A McKeonist Understanding of Kenneth Burke’s Rhetorical Realism in Particular and Constructivism in General

Robert Wess, Oregon State University

Abstract
Readers of KB Journal likely know Richard McKeon mainly through his essays on rhetoric and his relationship to Kenneth Burke. But McKeon was first and foremost a philosopher who came to rhetoric in mid-career, so that his work is a philosophical path to and defense of rhetoric. This path, moreover, precisely because of its philosophical depth, offers insight into why “the linguistic turn,” which began sooner than is commonly thought today, culminated in “the rhetorical turn” that informs constructivist theorizing in general and that is perhaps best exemplified by Burke’s “rhetorical realism” in particular.

The main inspiration for this essay is the appearance of Richard McKeon’s name among the new rhetoricians linked to Burke in the “Call for Papers” for the Ghent conference on Burke, *Rhetoric as Equipment for Living*, a milestone in Burke studies. McKeon influenced me more than any of my other teachers at the University of Chicago. He is the principal reason I began studying Burke seriously, and throughout my career, I have been engaged in a McKeonist understanding of Burke. This understanding, furthermore, is inextricably intertwined with a McKeonist view of developments described in this “Call”:

_The second half of the twentieth century has witnessed a number of different but related turns. . . . All these turns recognize the importance of signs and symbols in our interpretations of reality and more specifically the cultural construction of meaning through both language and narrative._

This notion of “construction” seems to have emerged as the principal fruit of a generation of language-centered theorizing. McKeon’s capacious philosophical pluralism encompasses both constructivism in general and Burke’s rhetorical realism in particular.

“Rhetorical realism” is a term I have used elsewhere to identify what distinguishes Burke’s rhetorical theorizing (Wess). One example of this distinctiveness is Burke’s statement, “Whenever we call something a metaphor, we mean it literally” (Brock et al. 27). Burke says this during his debate in the early 1980s with Bernard L. Brock and other Burke scholars, an episode that is famous in the history of Burke scholarship. This debate centered in the issue of whether in his dramatism Burke should be understood as speaking literally or metaphorically. Burke sided with the literal, and while I was not at this debate it is my understanding that in doing so Burke stood alone as the Burke scholars sided with metaphor—a case of scholars telling an author how to understand himself, but perhaps not really as odd as it might sound initially.

In any case, in subsequent decades Burke scholars have returned to this issue, and these scholars have generally sided with Burke. A notable example is Clark Rountree’s “Revisiting the Controversy over Dramatism as Literal,” which appeared in *KB Journal* in 2010. Among its strengths, this essay includes an account of what Burke meant to communication scholars in the 1960s and 1970s that explains their reaction to Burke’s insistence that dramatism is literal. Mimic their emotions, Rountree exclaims, “Burke was a breath of fresh air. . . . He warned us about termistic screens. . . . How could the one who helped show us the light turn around and insist that his own view wasn’t merely perspectival, but ontological and literal?”

I do not propose to return to the details of this debate, but instead to let the Burke statement stand as a “representative anecdote” for his rhetorical realism, which combines theorizing the constructive powers of language with the recognition of language as a reality in its own right, a reality that is not itself a construct, so cannot be understood in constructive terms. This reasoning, as we shall see, informs Burke’s defense of his statement.

A McKeonist understanding of constructivism in general and Burke’s rhetorical realism in particular is virtually equivalent to understanding the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric in McKeon’s work. What gives this relationship special interest in McKeon’s case is that McKeon
was a philosopher first, foremost, and always. Rhetoric is something he turns to but for philosophical reasons. His example is thus simultaneously a philosophical defense of and path to rhetoric. Burke, by contrast, seems to have started with rhetoric. Even in his twenties, during the 1920s, when he concerned himself principally with art and aesthetics, he defined artistic form as a relation of the art work to its audience, as in "Psychology and Form," for example, which was first published in 1925 and later reprinted in Counter-Statement, where his "Lexicon Rhetoricae" appears. This reliance on rhetoric is all the more remarkable when one considers that modernism was in its heyday in the 1920s and that one of modernism's maxims was "True Art Ignores the Audience" (Booth 89).

McKeon's philosophical path to rhetoric reveals the distinctive explanatory power of his theorizing of rhetoric, but important contributions to the sparse scholarship on McKeon—Charles W. Wegener's and George Kimball Plochmann's—see not a path but a detour. A McKeon student in the 1940s, Wegener remembers a McKeon preoccupied with "logical and methodological questions and their close relation to metaphysics," adding, "[O]ne of the persistent items in the student scuttlebutt which always surrounded him was that he had in mind to write—and perhaps had already written in part—a history of logic" (104).

