

BURKE'S DRAMATISM AND ACTION THEORY

Kenneth Burke's work has had considerable influence in rhetorical theory in recent years. His dramatistic analysis of human affairs has been seen as nicely illuminating important features of man's symbolic character. But while Burke's distinction between action and motion is often acknowledged as central to his dramatistic view, that distinction nevertheless generally receives scant attention apart from such acknowledgements. This essay examines Burke's distinction, and argues that Burke's view suffers from inadequacies. These difficulties do not so much undermine Burke's dramatism, however, as they point the way to an alternative foundation for dramatism.

I

It has sometimes been held that all meaningful discourse, including discourse about persons, is translatable into physicalistic discourse without loss or change of meaning.¹ This belief is apparently bolstered by the thoroughly physicalistic character of contemporary natural science; after all, physical theory contains no reference to any curious non-physical processes or events. It is thus understandable that some have suggested a completely materialistic account of human affairs. Consider, for example, the views of D. M. Armstrong:

What does modern science have to say about the nature of man? There are, of course, all sorts of disagreements and divergencies in the views of individual scientists. But I think it is true to say that one view is steadily gaining ground, so that it bids fair to become established scientific doctrine. This is the view that we can give a complete account of man in purely physio-chemical terms. . . . I think it is fair to say that those scientists who still reject the physio-chemical account of man do so primarily for philosophical, or moral, or religious reasons, and only secondarily, and half-heartedly, for reasons of scientific detail. This is not to say that in the future new evidence and new problems may not come to light which will force science to reconsider the physio-chemical view of man. But at present the drift of scientific thought is clearly set towards the physio-chemical hypothesis.² And we have nothing better to go on than the present.

A variety of philosophers and social theorists have found fault with this general view. Very broadly, the argument of these critics is that man is a special sort of being that requires a special non-physicalistic explanation. One such critic is Kenneth Burke, who has attempted to build a distinctly non-physicalistic framework for the study of man: Dramatism. He suggests that dramatism 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."³ Indeed, Rueckert indicates that dramatism "is meant to function as a counter-statement against what Burke calls the decline of realism and the rise of scientism."⁴ This emerges clearly in Burke's most general defense of dramatism:

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." The slashing of the waves against the beach, or the endless cycle of births and deaths in biologic organisms would be examples of sheer motion. Yet we, the typically symbol-using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion. Even the behaviorist, who studies man in terms of his laboratory experiments, must treat his colleagues as persons,⁵ rather than purely and simply as automata responding to stimuli.

Thus Burke draws a fundamental distinction between "action" and "motion," basing dramatism on the former. The centrality of this distinction to Burke's work is displayed in Burke's recent exchange with W. S. Howell, where Burke outlines "three basic Dramatistic axioms: empirically, there can be motion without action, there can be no action without motion, action is not reducible to motion (this third axiom being the basis of the distinction between Dramatism and Behaviorism)."⁶ The movement from the action-motion distinction to the dramatistic framework is evident when Burke writes, "If action is to be our key term, then drama; for drama is the cumulative form of action But if drama, then conflict. And if conflict, then victimage. Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that it comes to a culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat." Those familiar with Burke's work will recognize in this quotation an adumbration of the tragic cycle of dramatism,⁹ that "Iron Law of History"⁸ that is Burke's central organizing scheme.

Hence Burke's argument for "man's essentially dramatic nature"¹⁰ and his justification for the development of his dramatistic framework rest on his distinction between action and motion. Dramatism is an attempt to avoid, in Burke's words, "the reduction of some higher or more complex realm of being to the terms of a lower, or less complex realm of being"--the reduction of action to motion.¹¹ As Burke notes, "drama is dissolved by terminologies that reduce action to motion."¹²

Given the centrality of the action-motion distinction to his work, one might hope that Burke would carefully elaborate and defend it. This is unfortunately not the case. While Burke repeatedly mentions and employs the distinction,¹³ he gives little attention to the question of just what the difference is. He does say that "action" is "motion-plus."¹⁴ But plus what? It appears that action is to be understood as motion-plus-purpose: Burke writes that "the basic unit of action is the human body in purposive motion."¹⁵ Thus Burke's view is apparently that certain kinds of motions (those accompanied by purposes) qualify as actions; action is a certain sort of motion (hence the first two "Dramatistic axioms"). Burke thus sees a "qualitative empirical difference between mental action and mechanical motion":¹⁶ actions and motions are different explanatory frameworks.¹⁷

I think Burke's distinction is defective, but before critically analyzing it one initial clarifying comment is in order. I have interpreted Burke's view as being one that claims actions are those motions accompanied by purposes. But mere accompaniment will not suffice.

