

Abortion and the Drama of Human Motivations:
With Reference to Kenneth Burke and René Girard

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For those who are unfamiliar with Kenneth Burke, I will present a thumbnail biography. He was born in 1897 and died in 1993. He attended Columbia University for one semester, but then dropped out of college and became a self-educated thinker by reading voraciously and interacting with the intelligentsia in the New York City area. In his earlier years as an author he was a music and literature critic; he gradually morphed into a philosopher, with a strong interest in anthropology. Politically, he was sympathetic with Marxism, but not in an overly narrow and doctrinaire way. His main books are: *Counter-Statement* (1931), *Permanence and Change* (1935), *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1941), *A Grammar of Motives* [GM] (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* [RM] (1950), *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), and *Language as Symbolic Action* [LSA] (1966). He also wrote one novel, and some works of short fiction and poetry. Burke is primarily studied today in English and Speech departments as a major twentieth century theoretician of rhetoric. There is a Kenneth Burke Society which holds a conference every three years.

Many readers of René Girard are probably under the impression that Girard coined the phrase “the scapegoat mechanism.” Actually, Burke was already using that phrase in *Permanence and Change* in 1935. There is also a section of *A Grammar of Motives* entitled “The Dialectic of the Scapegoat.” In various places in his writings Burke spoke of violence toward scapegoats as an act of psychological

catharsis this serves the end of social cohesion. From the few scattered references to Burke in Girard's writings, it is clear that Burke had a significant influence on Girard, though the way Girard formulated the concepts of mimetic desire, scapegoating, and biblical revelation took him into territory that Burke did not enter himself. Burke described himself as an agnostic, though he was not at all hostile toward religious ideas or religious people. One of his key late works was *The Rhetoric of Religion*, which includes extensive commentaries on Genesis chapters 1-3 and on Augustine's *Confessions*.

It is fair to say that Burke and Girard are similar in that they are known primarily as anthropologists, not as ethicists. By this I mean that they both tend to steer clear of making direct comments on the topics that ethicists talk about: just war theory vs. pacifism, abortion, genetic manipulation, and so forth. It does not follow, however, that there are no ethical ideas or implications embedded within their writings. I believe that the reason why Burke and Girard chose to focus on anthropology is precisely because they had deeply felt ethical concerns that could not be adequately addressed using the language of ethics *per se*. One can argue about just war theories and pacifism without asking the deeper question: Why are human beings violent? Burke and Girard both intuitively sense that in the modern world clashing ideologies cannot find peace if there is simply a war of competing ethical *answers*. We need to be asking deeper anthropological *questions*. Hence, Burke's main concern became comprehending human *motives*, and Girard continued that same train of thought, though along a somewhat different track.

Some people accuse Girard of having too much of a "grand meta-narrative." In my opinion, Girard's meta-narrative is not grand enough. I mean that we need a complex anthropological vision that outlines how human beings inhabit the various dimensions of reality. There is the vertical axis of God and nature, traditionally called the Great Chain of Being. There is the horizontal plane of human social

relations. And there is individual human selfhood in time. The dimensions are fields within reality that can be described through the use of clusters of words.

- The vertical axis evokes words such as hierarchy, monarchy, spirit and matter, divine law and natural law, idolatry, master and slave, love of God, the eternal and the temporal, natural evil
- The horizontal plane evokes words such as democracy, diversity, equality, solidarity, a mob mentality and scapegoating, love of neighbor, moral evil
- The trajectory of individual selfhood evokes words such as inwardness, individualism, imagination, free will, narcissism, autonomy, love of self, growth in virtue, temptation to (individual) evil

These lists are not exhaustive, of course, just suggestive.

I say that Girard's meta-narrative is not grand enough because Girard's thought is a masterful exposition of the horizontal plane, but it focuses too narrowly on that dimension of reality. Kierkegaard is a thinker who focuses on individual selfhood; Aquinas focuses on the vertical axis. Thinkers often have a forte, a powerful vision of a particular aspect of reality which they develop with great skill and power. But my plea is that we should always be expanding our vision to comprehend the widest possible circumference of elements. Of course, Girard, Kierkegaard, and Aquinas are aware of all three key dimensions of reality, but the question I'm raising concerns how successfully a thinker holds the dimensions in a creative tension and synthesis.