Wegener notes that in the 1930s McKeon frequently taught

a course called "metaphysics and method," and while that title disappeared from his repertory in the period with which I am here concerned, it would not be a bad title for some of the logical courses, except that it would more accurately reflect the trend of his teaching were it reversed to method and metaphysics. (104)

Wegener writes this over a decade after McKeon's death, and even in retrospect he wonders, given the McKeon he knew in the classroom, why McKeon turned to rhetoric, as he asks, "Did [McKeon] follow where the argument led? If so, what is the argument?" (109).

Wegener leaves his questions unanswered, but he implies that he thinks the answer to the first question is "no," which erases the second question altogether. For he explicitly leaves explaining McKeon's rhetorical turn to "historians and biographers" (109), which would seem to put the explanation outside the domain of philosophical argument. With respect to history, Wegener does note that McKeon's turn coincides with a widespread growth in the prominence of rhetoric in the last half of the twentieth century (109). Nothing comparable appears with respect to biography, although earlier in his essay Wegener does add an endnote contrasting McKeon's pluralism to the pluralism "his friend Kenneth Burke was developing" in the 1940s from a rhetorical standpoint (106n2, 246). While this suggests a possible influence in McKeon's biography, Wegener does not make a point of it.

By contrast to Wegener, my answer is "yes"; it is precisely the "argument" that led McKeon to rhetoric that I aim to outline. McKeon's friendship with Burke is probably relevant but not decisive. Burke no doubt drew on rhetoric in his many conversations with McKeon, but they became friends as teenagers, before 1920, while McKeon's turn to rhetoric does not come until mid-century.1 For McKeon to turn to rhetoric, there needed to be a path in the development of his philosophy that led to it.

The McKeon counterpart to Burke's early commitment to rhetoric is a commitment to philosophical pluralism. McKeon is a pluralist not in the soft sense of toleration for multiple viewpoints but in the hard sense of seeing the nature of things as fundamentally ambiguous, so that there is no one way to disentangle this ambiguity. He indicates that early in his career he became intrigued by two ideas that anticipated his pluralistic philosophizing: "there is a sense in which truth, though one, has no single expression and a sense in which truth, though changeless, is rendered false in the uses to which it is put" ("Philosopher Meditates" 49). He indicates that these ideas ran counter to his convictions at the time but looking back at them thirty years later, he realizes that they proved to be seminal for him. The development of McKeon's pluralism, then, is where one must look to find the argument that led to his rhetorical turn.

From a bird's eye view, this development has two main stages, with the second occurring around mid-century when a historical semantics emerges to create a division between philosophical and historical semantics. In this division, philosophical semantics focuses on philosophical issues that cut across historical periods, while historical semantics identifies subject matters relative to different historical periods. The issues that cut across historical periods take different forms depending on the subject matter of different periods.

The most detailed account of the development of McKeon's pluralism appears in George Kimball Plochmann's Richard McKeon: A Study. Plochmann's account is irreplaceable insofar as it draws on classroom experience and interplay between what McKeon did in class and in publications. Plochmann first took a class from McKeon at Columbia University in 1934, when McKeon turned 34; then, after McKeon moved to the University of Chicago, he followed him there in 1936 (2.5). He also returned to Chicago after WWII for additional work with McKeon in the late 1940s (11).

Plochmann recounts that McKeon's earliest pluralistic scheme "was reminiscent of Coleridge's famous remark that everyone is born a Platonist or an Aristotelian (48). In a course at Columbia, McKeon would put "Plato" and "Aristotle" on the blackboard, then list under these names terms contrary to one another to identify pluralistic options. One essay evidencing this pluralistic scheme (primitive compared to McKeon's mature pluralism) is "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," published in Modern Philology in 1936, then reprinted in Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern, the principal volume of what came to be known as the "Chicago School" of literary criticism. Analogous to his classroom practice, McKeon analyzes in this article the different meanings "imitation" has for Plato (149–59) and Aristotle (160–68). After these sections, McKeon goes on.

The word [imitation] was used in still other senses by other writers in antiquity, but considerations of method are not so important in the fashions of their usage, and the systematic implications are not so subtle. None of the writers on literature employed the

http://kbjournal.org/wess_mckeon
A Meckonist Understanding of Kenneth Burke’s Rhetorical Realism in Particular and Constructivism in General

McKeon thus sees in descendents of Aristotle and Plato degradations of Aristotle’s and Plato’s methods and meanings. He finds examples of these degradations among rhetoricians in antiquity and groups them together: “A third variant to the meanings of Plato and Aristotle may therefore be said to derive from the tradition of writers on rhetoric” (168). Rhetoric is thus marginal in McKeon’s earliest pluralism.

