

THE FORUM

KENNETH BURKE AND IDENTIFICATION

To the Editor:

In the October, 1960, issue of *QJS*, Mr. Dennis Day made an effort to throw some light on Kenneth Burke's contributions to our field in an article entitled, "Persuasion and the Concept of Identification." Quoting Marie Hochmuth Nichols' statement that "Burke deserves to be related to the great tradition of rhetoric," Mr. Day proceeded to support this position in his discussion. If this statement means, as Mr. Day's paper seems to indicate, that Burke is basically traditional in his approach, then in my opinion Burke "deserves" something more than to be pigeonholed with Aristotle. In order to make full use of Burke's contributions, we need to dwell on what is *new* in Burke.

Mr. Day tells us:

We shall discover that Burke's concept of identification is an extension of traditional rhetorical theory, that it is based upon his philosophical concept of "substance," and that the concept of identification itself is expressed implicitly in the writings of A. E. Phillips and explicitly in James Winans' book, *Public Speaking*.

My investigation suggests that this description is so superficial that it tends to be grossly misleading, and that it is more profitable and more appropriate to take the position that the term *identification* used by Burke is an essentially new term, with properties that are not found in the traditional use of the term. I should like further to suggest that Burke's whole discussion of rhetoric ought to be viewed by scholars in our field as a new approach to the subject which can no

longer profitably be grouped with classical tradition.

The key to Burke's concept of identification is not that it is like the identification of Winans and Phillips. Burke's identification certainly encompasses the concept of Winans and Phillips, but it functions not only as a *process* whereby separate entities are brought together, but also as a *structure*—a hierarchial structure in which the entire process of rhetorical conflict is organized. Identification is then not only a process which operates in rhetoric; it is also the structure which gives it order.

Although Mr. Day is right as far as he goes in saying that "identification at its simplest" can be put "in terms of the joining of interests," he overlooks or ignores the hierarchial function of Burke's identification concept. Mr. Day supports his statement by quoting Burke out of context: "For example, the politician says to the farm group, 'I was a farm boy myself.'" The complete quotation from Burke is: "Identification ranges from the politician who, addressing an audience of farmers says, 'I was a farm boy myself,' through the mysteries of social status, to the mystic's devout identification with the source of all being." Although Burke admits the traditional rhetorical definition of identification into his definition, he places the greater emphasis in this work on spinning out the implications of the latter part of the statement—the functioning of the hierarchy of identification in the context of social action.

Mr. Day tells us: "Burke generally conceives of rhetoric in traditional terms.

Almost one half of *A Rhetoric of Motives* is devoted to what he titles 'traditional principles of rhetoric.' To characterize the first part of *A Rhetoric of Motives* as a traditional treatment of rhetoric, regardless of what Burke calls it, is a dangerous oversimplification of the facts. Viewing as he does the whole realm of traditional rhetoric from the standpoint of his identification concept, Burke discusses the traditional rhetoric in a far from traditional way. For instance, in summing up his discussion of Aristotle, Burke tells us, "Thus, all told, besides the *extension* of rhetoric through the concept of identification, we have noted . . . purely traditional evidences of the rhetorical motive." He also uses his discussion of Aristotle to introduce ideas of "semi-verbal, semi-organizational," tactics which Burke calls a "Rhetoric of Bureaucracy." In this discussion, Burke is illustrating the workings of the identification hierarchy in the social structure. He points to the devices in Machiavelli's *The Prince* as an example. Surely these ideas cannot properly be called Aristotelian.

I would like to suggest that Mr. Day and other writers in the field who have made such an effort to relate Burke to the rhetorical tradition now take a look at the other side of the coin and examine more closely what is unique in his position.

Identification in its function as a structure is an order based on the resolution of conflicts by finding their common source. A conflict is "resolved" by discovering a larger generalization which will encompass both sides of the conflict. In this structure, "truth" is arrived at not by eliminating one side of a conflict and allowing the other to stand, but by finding a "name" which will describe the state of the conflict at any given time. A result of this approach

is a uniquely modern statement of "truth" not in absolute terms but in terms of an ordered *contingency*. This new kind of rhetorical statement is fundamentally akin to Heisenberg's *uncertainty principle*, Weiner's *physics of contingency*, and other contemporary scientific statements about the nature of the universe.

The implications of this new rhetorical statement have yet to be considered by scholars in our field. Aristotle met Plato's challenge in fashioning a rhetoric to deal with the Platonic notion of truth as an absolute. Is it not possible that Burke is fashioning a rhetoric to deal with the modern notion of truth as a contingency? We can answer this question by examining closely Burke's "hierarchy of identification," being careful to avoid over-simplifications and too-easy categorizations of this difficult but exciting concept.

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KENNETH BURKE AND IDENTIFICATION—A REPLY

To the Editor:

In the foregoing letter, Mr. Kirk bases his disagreement with my treatment of the Burkian conception of identification on two points: (1) the term *identification* should be treated as "an essentially new term," and (2) identification "functions not only as a process . . . but also as a . . . hierarchial structure. . . ." Both points involve semantic difficulties.

Identification is neither a "new" term nor a "new" concept with Burke. The semantic problem here is what we mean by the term "new." Let us drop the term "new" and phrase the point in a different way. Neither the concept of identification nor the term identification *originate* with Burke. With this statement there should be no disagreement.

