as it might at first seem to be. Korzybski recognizes the great importance of identification as a rhetorical device. Indeed, we might define his system as a deliberate attempt to eliminate from language such rhetoric as the use of race theories for malign political ends. And he would never let us forget that such devices are but tricks of "identification." Llilo Aristoteles, he holds that a "scientific" language is the very opposite of rhetoric. And Aristotle would subscribe wholly to Korzybski's "non-Aristotelian" wish that all social and political relations could be discussed in purely scientific, rather than rhetorical, terms. But though they might agree on the ideal here, Aristotle proceeded to write a rhetoric on the assumption that public relations would go on being conducted largely in such terms. Korzybski, on the other hand, holding that identification is implicit in Aristotelian thought, would propose "non-Aristotelian" ways of banishing it from all language. He hates its vices so intensely, he can't bring himself to admit its virtues. But if he did succeed in getting rid of it, he would alas! deprive us of a word to name that charming identification of all Korzybski-ites with the master and with one another, the unit substance that makes them winsome. Where, without "identification," would be their common participation in Krzbsk-ism?

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Notes

1. I am grateful to David Blakley for assistance with the Burke bibliography and for clues to a possible dating of this paper. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Jack Felser, who introduced me to the Burke family and library, and to Anthony Baht Burke, Julie Whicker, and Anthony Baht Burke, to whose generous assistance with the research for these notes and who approved publication of the paper, which, insofar as we have been able to determine, has not been previously published. I am indebted also, for permission to publish the paper, to the Kenneth Burke Literary Trust, Anthony Burke, Co-Trustee, Kenneth Burke Literary Trust, October 8, 2006.

2. One of the carbon copies, the text copy, has "Rhetoric Aristotle" written in the upper left corner; the other copy, the file copy, has "Leaves" written in the upper right corner. The file cabinet also contains twenty single-spaced typed pages of notes on Aristotle's Rhetoric. This version of the paper incorporates occasional hand-written insertions, including two corrections, which are the same in both the copies, and silently corrects a few obvious typographical errors. The notes, with the exception of contemporary studies of Burke, refer to editions in Burke's library, which (including copies of his own published works) are heavily underlined, with occasional marginal notations and partial indexes and incidental notes in the back and front covers and flyleaves.

3. Blakley (1997) points out that Burke was still thinking about prophecy as late as February 1947 but by 1948 had evidently settled upon identification as his key term for the Rhetoric.

4. Crassus (1976, 24-30) and Henderson (1978, 32-33) explain that Burke's Grammar and Rhetoric are related as a dialectic and a rhetoric, the one emphasizing diversity and difference, conflict and opposition, the other cooperation, communication, and community. According to Crassus, the Grammar develops the dramatistic pattern as a kind of dialectic, "a way of systematically contemplating any set from a multitude of hermeneutical perspectives" (27) The Rhetoric, in contrast, offers a way to overcome these differences of perspective—"to foster cooperation and establish community" (24). Wolin (2001, 149, 172) similarly explains that in his Grammar and Rhetoric Burke engages in "speculations about human motivation in order to find alternatives to hand-to-hand combat, rifle fire, and aerial bombardment" and attempts "to find better ways to establish common ground between people with differing interests and views of the world" and thus to forge a common community. According to Wolin, Burke points to democracy as the key to establishing common ground and thus to form communities, and he points to collaboration as the key to identification: "Collaboration is the key to style as the engine of identification" (177, 189). Burke, Wolin claims, never explains what he means by collaboration (189). In this brief essay, however, Burke seems to suggest that the unifying principle that seeks common ground among competing points of view is the Platonic dialectical symmetry, which he explores at length in the final section of the Rhetoric.


6. This sentence is inserted, in Burke's handwriting, in both copies of the essay. Quintilian's observation on clarity appears in The Institute Oratoria of Quintilian (1921, 22, VIII. 3. 1). The phrase "svs rcajucqy rei atappiitio" is translated literally "calling things by their right names" (197). The 1943 reprint of volume 3 of the Loeb edition in Burke's library might or might not be the source of this reference since only volume 1 of this edition contains Burke's characteristic indexing and underlining, a hint that he might have found the Quintilian reference elsewhere, such as another edition of the work.

7. This sentence is inserted, in Burke's handwriting, in both copies of the essay. Aristotle, Rhetoric III, xix, 6, writes: "To the conclusion of the speech the most appropriate style is that which has no connecting particles, in order that it may be a peroration, but not an oration: I have spoken; you have heard; you know the facts; now give your decision." (471).

8. Mead (1935, 101), writes: "In carrying back the thinking process to the talking process, behaviorist John B. Watson seems to identify thought simply with the word, with the symbol, with the vocal gesture. He does this by means of the transference of a reflex from one stimulus to another—conditioned reflex is the technical term for the process. The psychologist isolates a set of reflexes which answer to certain specific stimuli, and then allows these reflexes expression under different conditions so that the stimulus itself is accompanied by other stimuli. He finds that these reflexes can then be brought about by the new stimulus even in the absence of that which has been previously the necessary stimulus."
George, Ann, and Jack Selzer. [in press]. Kenneth Burke in the 1930s. Columbia: U of South Carolina P.