McKeon quickly began moving toward the complexity of his mature pluralism, substituting for the individuals Plato and Aristotle two pluralistic categories: “holoscopic” (Plato) and “meroscopic” (Aristotle) (Plochmann 47). These terms identify a problem of philosophical first principles common to all philosophies: view from the whole (holoscopic) or view from the part (meroscopic). Later, Democritus became the illustration of meroscopic principles and Aristotle was moved to a position between meroscopic and holoscopic (Plochmann 49). While there is a sense in which this part/whole issue appears in its purest form in metaphysical periods, like Plato and Aristotle’s, it reappears in other periods in modified forms.

As McKeon’s pluralism developed, other pluralistic options appeared, leading to what became philosophic semantics. The evolution of this semantics is Plochmann’s principal concern. The key essay in Plochmann’s account is “Philosophic Semantics and Philosophic Inquiry,” which he has delivered as a lecture in 1956 at Southern Illinois University, where Plochmann taught (Plochmann 68). McKeon never published this lecture in his lifetime, but it became legendary among his students as he used mimeographed copies of it in classes, with its fourfold of fourfolds (“Philosophic Semantics” 218).

The philosophical argument leading to McKeon’s rhetorical turn, however, is to be found not in philosophical semantics but in the emergence of historical semantics. Some material relevant to this emergence appears in Plochmann, but very little compared to his extensive attention to philosophical semantics. Plochmann’s response to McKeon’s rhetorical turn, furthermore, is similar to Wegener’s insofar as he does not see the turn as a direction “where the argument led”—that is, a direction where the development of McKeon’s pluralism led him. Rather, he sees the turn prompted by something external to argument. In Wegener’s case, the external is history and biography. In Plochmann’s, it is historical, albeit not the historic revival of rhetoric but instead the formation of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). McKeon’s involvement with UNESCO began in the late 1940s, and continued for many years after in essays directly related to UNESCO projects and, more broadly, to issues arising from UNESCO’s aim to foster international dialogue. Plochmann alludes to this work in observing.

In the late 1960s and 1970s he [McKeon] turned his attention more and more to the uses of rhetoric, which he now called an architectonic art. This may have been owing to his realization that one must use all available means of persuasion if one hopes to win hostile persons or states over to a search for common understanding, peace, and world unity. Not that McKeon grew disillusioned with philosophy; he merely approached it from another side. (151)

But if one looks at McKeon’s “A Philosophy for UNESCO,” one sees that it is his pluralism that is ideally suited to fostering international dialogue. His pluralism, one suspects, must have been a key reason for his involvement with UNESCO in the first place. Concern with “world unity” is more a reason to develop pluralism than to approach philosophy from “another side,” as Plochmann suggests in seeming to envision McKeon becoming an Aristotelian rhetor using “all available means of persuasion.”

Material in Plochmann relevant to historical semantics appears when he describes McKeon’s classroom experiments with pluralistic options based on subject matters:

Things, thoughts, words
Thoughts, words, things
Words, things, thoughts

In these options, the term on the left is dominant and the two to the right are subordinate. This classroom experimentation begins a few years before McKeon’s essay on G. E. Moore, first published in 1942, which Plochmann cites as published evidence of the skepticism about the option in which words are dominant that McKeon expressed in class (80). There is no indication in Plochmann’s account that history was a consideration in McKeon’s discussion of these options. It would appear, rather, that at this point McKeon was responding to the fact that many philosophers at that time, including Moore, were focusing on language in what came to be known as “the linguistic turn.” The classroom experimentation is evidence that McKeon was looking for ways to incorporate this turn to language in a pluralistic schematism, while his skepticism seems to indicate some doubt about the viability of language, as distinct from thing and thought, as a basis for philosophy. On this point, he would later change his mind.