This concept of complex dimensional anthropology had already come into focus for me, based on reading Eric Voegelin, Kierkegaard, Girard, and other thinkers, before I started reading Kenneth Burke, and I was gratified to see that he was wrestling with the exact same problem. When he wrote his

central philosophical work, *A Grammar of Motives*, he had in mind that this would be the first book of a trilogy. The second would be *A Rhetoric of Motives* and the third *A Symbolic of Motives*. What did Burke mean by grammar, rhetoric, and symbolic, which are obviously his key terms?

By grammar, Burke means reflection on the ontological basis of human life, the substance of human beings. He points out that the word “substance” is paradoxical; its root meaning, sub-stance, is that which lies underneath something, the ground on which the thing is standing. For human beings, our substance in this sense is our physical embodiedness—the bones, muscles, blood, and DNA that constitute our physical life. But the word substance is paradoxical in that it is usually used to indicate the essence of something, its internal spirit or soul. The substance of a person is both their (material) brain and also their (immaterial) mind or intellect. By rhetoric, Burke means “persuasion and dissuasion, communication and polemic.” Rhetoric is the use of language to form and sustain a community, usually by verbally attacking some other community or some group within the community. “The *Rhetoric* deals with the possibilities of classification in its *partisan* aspects; it considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another.” By symbolic, Burke means reflection on a thing’s *identity*, “its uniqueness as an entity in itself and by itself.” The symbolic perspective treats “the individual substances, or entities, or constituted acts ... considered in their uniqueness”(RM, 21-23). So we can see that Burke saw clearly the dimensional anthropology that I outlined above. The terms grammar and substance correspond with what I’m calling the vertical axis; rhetoric corresponds with the horizontal plane; and symbolic corresponds with individual selfhood in its uniqueness.

Burke also identifies a cluster of three terms that reinforce this analysis: “Order, the Secret, and the Kill” (RM, 265). He describes these as three key motives around which human life in society

revolve. By *order*, Burke means the hierarchies of human society that mirror the hierarchy of lower and higher life forms in nature. By *the secret*, Burke means the interiority of the human person, who is deciding to act. By *the kill*, he means scapegoating and sacrifice.

I don't have time within the limited scope of this paper to adequately expand this point, but in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard and Eric Voegelin, I see an awareness of dimensional anthropology articulated with great subtlety and philosophical depth.¹ They portray the human self as existing at the intersection of the dimensions of reality. Our sinfulness, our malformation, as human beings, is our inability, or refusal, to faithfully synthesize the dimensions and hold them in creative tension as we live our lives before God. Burke and Girard don't put things in this precise way, but I see them as presenting anthropological visions that arise out of similar intuitions about the health and sickness of human beings. Burke's overall project is to articulate the complexity of human motivational derailments as a failure to synthesize grammar, symbolism, and rhetoric in an ethical way. Girard's overall project is to show how human beings fail to find true selfhood when they are swept up in the social dynamics of mimetic desire and scapegoating. Living only on the horizontal plane is an "ontological sickness" that can only be healed by one thing, by entering into the kingdom of God, into good mimesis. Then, true *selfhood* is found in relation to the *God* who is revealed in Christ. The vertical, selfhood, and the social then cooperate in a healthy way.

When the dimensions of reality come into focus for us, we can see that the primary examples of unethical behavior in the modern world fall along dimensional lines. The defense of slavery in the 19th century, for example, arose out of vertical othering, the idea that whites are superior to blacks in the Great Chain of Being. Slavery was an example of what Burke called a "hierarchical psychosis." The

¹ See Charles Bellinger, *The Trinitarian Self: The Key to the Puzzle of Violence* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008).