Suppose I have been given curare, so that I literally cannot move a muscle (I am being kept alive by an iron lung). I decide to move my head to the right (a purpose) and, simultaneous with my doing so, another person moves my head to the right. This surely would not count as an action I have performed; it would be more appropriate, in Burke's terms, to say that I have been "moved" or "affected."¹⁸ Thus it seems that for Burke's line to have plausibility, the purpose must play some role in bringing about the action, must "cause" (in some sufficiently broad sense) the action. Now perhaps Burke meant to say this in employing the phrase "purposive motion," but he is characteristically obtuse here; he ultimately leaves the relation between mental states and action unclarified.

Under either reading, Burke's distinction suffers from several problems. Three difficulties seem especially troublesome.

(1) To say that action is motion-plus-purpose does not by itself suffice to show that a non-physicalistic explanatory scheme is required for action. A materialist might argue that "purpose" could be translated into physicalistic discourse. Thus, for example, Brodbeck holds that "a complete description and causal explanation of human actions can be given in principle by means of terms that, like those of physical science, have reference only to objectively observable properties of material objects. . . . The mentalistic terms characterizing action, like 'purpose' and 'thought,' are, . . . all eliminable by definitions using only nonmentalistic terms."¹⁹ Now Brodbeck's proposed definition involves translating "purpose" into terms of overt behavior.²⁰ But a materialist could equally well argue that "purpose" can be materialistically redefined in terms of brain states, as Smart has done.²¹ Whether the materialist is a "peripheralist" concerned with overt behavior or a "centralist" concerned with brain states matters little to the argument. The point is that materialists have suggested the possibility of physicalistic characterizations of "purpose." Hence Burke, if he is to justify dramatism, needs to show these suggestions defective, and this he does not do. If "purpose" is reducible to a materialistic characterization, then "action" loses the special status Burke accords it. Now Burke does of course claim that action is not reducible to motion (the third "Dramatic axiom")--but given analyses like Brodbeck's and Smart's, something more than mere assertion seems required.

(2) It may plausibly be argued that many actions are not purposeful. As White notes, "experience clearly shows that actions often lack such an antecedent [as some effort of will, resolution, intention, decision, purpose, aim, etc.]. We often do things without any effort of will, without resolving or deliberating whether to do them, unintentionally, non-voluntarily, for no purpose, etc."²² I shall return to this point shortly.

(3) Burke suggests that the agent's purpose marks out the appropriate label for the action; two persons may perform the same physical motions, but if their purposes are different they are performing different actions.²³ But two agents performing identical motions with identical purposes may yet perform different actions. For example, two agents may (through identical motions) perform the action of "hunting" (and may share the appropriate purpose), yet only one of these actions

correctly be described as "trespassing." Part of Burke's difficulty here seems to be the implicit assumption that acts have only one appropriate description. But as White has noted, "there is no one description which is the description of an action any more than there is the description of an object or event; though many descriptions of it will be definitely wrong."²⁴ The trespassing example also illustrates the point made in the previous paragraph: an action may be performed unintentionally. Rather than saying (as Burke does) that actions must be intentional (purposive), it might be better to simply note that actions are the kind of thing of which it makes sense to ask whether they are intentional.

