**The Tactics of Motivation**

*By* ***Kenneth Burke***

I

N CONSIDERING the three articles by Messrs. Dewey, Nagel, and Hook, one's initial embarrassment may be in not quite knowing whether he would enroll under some variety of "nat‑

uralism" (if not quite their variety, then a naturalism of sorts) or whether he should look for an appealing label among the brands of thought which Mr. Dewey lists for the opposition: su­pernaturalism, non-naturalism, anti-naturalism, extra-naturalism.

For one thing, we must grant that naturalism (including the ((materialism" which Mr. Dewey would exclude, with a prompt­ness almost amounting to acerbity, from the naturalist orbit) has made splendid "hark ye" contributions to the study of religion. The secular critique of religion has assembled an impressive lore on the misuse of religion, both as regards the deliberate exploita­tion of religious loyalties for the maintenance of injustice, and as regards the devices of self-deception whereby a sincere and hon­est man may, through the labyrinthine subterfuges of symbolism, hide his devilish motives, even from himself, behind the name of God. And one might well test the sincerity of a man's religion by inquiring whether he was a careful reader of this secular lore. For any man truly religious will seek in every way to guard against the misuse of religion on the part of both others and him­self; and secular history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and similar disciplines can provide him with the relevant admoni­tory information and speculation.

On the other hand, theologians and religious psychologists often have a kind of thoroughness which secular experimentalism lacks, as regards the posing of motivational problems. For where­as religious introspection takes us, however waveringly, into the depths of *conscience,* close to the centre at which the decisions of moral agents originate, characteristic secular psychologies even keep us outside the surface of *consciousness,* preferring to study human conduct in the terms of *motion* rather than the terms of *action.*

22

There is a radio program in which several comedians compete by telling jokes on assigned subjects. Their relative success is measured by a device for registering the intensity of the laugh­ter with which the audience at the broadcast greets each of the jokes. And the highest rating recorded on this "laugh-meter" is taken to indicate the "best" joke, or at least the *favorite* joke, as attested by a public judgment impartially recorded. Perhaps we should say the *momentarily* favorite joke; for there is of course no way of indicating which of the jokes will be remembered and retold afterwards. And though a "laugh-meter" might also be designed to register the duration of laughter as well as its in­tensity, with ratings got by the product of the two, I believe that this particular device judges by intensity alone. In any case, by its use, one gets a kind of "spontaneous voting," with certain su­periorities over the machinery of the verbal ballot. (The ballot is a more purely "rationalistic" way of voting, whereas I should think that the "laugh-metric" vote would be more "empirical".)

I confess that this radio program lures me greatly. For along with the entertainment of the stories, and the drama-atop-drama that goes with the competition among the storytellers, there is this pressing puzzle for literary criticism: to decide just how one should take this "laugh-meter." I am sure that none of the three naturalists who introduced the "Failure of Nerve" controversy would take it as a fair example of "scientific method" applied to literary criticism. Yet would they not at least grant that it is the burlesque, or *reductio ad absurdum,* of scientific method? That is, though its path to a judgment is simpler than the complicated

nature of the subject-matter justifies, a scientist could hardly object to its ideal. Nor is the device by any means unreasonable; for jokes are traditionally greeted by laughter, hence a device for impartially appraising the degree of laughter caused by a joke does in a sense record a public judgment on that joke. And it does so in a way that could not be done with anywhere near the same precision were the judges to attempt appraising by their judgment alone the relative degrees of appreciation manifested by the audience. If the judges were placed where they could fol­low the jokes, they would be in part affected by their personal preferences. And they could approach somewhat the perfection of the "laugh-meter" only by being placed, like the "laugh- meter" itself, in a position from which they could not follow the jokes, but could only record the response.

23

Again, it is said that the air-conditioning plant in a movie thea­tre must operate at a much swifter pace when the movie is a "thriller," since the higher rate of respiration in the audience causes a proportionate increase in the degree of humidity which the air-conditioning plant is designed to rectify. This struck me as providing a much more "scientific" test of the relative excite­ment in pictures than could be got through the more purely "rationalistic" procedure of counting the box-office receipts (though the public aspect of the box-office test seems in turn a closer approximation to scientific modes of public judgment than are to be reached by purely literary modes of appraisal).