Nazis and the Stalinists engaged in horizontal othering. They used rhetoric to label certain human beings as belonging to groups that needed to be eliminated. They overemphasized the horizontal plane and its organ of power the State. They refused to respect the dignity and value of individual human beings. In our age extreme individualism tends to overemphasize selfhood, which leads to other forms of pathology. When we see that the dimensions are temptations to overemphasis that can lead to unjust violence, then an ethical imperative will naturally present itself to us: we ought to live in the Center, holding the dimensions in a balanced and creative synthesis.

This analysis allows us to make some comments on the abortion debate. Let us consider Burke's dramatic pentad as an illustration of the difficulty involved in this question. (Burke's pentad employs the terms Scene, Agent, Act, Agency, and Purpose to analyze the drama of human life in literature and in history. GM, xvii) For example, one could comment on the abortion debate by saying that pro-choice advocates place the emphasis on the Agent and view the fetus in Scenic terms, as natural matter that is lower down on the Great Chain of Being. The Act of abortion, using suction technology as an Agency is morally appropriate in a particular circumstance given the Purposes of the woman, her plans for the future unfolding of her life. Pro-life advocates, on the other hand, think that it is wrong to view the unborn child as mere matter, as impersonal substance; rather, the unborn child should be treated as an Agent-in-formation (with "rights"). Alternatively, God should be seen as the Agent who is creating the child and abortion is destroying God's work. In either case, the Agent-Scene ratio is interpreted differently than it is by pro-choice advocates, who use the language of individual autonomy to place more emphasis on the woman as Agent. It follows from the pro-life assumptions that the use of abortive technology is morally wrong because the Purposes for which it is being employed are not appropriate from the pro-life point of view. A woman should be open to adjusting her life to receive a child (or giving up the child for adoption) instead of controlling her future through an Act that is viewed as unjust

violence.² Burke's term "circumference" can also be useful here. For Burke, circumference or scope are terms that indicate how broad or narrow a person's philosophical perception of the Scene is. Pro-choice advocates commonly speak about the circumstances of a particular woman's life—her financial resources, her relationships or lack thereof, her employment situation, her health, etc. Pro-life advocates commonly talk about abortion in connection with slavery and the Holocaust, by claiming that the fetus is "owned" by the woman as a slave-owner owned slaves, and that the fetus is dehumanized in pro-choice rhetoric just as Hitler dehumanized the Jews.³ This sort of accusatory rhetoric sounds bizarre and offensive to pro-choice ears. Looked at from Burke's point of view, the difference in perspectives arise out of two disparate circumferences: a focus on the particular situation of a woman vs. placing abortion within the broad Scene of modern history. As Burke says: "the choice of circumference for the scene in terms of which a given act is to be located will have a corresponding effect upon the interpretation of the act itself"(GM, 77).

Neither Burke nor Girard include in their published writings a lengthy commentary on the abortion debate. It is possible that a person could study their writings thoroughly and then affirm either a pro-choice or a pro-life stance. However, I think that the moral arc of the analysis bends in a pro-life direction. The pro-choice position, for example, is usually presented as a set of nested propositions: 1) the sovereign political principle relating to abortion ought to be the complete autonomy of the individual self, 2) the natural fertility of a woman's body is perceived as threatening, because it can "enslave" a woman to her biology, 3) pro-lifers seek to impose their moral beliefs on others, limiting the liberty of those others, 4) if this social imposition is enforced by the State, principle #1 is contradicted, 5) abortion

² For another discussion of the pentad and abortion, see Stan A. Lindsay, *Implicit Rhetoric: Kenneth Burke's Extension of Aristotle's Concept of Entelechy* (New York: University Press of America, 1998), 111-28.

³ See, for example, James Burtchaell, *Rachel Weeping and Other Essays on Abortion* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1982), 141-287.