At the same time, history was far from foreign to McKeon’s thought insofar as a number of his early essays are concerned with developing a philosophical conception of intellectual history. Notably, he contrasted Plato’s and Aristotle’s conceptions of intellectual history in a 1940 essay, “Plato and Aristotle as Historians: A Study of Method in the History of Ideas.” McKeon spent his 1934-1935 year at the University of Chicago as a visiting professor in the Department of History, before joining the faculty permanently in 1935 with appointments in the Departments of Greek and Philosophy (Levine 92). In this early historical work, McKeon challenged a “conception of intellectual history as the simple record of the
development of a body of knowledge by more or less adequate investigations of a constant subject matter” ("Rhetoric" 124). This conception assumes unchanging subject matters on one side and thinkers on the other side developing over time better reproductions of these subject matters in their representations of them. This assumption came to be widely questioned in the wake of Thomas S. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, which demonstrates that science proceeds not by accumulating more and more knowledge of an unchanging subject matter but by paradigm shifts that change the subject matter (Kuhn 4-5). McKeon's early pluralistic interest in changes in subject matter came to its ultimate fruition in his historical sematics. Along the way, in a 1951 essay, he stated succinctly the conception of science that later appears in Kuhn ("Philosophy and Method" 184).

The “linguistic turn” phrase identifies a change in subject matter whose origins appear no longer to be common knowledge. In a 2013 article, Eileen Joy refers to Derrida as “one of the architects of the ‘linguistic turn’” (28), when in fact it was already underway when Derrida was born in 1930. McKeon’s historical semantics informs his mature understanding of this historic change in subject matter, which also explains his turn to rhetoric.

No doubt this phrase became commonplace with the help of Richard Rorty’s collection of essays, The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method, which appeared in 1967, then reappeared in a new edition in 1992, with “Recent” deleted from the subtitle. Rorty attributes the coinage of the phrase to Gustav Bergmann (9). In an essay Rorty includes in his collection, Bergmann indicates that the “turn” begins with the emergence of logical positivism (53), or logical empiricism. As Bergmann puts it, “They [logical positivists] all accept the linguistic turn Wittgenstein initiated in the Tractatus” (53), which appeared in 1921, then in English translation in 1922. Rorty’s Linguistic Turn collection, then, was a contribution to the analytic tradition that the logical empiricists launched, so much so that the glut of books on this tradition by the 1960s made it difficult for Rorty to find a publisher for the collection (Gross 178).

The reason the term “linguistic turn” is applicable to logical positivists is that they made language the subject matter of philosophy, what distinguishes their work from later developments in this focus on language, stretching across many decades, is that they thought philosophy’s job was to align the language of philosophy with empirical science. The language of philosophy, in other words, needed to be not politically but scientifically correct. Moritz Schlick—the figure around whom the Vienna Circle formed in the 1920s to launch logical positivism (Ayer 3)—lays out this philosophical project in simple terms in an essay Rorty puts first in his volume, after his own lengthy introduction:

Thus the fate of all “philosophical problems” is this: Some of them will disappear by being shown to be mistakes and misunderstandings of our language and the others will be found to be ordinary scientific questions in disguise. These remarks, I think, determine the whole future of philosophy. (51)

This is philosophy as therapy, that is, philosophy conceived as curing philosophy of mistaken uses of language that led it astray in the past and turning philosophy in the direction of scientific correctness going forward. The dismissal of much earlier philosophy that such therapy involved is completely foreign to McKeon. Looking at the past differently, McKeon also came to look differently at language becoming the subject matter of philosophy. As a result, as we shall see, his work suggests why rhetoric, not scientific correctness, is the logical culmination of philosophy’s turn to language. Rorty himself, after breaking with the analytic tradition, later remarked, first “the linguistic turn,” then “the rhetorical turn,” as Herbert W. Simons records in his Rhetorical Turn (viii). Today, there may be a tendency to confl ate the “linguistic” with the later “rhetorical” turn.

Subsequent to Plochmann’s classroom example, McKeon added “action” to “word.” In a 1959 essay, he outlined in detail how philosophizing could proceed from three standpoints: thing, thought, or language and action. With respect to language and action, the problem of principle centers in the issue of whether (a) words are fundamentally acts, or (b) acts instantiate fundamental verbal rules ("Principles and Consequences" 395). One can see the (a) option in Burke and speech act theory and the (b) option in structuralism and poststructuralism. The notion of the “linguistic turn” encompasses both.

These three philosophical standpoints appear in McKeon’s historical semantics as cycles in the history of philosophy. An excellent introduction to these cycles appears in the work of Walter Watson, who compiles a lengthy list of texts where one can find McKeon using thing, thought, word, and act—which Watson calls McKeon’s “master topic”—to map “three-stage cycles in the history of philosophy” ("McKeon" 16n29, 234–35). These cycles are a pluralism of philosophical subject matters. That is, subject matters that are the changing (historical shifts of subject matter) changeless source (recurrent cycles) of philosophical first principles. Watson indicates that if one puts together all the cycles McKeon identifies in various texts, one finds five altogether in the history of Western thought (Architectonics 11), with the last cycle beginning in the seventeenth century (a metaphysical period) then turning to thought, most prominently in Kant (an epistemological period), then turning to the “linguistic turn” in our time, possibly best characterized as a rhetorical period when one considers that the great revival rhetoric enjoyed in the closing decades of the twentieth century is likely to be seen as among the important rhetorical periods in the long history of rhetoric. Earlier rhetorical periods McKeon cites most often as analogous to our own are the Renaissance and Rome in the time of Cicero (e.g. "Uses of Rhetoric" 205).