It is no accident that these three lines of criticism of Burke's view are in large measure based on the work of philosophers such as Smart, White, and Brodbeck. The relation between human action and physical movement had been a topic of philosophical discussion for some time before Burke articulated his views--so much so that in reviewing Burke's presentation (in Grammar of Motives) of the action-motion distinction, Abraham Kaplan could write, "on behalf of this familiar position Burke adds no new arguments, and, indeed, makes little effort to expound the old ones."²⁵ Action theory has since become a central philosophical domain, as indicated by the number of anthologies and book-length treatments in the area.²⁶ What is the import of recent work in action theory for Burke's "motion-plus" conception of action? George Sher puts it thusly:

If any general conclusion has come out of recent studies in the theory of action, it is that we must give a negative answer to Wittgenstein's seminal question, "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up [motion] from the fact that I raise my arm [action]?" We must answer that nothing is left over, simply because all attempts to specify a type of event that might confer action-hood upon the movements which it causes (or, perhaps, merely accompanies) have been shown to lead to insuperable difficulties. Actions may have causes; but it is not the having of a cause of a special sort which makes a movement into an action. An action is not a movement plus some other event.²⁷

II

Do these considerations utterly undermine dramatism, as it might seem on the face of it? Are we left with only a thoroughly materialistic approach to human affairs? Not necessarily. There is an alternative way of drawing the distinction Burke has in mind--a way that simultaneously avoids the difficulties met by "motion-plus" approaches such as Burke's, yet still leaves open the possibility of a non-physicalistic approach to the study of man.

This alternative approach concedes that only material entities exist; that is, any sort of Cartesian dualism (a dualism of substances) is rejected, as would be any implications of Cartesian dualism, including those shared by Burke's view. There are nevertheless two different conceptual frameworks through which human behavior can be approached. The first is a physicalistic one in which persons are construed as

nothing but physical organisms; a person's behavior would be described solely in terms of physical movement (using a physicalistic observation language). The second framework is an action-framework, in which persons are construed "as agents, as beings who can act and who have intentions, motives, reasons, desires, and so forth."²⁸

Thus one might describe behavior (where "behavior" is taken as a term neutral between the two approaches) either in action-talk or in movement-talk. But there is a logical gap between the two accounts, for action-talk and movement-talk are not intertranslatable (and hence movement-talk cannot justifiably be substituted for action-talk). There are two related reasons for this. The first is that a given action (e.g., mailing a letter, or opening a window) can be accomplished by "an indefinitely large range of movements."²⁹ That is, one can perform the action "mailing a letter" by a variety of different movements: opening the chute of a mailbox and dropping the letter inside, handing the letter to the appropriate postal employee, clipping the letter to the outside of one's mailbox, and so on. The second reason is that a given movement may in different circumstances and on different occasions instantiate different actions (as was seen in the trespassing case). The same physical movement might on one occasion be correctly described as "pitching" (throwing a baseball), and on another as "vandalizing" (throwing a rock at a window). So not only does a given action-description not uniquely identify a correlated movement-description, but a given movement-description does not uniquely identify an associated action-description. Hence action-talk and movement-talk are not in general intertranslatable.

Where Burke's analysis draws an "ontological" distinction, the suggested alternative draws a "logical" or "conceptual" one. That is, Burke holds that there are two different sorts of things in the world, actions and motions. In contrast, the distinction here is between the conceptual frameworks through which behavior is approached. There are, we might say, two "realms of discourse" here. The action-framework includes mentalistic terms such as "purpose," "belief," "want," and "intention," while these are absent from the physicalistic framework.

Now the two-frameworks line still leaves the way clear for a non-materialistic account of human affairs. Indeed, it should be clear that, because action-talk is not translatable into movement-talk, any a priori requirement that (say) social scientific discourse be translatable into physicalistic discourse is questionable; after all, the action-framework may turn out to be the one best suited to the social scientist's needs. Thus the motivation for Burke's action-motion distinction--to find a special place for the study of man--can be satisfied by the two-frameworks analysis. And the two-frameworks approach recognizes the criticisms made of the "ontological" approach; for example, actions can now readily be seen as the kind of thing of which it makes sense to ask "intentional or not?" rather than as the kind of thing which must be intentional.

Most importantly, the suggested analysis is more consistent with the tenor of Burke's dramatism than is Burke's ontological distinction. Burke emphasizes that man has no direct, unmediated contact with reality.³⁰ Indeed, Burke writes that "'behavior' isn't something that you need but observe; even something so 'objectively there' as behavior must be

observed through one or another kind of terministic screen, that directs the attention in keeping with its nature.³² And Burke acknowledges that dramatism is itself a terministic screen.³² Yet Burke's defense of dramatism is based on his action-motion distinction³³; and the distinction is one Burke sees as a "qualitative empirical one"³³--as indeed he must if he is to defend an ontological distinction.