What is wrong with these devices as evaluators? There is nothing wrong with their judgment, so far as it goes; for that is nearly perfect. Further, one could employ such devices for quite discriminating work. For instance, one could try telling the same story (naturally to different audiences of similar status) at varying tempos, or at varying pitches, or with varying kinds of imagery, or with varying kinds of preparation, etc.; and I be­lieve one could, with the help of the meter-readings, make some very valuable discoveries about the relative effectiveness of such changes. And out of such investigations, I am sure, one could de­rive new and accurate observations about the ingredients of which

a literary work is composed. We all know, for instance, that a good actor develops an "instinct" for timing, as a very effective line can be spoiled by being said a little too soon or a little too late; but at present our critical discriminations here can't go much beyond the point of a general outcry of enthusiasm for the play­er's "perfect timing."

24

No, the objection to such devices would not be in their reduc­tion of a qualitative order to terms of quantity, for nothing is more qualitative than the weather, yet I see nothing wrong with such scientific translations of the weather as we get in thermom­eters and barometers. The objection arises when philosophers of science are loath to grant that this very capacity of science de­mands a compensatory counterpart, variously named "intuition," "imagination," "vision," "revelation," etc. For though one could scientifically break a work of art into many ingredients, and by test arrive at some extremely subtle and perfectly just discrimina­tions about these ingredients, it is when confronting the synthesis of the ingredients that the scientific method becomes inadequate.

The "laugh-meter," for instance, could make a perfectly good judgment about the relative effectiveness of two different tempos. Or the air-conditioning device might be so developed as to give us a record of the different degrees of humidification (hence dif­ferent degrees of thrill) in the different parts of a drama. But what the "laugh-meter" could not do would be to make discrim­inatory judgments about the ways in which one should combine the various elements that go to make up an esthetic whole. Every combination would be a new act, that might subsequently be broken down for scientific discrimination, but in itself was a syn­thesis. One can synthesize chemicals even by accident, as one merely throws things together and sees what happens. But an imaginative synthesis, including the formulation of scientific laws, is not of this order. It takes its shape from final causes, however vague their formulation in the mind of the synthesizer.

Hence, reverting now to the matter of "theology," the fact that religion and metaphysics are in essence unifying approaches, dealing with the fields of all the special disciplines at their area

of *convergence,* would seem to argue that their centre of moti­vation must necessarily lie outside the orbit of scientific method. The scientist, of course, makes syntheses within his specialty; and there are tests within the specialty for checking on the validity of the syntheses. But if one offered a synthesis of the fields cov­ered by the various disciplines, which of the disciplines could pos­sibly be competent to evaluate it? Where each specialty gets its worth precisely by moving towards diversity, how could any spec­ialty possibly deal with a proj ect that offered a *unification* among the diversities? Or, otherwise put: if one were to write on the *interrelatedness* among ten specialties, one would be discussing something that lay outside the jurisdiction of them all.

25

From this point of view, perhaps the old controversy over "faith" and "knowledge" might be rephrased in terms of the "unity-diversity" pair. An assertion in the category of "faith" is a *unifying* assertion. Any practical or imaginative act has this in­itial unifying quality, spontaneously combining a host of factors that could be "broken down" into as many different specialized components as we can systematically isolate in our scientific dis­ciplines.

Both faith (a philosophical synthesis that must recommend it­self on dialectical grounds rather than by strictly scientific tests) and knowledge (the kinds of analytic observation that develop out of the perspective established by the faith) are necessary to a complete dialectic for the discussion of human motives. And a literary man who might begin his speculations about motives from the fact that his poems or fictions are obviously to be treated as synthesizing acts of faith rather than as instances of "scientific method," would perforce be shunted into the position of "anti- naturalism" insofar as naturalism thoroughly identifies itself with scientific method. The nature of the medium is such that it simply cannot represent "scientific method," since art is not a science. Hence, if apologists of science leave poetry only a choice between science and the notion of intuition as a dark cult, the poet must perforce choose the name for the dark cult as the name for his experience of motivation.