Watson’s list is a significant indicator of the timing of the emergence of historical semantics. Almost all of McKeon’s discussions of these cycles come after mid-century. Only two examples appear before 1950, the first in 1943, and arguably they are not worked out as well as the later examples, including examples I witnessed in classes, where McKeon would often review the most recent cycle, beginning in the seventeenth century, to identify the distinctiveness of the intellectual situation in the 1960s. What Watson calls McKeon’s “master topic,” then, arrives late, but when it arrives it becomes the “master.” The same is true of McKeon’s rhetorical turn. There is a connection.

Before turning to it, one needs to note that any review of a cycle almost automatically raises the question “what next?” McKeon typically leaves that question hanging unanswered, but in a 1967 course called "The Philosophy of Communications and the Arts," in the context of a review of the most recent cycle, he answered it, predicting that the next revolution in philosophy

http://kbjournal.org/wess_mckeon

9/9/2015
shall proceed again to a choice between parts and wholes and to the establishment of principles in a new metaphysics. I want to confess that I am subversive in intention. But this course is not a revolutionary one. It is not aimed at the philosophy of the future. It is a simple introduction to philosophy as it is practiced today, rendered a little novel and difficult by exposure to its basis in rhetoric and communication. ("Experience")

While this remark links the philosophy of the day to rhetoric, it also points to a different future, which suggests that McKeon saw his turn to rhetoric as suited for his time, not for all time. The remark is also notable in 2013 because there are currently signs that this 1967 prediction is coming true. There is a new philosophical movement that takes its name from a 2007 workshop entitled "Speculative Realism," held at Goldsmiths, University of London. In varying ways, speculative realists advocate a turn to what McKeon's historical semantics identifies as "thing." Of these realists, Graham Harman is probably now the most widely known. His variant of speculative realism, "object-oriented ontology" (OOO), is sometimes confused with speculative realism as a whole. Anyone who follows this movement will see new names popping up the way they did in the theory revolution in the US in the 1970s. What will come of this emergent philosophical movement remains to be seen. But its emergence does make some credibility to McKeon's prediction, making it something to keep in mind going forward.

The connection between McKeon's historical semantics and his rhetorical turn is where one finds the "yes" answer to Wegener's question, "Did [McKeon] follow where the argument led?" This connection appears clearly in "The Methods of Rhetoric and Philosophy: Invention and Judgment," published in 1966, where in the first paragraph McKeon introduces the subject matter of the "linguistic turn," then in the second paragraph argues that rhetoric provides the method needed to philosophize about this subject matter.

The first paragraph recounts revolutions in the history of philosophy, ending with McKeon turning himself into the mouthpiece for the twentieth-century's revolution, using his "master topic" to do so:

Since it is absurd to seek to base meanings on alleged characteristics of being or on supposed forms of thought, inquiry into what men say and what they do may be used to provide clarification and test of what they say they think and of what they think is the case. Things and thoughts are in the significances and applications of language and in the consequences and circumstances of action. (97)

This formulation contrasts sharply with McKeon's Moore essay, mentioned earlier. Contrasts with this 1942 essay reveal the difference historical semantics makes. While much of this essay is about Moore's focus on language, there is nothing about how this focus is an example of the twentieth-century's revolutionary turn to language and action. Instead, as Plothmann indicates, the essay registers skepticism about the value of this focus. This critical bent in the essay is somewhat anomalous insofar as McKeon's usual pluralistic practice is to put the figures he discusses in different places, all credible, in some pluralistic schema. Plothmann recalls a McKeon anecdote that encapsulates McKeon charitable reading practice. When reading Kant, McKeon once remarked, "Do not worry at first whether space and time are really subjective forms in the mind, but worry instead about what Kant means when he says they are (205n4)." In other words, rather than jump to the conclusion that an author is right or wrong, read charitably enough to take time to work out an author's meanings, even if that entails entertaining assumptions that seem far-fetched. While McKeon's Moore essay is laced with critical remarks, McKeon is still charitable enough not to argue that Moore is flatly wrong. Instead, his essay moves to a conclusion where McKeon underlines Moore's separation of thing, thought, and word. McKeon accepts Moore's separation of these three. His criticism is that Moore fails to find productive connections among them: "[Moore's] entire philosophy is devoted, once the separation of the three has been ensured, to a vain effort to find legitimate connections between things, thoughts, and statements (478)." This "vain effort" claim is supported by a motif, running through the preceding pages, that states in varying ways that Moore's work does not add up to much. (455-56, 457, 459, 460). After the emergence of historical semantics, by contrast, McKeon sees that the twentieth-century's turn to language can add up to a great deal.