Thus my argument is that Burke's defense of dramatism turns on his claim of a hard, ontological, empirical difference between action and motion; and that this mode of defense is not only marred on its own terms, but is inconsistent with Burke's characterization of dramatism as a terministic screen. A more defensible distinction, and a distinction more compatible with dramatism, can be had by recognizing that the same behavioral event can be described through either of two different conceptual frameworks ("terministic screens"): an action-framework or a movement-framework. One need not justify the action-framework by claiming ontological status for a special kind of event; the approach can instead be justified by (say) its greater explanatory power, its insightfulness into human affairs, and so on. The choice between frameworks turns on deciding which provides "the most fruitful forms of explanation of behavior."³⁴ This perhaps makes the selection of a dramatistic framework somewhat more difficult to justify than it might have been, but if there are no knockdown arguments for preferring the action-framework in general, then there are no knockdown arguments for preferring any particular sort of action-framework such as dramatism.

NOTES

¹ See, e.g., S. S. Stevens, "Psychology and the Science of Science," Psychological Bulletin, 36 (1939), 221-63; Carl Hempel, "Logical Analysis of Psychology," in Readings in Philosophical Analysis, ed. Herbert Feigl and Wilfred Sellars (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), pp. 373-84; Rudolph Carnap, "Psychology in Physical Language," in Logical Positivism, ed. A. J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959), pp. 165-98.

² D. M. Armstrong, "The Nature of Mind," in The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, ed. C. V. Borst (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 67.

³ Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 53. Henceforth cited as LSA.

⁴ William Rueckert, Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1963), p. 160.

⁵ LSA, p. 53.

⁶ Kenneth Burke, "The Party Line," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1976), 65.

⁷ LSA, pp. 54-55.

- ⁸ Kenneth Burke, The Rhetoric of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 4. Henceforth cited as RR.
- ⁹ See Rueckert, pp. 131-34.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 252. Henceforth cited as GM.
- ¹¹ GM, p. 506.
- ¹² GM, p. 441.
- ¹³ See, e.g., GM, pp. 56, 234-35, 254; LSA, pp. 11, 59-60, 64, 366-67, 481-83.
- ¹⁴ LSA, p. 67.
- ¹⁵ GM, p. 61; see also p. 14.
- ¹⁶ RR, p. 40.
- ¹⁷ See also LSA, p. 54.
- ¹⁸ LSA, pp. 430, 431.
- ¹⁹ May Brodbeck, "Meaning and Action," in Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, ed. May Brodbeck (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 59.
- ²⁰ See Brodbeck, p. 71.
- ²¹ J. J. C. Smart, "Causality and Human Behavior," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume, 38 (1964), 143-48.
- ²² A. R. White, "Introduction," in The Philosophy of Action, ed. A. R. White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 7.
- ²³ See GM, pp. 108, 276.
- ²⁴ White, p. 8.
- ²⁵ Abraham Kaplan, "A Review of A Grammar of Motives," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 5 (1947), 234.
- ²⁶ See, e.g., Myles Brand, ed., The Nature of Human Action (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1970); Alvin Goldman, A Theory of Human Action (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970); Theodore Mischel, ed., Human Action: Conceptual and Empirical Issues (New York: Academic Press, 1969); A. R. White, ed., The Philosophy of Action (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

27 George Sher, "Causal Explanation and the Vocabulary of Action," Mind, 82 (1973), 22.

28 Charles Landesman, "The New Dualism in the Philosophy of Mind," Review of Metaphysics, 19 (1965), 329.

29 Theodore Mischel, "Scientific and Philosophical Psychology," in Human Action: Conceptual and Empirical Issues, ed. Theodore Mischel (New York: Academic Press, 1969), p. 8.

30 LSA, pp. 44-47.

31 LSA, p. 49.

32 LSA, p. 53

33 RR, p. 40.

34 Charles Taylor, "Mind-Body Identity, A Side Issue?" in The Mind/Brain Identity Theory, ed. C. V. Borst (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 240.

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