Mr. Hook's reference to "faith in intelligence" is interesting as a dialectical device that obliterates the distinction between "faith" and "knowledge." Perhaps it is another way of doing what the Spinozistic motive, formulated as the amor intellectualis Dei, was designed to do. Since "knowledge is power," one can also get variants like "love and power," or "faith and power"; and since power is exemplified in war, you can get Yeats's version for the two motives that sprang from the eggs of Leda, "love and war" (which, we learn from his complaints as an old man, can degenerate into "lust and rage," as "faith in intelligence" could in a corresponding degeneration become "love. of war"). We might note that the "faith and knowledge" alignment could be read as "act and scene," if "faith" were conceived in the spirit of the expression, an "act of faith," and "knowledge" were a knowledge of the scenic conditions in which that act could be enacted (scenic conditions that became progressively reduced to purely naturalistic limits). Mr. Hook's expression, "faith in knowledge," could similarly be classed as an attitude of the agent directed towards agency; for "intelligence," like "scientific meth­od," can be interpreted as a means rather than a substance. Yeats's pair, particularly the "lust and rage" variant, is "idealistic," both members being properties of the agent.

26

I pause to review some of these possible transformations, so as to suggest what I mean by my remarks about "synthesis" as a unifying act of "faith." So far as I can see, there is no "scientific" way of testing these different calculi. They are developed purely by the exploitation of dialectical resources, and each has a kind of relevance. Each in its way, seizes an assertion by the scruff of the neck, as an "act of faith." Once such a synthesis has been enacted, it can to be sure be further broken down into parts. The fides can seek its complement, its scholastic parallel, in the materials of intellectus (beginning with the enterprise that goes with the translation of the faith from a largely implicit state into an ex­plicit equivalent, an equivalent which in varying degrees becomes less a "translation" of the original than a "betrayal" of the origi­nal).

Or, in given cases, we might better expect a synthesizing work of conceptual cast to contain a mixture of the two motives: it will center in a "vision" (or let us take a neutral synonym, "perspec­tive"); this vision will have been asserted atop the state of knowl­edge as then constituted; and one will, in the course of filling out his assertion, try to demonstrate the scope, relevance, and rea­sonableness of his calculus by whatever logical and empirical tes­timony he can master.

But the vision, or perspective, or calculus cannot be scientifi­cally tested, since it is neither true nor false, but an act. And one will "suffer" the kind of knowledge that is the reciprocal of his act. (We state here, in a modified form, the process embodied in tragedy: out of the agent's action there grows a corresponding passion, and from the sufferance of this passion there arises a knowledge of his act, a knowledge that also to a degree transcends his act.)

However, perspectives are not often as private in their incep­tion as the naturalists would encourage us to believe. Even rev­elations from "on high" are usually the codification of tribal values, otherwise they could not recruit adherents in any great numbers. (Thus with the two testaments that were, by an egreg­ious and fatal misnomer, called a "book" whereas they should have been called a "library.") And behind both artistic and sci­entific syntheses, there is always a kind of "collective revelation."

II

Men seek for vocabularies that will be serviceable *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain situations, function as a *deflection* of reality. With such condi­tions in mind, how might one best proceed to select a vocabulary (a perspective, a systematically interrelated terminology) that might lay claim to be central for the discussion of human affairs and human relationships, and for the placement of cultural forms?

27

One must use some "representative anecdote" as a form in con­formity with which his vocabulary is to be developed. The be­haviorist, for instance, uses his experiments with the conditioned reflex as the anecdote about which to form his vocabulary for the discussion of human motives, but this is not a "representative" anecdote; for whether one insists "scientifically" upon classing men with animals, the fact remains that one cannot find a repre­sentative case of human motivation in animals, since they lack the properties of linguistic rationalization. A representative case of human motivation must have a strongly linguistic bias, where­as animal experimentation necessarily neglects this.