But for this to happen, the second paragraph argues, one must turn to rhetoric. Having briefly sketched "revolutions in the first decades of the twentieth century" that inaugurated the turn to language and action, McKeon goes on,

The vast and difficult task undertaken in these revolutions lacked instrumentailities needed to carry it out successfully, because no art of rhetoric had been formed adequate to the possibilities of communication or to the contents or ends to which communication might be adapted. (97)

McKeon's philosophizing of rhetoric is a rhetorical turn that takes a step beyond not only the therapeutic philosophy at the beginnings of "the linguistic turn" but also the later constructivism that rejected scientific correctness in favor of deconstructive exposure of constructs everywhere, prompting some, as Joy illustrates, to mistakenly think that Derrida's deconstruction launched this "turn." The now commonplace constructivist argument takes as its premise that words are mediations: one does not have direct access to a thing, which in turn guides one's use of words to represent it; instead, words are mediations that construct things linguistically, not in their full materiality, as if language were godlike, but in their meaning, as in the example of sexually differentiated bodies mediated through gendered meanings. To claim these bodies inform these meanings is to essentialize. The constructivist counterargument exposes such essentializing as a construct forged in history.

McKeon's step beyond both centers on the premise in this reasoning. The constructivist argument that words mediate shows how words do this mediating, this verbal mediating being the premise that grounds the inferences in the argument. What tends to go unnoticed is that this argument's insistence that this mediating actually happens testifies to the sense in which verbal mediating is a mode of existence. As an existent, it is a thing, different from other things, but nonetheless a thing. In a 1960 essay, "Being, Existence, and That Which Is," delivered as

http://kbjournal.org/wess_mckeon

9/9/2015
the Presidential Address at a meeting of the Metaphysical Society of America, McKeon explicitly called for a broadening of our notions of what things can be "to include what we say and things we seek" (254).

A similar recognition appears in Burke. In "What are the Signs of What?" he puts words in four categories: natural, verbal, sociopolitical, and supernatural, then adds, "Though there are many differences among them with regard to their referents, all four are equally real so far as their nature as sheer words is concerned" (374). Burke goes on.

And of all situations having to do with language, the only time when something can be discussed wholly in terms of itself, is when we are using words about words. Insofar as nonverbal things are discussed in terms of words (or symbols generally), they are necessarily discussed in terms of what they are not. (375; see also Grammar 58)

All of us have no doubt lost count of our encounters with words about words. For decades, few things have been more common than words (a book on one's desk) that claim to explain what words do, what they cannot do, and so on (the book's subject matter).

Books on one's desk telling one about words, moreover, are the result of a thing being accessed directly, this thing being verbal existents that are distinct from the books that claim to represent them correctly. This result is unique in a constructivist world; such access occurs nowhere else. These existents inform the constructive process, but they themselves are not constructs. In the notable case of Derrida, the key existent is "difference," which is the immanent formal cause of verbal meanings. Perhaps unwittingly, Derrida underlines the sense in which "difference" is a distinct existent when he insists, "Differance is neither a word nor a concept" (130). From the standpoint of McKeon's "Principles and Consequences," discussed earlier, "difference" is a rule of rules, prior to acts.

While words are secondary to things and thoughts in some senses, as well as in much philosophy in previous centuries, there is also a sense in which words are not only existents, but also the primary existents, the one and only gateway to everything else. These primary existents are a reality in their own right and as such, they are a philosophical subject matter, as McKeon's historical semantics recognizes. Attending to this reality, one can go beyond the negativity of therapy and deconstruction to philosophizing constructively the reality of a rhetorical world. Instead of viewing verbal mediating as something requiring therapeutic attention or deconstructive exposure, one can view it as a reality, indeed, a primary reality, and then inquire into what is needed to philosophize this reality.