is morally acceptable because the fetus is natural matter, not a “person” possessing rights, until some later point in time (viability, birth, or after birth, according to various arguments). From the perspective of the dimensional anthropology outlined above, this picture just painted is an example of overemphasizing the individual self within the overall complexity of reality. In a key passage in *A Grammar of Motives* (364), Burke points out that seeing the individual as alienated from and threatened by society is a particular feature of the modern west. In earlier centuries, when there was a more organic understanding of human beings participating in society, the individual was seen as a microcosm that is part of a macrocosm. But in more recent times, it is common for people to define themselves as individuals over against society. Now we have “the individual *against* the group,” in that any curb on the absolute freedom of the individual will is a case of society tyrannically imposing its will on the individual. Burke says that in this modern development a “fall” has taken place. Burke is not recommending extreme individualism as a good thing; he is placing it in a dubious light. He implies that there is a need for a “wider circumference” which takes into account the social, natural, or supernatural environment in general, rather than saying that the individual trumps everything else in the universe (GM, 362). In his important essay entitled “Definition of Man,” he speaks of human beings as separated from their “natural condition by instruments of their own making”(LSA, 3-24). This can be seen as a critique of the idea that the natural fertility of a woman’s body is an alien force which must be controlled by the technology of abortion.⁴

Burke uses the term “transubstantiation” to describe a historical period in which the “substance” of the political life of a people undergoes a major upheaval (GM, 320). The American Revolution, for example, was a transubstantiation from a monarchical political structure that is vertical, to a democratic

⁴ See also John Wilcox, “Nature as Demonic in Thomson’s Defense of Abortion,” *New Scholasticism* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 1989): 463-84.

political structure that is horizontal. *Roe v. Wade*, we can suggest, was another major upheaval that accomplished a transubstantiation from horizontal democracy to individual selfhood as the preeminent source of sovereignty.⁵ But *Roe v. Wade* is so controversial precisely because so many people either think that this transubstantiation was an error, or that narrowing the scope of sovereignty to one dimension of life is an error.

Girard's thought also bends toward the pro-life view, as we can see when he refers to abortion as a modern return to ancient "pagan practices."⁶ This case is made compellingly by Bernadette Waterman Ward in a *Contagion* article.⁷ She argues that the rhetoric of "pro-choice" does not correlate in a truthful way with the psychological reality of women in contemporary American culture. Echoing Girard's idea that modern "autonomy" is an illusion, she argues that abortions are sought not because women are autonomous but precisely because they are not. Women are enmeshed in a male-dominated sexual and economic milieu which treats them as objects of sexual desire that must conform to that milieu. Immense pressure is often put on a woman to have an abortion by various other persons in her life; or she may put pressure on herself because of a perception that the child she is carrying is a threat to the dream of economic success in a materialistic society that she has been mimetically conformed to. Instead of transforming the cultural system that oppresses women and denigrates their capacity to bring life into the world, the ideology of abortion treats the unborn child as a threat who must be sacrificed in order to conservatively perpetuate the male dominated system of structural violence.

In sum, I have argued that dimensional anthropology greatly illuminates various aspects of human behavior in the modern world. The dimensions are sources of "temptation" in that they can be

⁵ See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 181.

⁷ Bernadette Waterman Ward, "Abortion as a Sacrament: Mimetic Desire and Sacrifice in Sexual Politics." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis & Culture* 7 (2000): 18-35.

overemphasized, resulting in an unbalanced way of inhabiting reality, which lays the foundation for various forms of unjust violence. Slavery was predicated on vertical othering. There are many forms of horizontal othering, such as Nazism, Stalinism, and the ethnic violence in Rwanda and Yugoslavia. Abortion is a form of temporal othering in which it is claimed that the fetus may be killed because it is “not yet” a person.⁸ This form of othering arises out of an overemphasis on individual selfhood, without understanding that the modern notion of autonomous selfhood does not correspond with the best philosophical and psychological insights of thinkers such as Kenneth Burke and René Girard. The self exists in time, but the Golden Rule is broken when the temporal existence of a born individual is recognized and valued, while the temporal existence of the unborn child is seen as a fit subject for the type of sacrificial violence that perpetuates an unjust and immature social order.⁹ The various forms of othering that lead to unjust violence are always in direct opposition to the Golden Rule: “So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”(Matt. 7:12)

⁸ See Mary Ann Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion,” in *The Ethics of Abortion*, 3rd ed., edited by Robert Baird and Stuart Rosenbaum (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2001), 276.

⁹ On the Golden Rule, see Harry Gensler, “An Appeal for Consistency,” in *The Ethics of Abortion*, 286.