In his subtitle to "The Methods of Rhetoric and Philosophy," McKeon suggests that key components to such constructive philosophizing appear in "invention" and "judgment." To indicate the philosophical significance "judgment" acquires, he first reviews Aristotle's four fundamental questions, especially the "why" question of ultimate first principle. He then considers the rhetorical revision of these questions, wherein the answer to "why" appears in "judgment," which occurs in the context of "individual persons and determinate times, places, and circumstances" (101). A related passage appears in McKeon's 1970 essay, "Philosophy of Communications and the Arts":

Rhetoric is an art of invention and disposition: it is an art of communication between a speaker and his audience, and it is therefore an art of construction of the subject-matter of communication, that is, of anything whatever that can be an object of attention. What is, is established by the convictions and agreements of men. (317)

Here the "judgment" function appears in "convictions and agreements." One can conceive this function appearing in other forms. The specific form is less important than its general function of establishing "what is," which in a rhetorical world consists of verbal existents.

Philosophizing rhetoric, one explains what comes into existence by means of what words can do. Instead of looking, say, to nature for foundational causes of existents, one looks to human "judgment" for the foundational cause of verbal existents and their uses in forming constructs. The structure of a philosophical ultimate principle reappears but in a different form, centering on human "judgment" rather than a cause independent of humans, because humans are the ultimate cause of the emergence and dissolution of constructs. Different views of just how this "judgment" works, and even what to call it, shape philosophical controversy at the level of first principle. As a reality, a rhetorical world is limited when compared to an encompassing metaphysical reality that explains everything. Compared to such an encompassing reality, rhetorical reality is small, a bubble in a cosmos. But in the "linguistic turn," rhetorical reality is as big as it gets.

"Invention" is at the beginning of the process that ends in "judgment." It is "judgment" that seals the deal, giving a thing brought into existence by means of words the stability it needs to be an existent, a "what is," at least for a time, before it is displaced by another "what is" in the context of a different "judgment." "Invention" is the beginning and is unlimited except in one respect. No "invention" can preclude future inventions ("Methods" 100). What words bring into existence is determined by "judgments," which are alterable. Agreements today may tomorrow no longer be agreements. Existence in rhetorical reality is always open to new existents, so that any representation of this rhetorical reality must be open to the new to represent it accurately. A claim that a particular "what is" is true for all time is false.

This McKeonist standpoint clarifies the sense in which Burke's pentad represents rhetorical reality. The philosophical significance of the pentad is aided by Burke's applications of it in "The Philosphic Schools" (Grammar 125-320), but its applications are not limited to philosophies. The important point is that the pentad is consistent with the principle that, because of the variability of "judgment," no "invention" can preclude future inventions. In rhetorical reality, "what is" is "invented" and can change with changes in "judgment." What is unchanging are the principles of rhetorical reality that limit "invention" and empower "judgment" in these ways. Rhetorical reality is a world always open to the new. To represent it accurately, one's representation must incorporate a principle of openness, as in the pentad, which is open forever to new uses.

http://kbjournal.org/wess_mckeen

9/9/2015
Further illustration appears in possible philosophical debate centering on the issue of open-endedness. For example, one could pit the pentad against Burke’s theory of terministic screens, which argues that terminologies are “selections” from reality so that they are both “reflections” and “deflections” (“Terministic” 43). Because there is always “deflection,” a terminology always leaves open the possibility of a future terminology attending to what it looks past. Is this theory more open-ended than the pentad? Possibly, but one could counter that this openness is achieved by moving to a higher level of abstraction that looks past the concreteness of scene, agent, act, agency, and purpose. My purpose is not to settle this hypothetical debate between two Burke texts, but to use such a possible debate to illustrate the fashion in which debate about reality in a rhetorical world properly centers on the issue of the open-ended that McKeon pinpoints in the principle that no “invention” can preclude future invention.

It is true that forms such as Burke’s pentad and the trio of selection, reflection, and deflection are forms presented as eternal truths. But they are rhetorical variants of eternal truths. For the truth claimed to be eternal is the truth that guarantees openness to new possibilities. For openness to be possible, some things must be permanent.

Returning to Burke’s claim that “whenever we call something a metaphor, we mean it literally,” it helps to return to the earlier point that philosophizing rhetoric explains what comes into existence by means of what words can do. Words as existents have discernible characteristics that determine what they can and cannot do. It is on the level of such characteristics that Burke supports his claim. Here is the key passage:

> there is a difference between “horsepower” as referring to a horse, as referring to a car, and as referring to an orator’s diction. One could say that any word applied to a horse’s characteristics is but an arbitrary (fictive) title. But the mere fact that all linguistic entitlement is necessarily a mode of abbreviation when applied to any situation, the details of which are necessarily unique, shouldn’t require us to treat a word like “horsepower” as the same kind of (if you will) “metaphor” when applied to a horse as when applied to an orator’s diction. (Brock et al. 28)

The characteristic isolated here is that “linguistic entitlement” is “necessarily a mode of abbreviation.” For a word as existent to function, it must be applicable to multiple situations that differ in their details. Imagine a horse in multiple situations: at a racetrack, grazing in a barn, etc. For “horse” to function, it must be applicable to all these situations. If someone demanded a unique word to match the uniqueness of each unique situation one would have racetrack-horse, barn-horse, grazing-horse, etc. In other words, one would quickly have too many words for words to function. A word depends for its existence on “abbreviation.” This is part of what is essential to this kind of existent.

Consequently, there is a sense in which a word such as “horse” identifies a similarity in situations that are differ in their details, so that one could use this characteristic to argue that every word is a metaphor. But even at this level, one would be giving a literal account of words and how they work to explain the sense in which a word is metaphoric.

Furthermore, to turn to Burke’s main contention, such an argument simply rephrases the issue because it leaves one with the need to distinguish two kinds of metaphor: the first would be the similarity cutting across the racetrack-horse, barn-horse, and grazing-horse to produce “horse”; the second would cut across the difference between a horse and an orator’s diction. Without such a distinction, one would be arguing in effect that there is no difference between these two kinds of difference. But even if one decided to do without this distinction, Burke could counter by arguing that only a literal account of words as existents can explain exactly what was not being distinguished. At every point, one gets to the level of words as existents that McKeon identifies as the subject matter properly treated with rhetorical methods. Inferences based on these existents always refer to them literally. In a rhetorical world, words as existents are things and these are the things to which one has direct access, without mediation.

The proper conclusion of this McKeonist understanding is a reminder that McKeon turned to rhetoric for his time, not for all time. If the recent emergence of the speculative realists is a harbinger of the new metaphysics that McKeon envisioned, then we are at the dawn of a new metaphysical age. Such an age would need a reconfiguration of rhetoric, not its abandonment. For rhetoric does account for a portion of reality. It is properly contained, not eliminated, by metaphysics. A step toward such a reconfiguration would be a precise charting of the contours of rhetorical reality. This charting could take the form of a historical narrative in which the extraordinary revival of rhetoric in the closing decades of the twentieth century is seen as the telos of the “linguistic turn” that began early in the century. For this charting, one needs to turn away from therapeutic dictates and deconstructive exposures to McKeon’s philosophizing of rhetorical reality.

Notes
1. Jack Selzer’s authoritative chronology indicates that early in 1917, a few months before turning 20, Burke entered Columbia University and began taking a ferry to classes with McKeon (186), who was three years younger. McKeon was born in 1900; Burke, in 1897. It is not altogether clear but Douglas Mitchell, one of McKeon’s many dedicated students, seems to imply that McKeon’s commitment to rhetoric coincides with the beginning of his friendship with Burke during their student days at Columbia University (396). That is not supported by the evidence, but in any case it is a minor point in which is otherwise a review essay filled with valuable insights into a number of McKeon’s essays.

2. An important work of scholarship that remains to be written would combine a detailed historical study of the formation of UNESCO with an in-depth analysis of McKeon’s work relevant to it. A glimpse of what a chapter of such a book might look like appears in Erik Doxtader’s “The Rhetorical Question of Human Rights—A Preface,” which draws extensively on a large number of McKeon essays that address UNESCO concerns in varying ways.

3. This quotation comes from McKeon’s 1942 essay, “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages.” The 1942 McKeon is the McKeon both Wegener and Plochmann worked with closely and distinguished from the later rhetorical McKeon. The “rhetoric” in the title of this essay should not be
mistaken as a sign of a turn to rhetoric. As the quotation indicates, this essay theorizes a conception of intellectual history and applies this conception to the subject matter of rhetoric in the middle ages.

4. In *The Age of Analysis: 20th Century Philosophers*, Morton White indicates that the "marriage of the empirical and logical traditions was first solemnized by the name 'Logical Positivism' in order to indicate the two families united, but this was later changed to 'Logical Empiricism' when it was realized how bad the odor of the word 'positivism' was for those who associated it with the narrowness of Auguste Comte" (204). Bergmann nonetheless uses "logical positivism," explaining, "The very name, logical positivist, is by now unwelcome to some, though it is still and quite reasonably applied to all, particularly from the outside" (63).


**Works Cited**


A McKeonist Understanding of Kenneth Burke's Rhetorical Realism in Particular and Constructivism in General


589 READS