28

If the originating anecdote is not representative, a vocabulary developed in strict conformity with it will not be representative. This embarrassment is usually avoided in practice by a break in the conformity at some crucial point; this means in effect that the vocabulary ceases to have the basis which is claimed for it. The very man who might tell you that people are but chemicals will induce responses in people by talking to them, whereas he would not try to make a chemical behave by linguistic inducement. And to say that people are "chemicals that talk" is just about the same thing as saying that people aren't "just chemicals," since chemi­cals don't talk. I do not think that it is merely "meaningless" to call people "just chemicals," however; for such ideas, or perhaps better images, are the embodiment of attitudes, and in attitudes there are incipient programs of action. Hence, when one has dis­covered all the primary attributes with which a man implicitly or explicitly endows such a "god-term" (or ultimate "ground" or "title"), one may limit accordingly the range of actions one should normally expect of him. Out of any one image, or dogma, most anything may follow; but in proportion as it becomes modi­fied by contextual development, its range of probable eventuali­ties narrows.

If one builds a vocabulary at random, it lacks the value of a perspective, or rationale, being merely eclectic. And in any case, the vocabulary but avoids the appearance of an act of faith by being an assortment of minute and imperceptible acts of faith.

And any eclecticism is a mild kind of demoralization, and a chal­lenge to invent a new perspective, a "synopsis," that will bring the disjunct vocabulary into ordered relationship. But insofar as one would produce such a summation, or synoptic rationale, he is again faced with the need of some originating principle such as the choice of a "representative anecdote" provides for the midrib of his organization. The anecdote must have a form, so that he can contemplate it and proceed to build his vocabulary about it in an orderly fashion. Yet it must not be too confined a form, too special a form, a form too far aside from the main problems of human substance and human motivation.

29

In proposing that we should select drama as the "representa­tive anecdote" for a calculus of motives, I encounter the em­barrassment I originally spoke of, in trying to decide whether, in terms of naturalism, this perspective should be classed as "nat­uralistic," "anti-naturalistic," or even "supernaturalistic." For though I do not think there is anything intrinsically anti-scientific about the choice of drama as a "representative case" of human motivations, the dramatistic perspective itself places the sciences as dissolutions of drama.

True, for many situations the vocabularies derived by the dis­solution of drama are better suited than purely dramatistic co­ordinates. And the various scientific disciplines do well to perfect these partial perspectives, for the analysis of their particular fields. The dramatistic perspective counsels resistance, however, when­ever the attempt is made to follow the norms of these specialized vocabularies (all of which could be classed as variant terminolo­gies of motion) in discussing the human order of motives (which requires a terminology of action).

This distinction between action and motion can be empirically indicated. An act has the added motive (or the added "dimen­sion") of rationality, by which is meant the particular kind of purposive conduct that goes with the use of language, or symbol­ism. Language is, empirically, the extra dimension in human motives; and the empirical fact of this extra dimension offers the dialectical grounds for asserting categorically, independently of

scientific experiment, that the discussion of human motives cannot with accuracy be reduced to the level of the physical or sheerly biological, no matter how high an opinion one may have of the "matter" of which these levels are composed, unless it were found that a symbolism quite like human language figured in the rela­tionships among things and organisms at these levels. (As for the few cases in which domestic animals respond to words, one should "dramatistically" interpret these moments not as moments that reduce the human dimension to the merely animal dimension, but rather as moments where the few words enable the animals slightly to transcend the animal dimension, just as complex dia­lectical operations, developing imagery to conceive beyond imag­ery, may enable men slightly to transcend the human dimension.)

*30*

But though these distinctions of level can be as empirically established as any distinctions in a world whose parts shade off into one another (so that every division can be redefined as a merger), I will grant that one can frequently find anti-naturalistic and supernaturalistic discussions of human motivation more re­vealing than the strictly scientific varieties, because thought theo­logical in cast is regularly "dramatistic" in nature. This ingredient is also true of political philosophies, though usually with not such thoroughness of development as we find in theologies, with their extreme sensitivity to the relationship between the *scene* or *ground* of human actions and the acts enacted on this ground.

As I have observed elsewhere, the primary "dramatic ratio" is that whereby the quality of the *act* reflects the quality of the *scene* in which it is placed. And there is a derivative consideration, which I call the "lyric ratio,". that observes a similar relation be­tween scene and agent, with the quality of the *agent* sharing the quality of the *scene,* as the thing contained may synecdochically share in the quality of the whole containing it. One can readily see how a strict obedience to the logic of these ratios suggests a kind of "symmetrical necessity for the existence of God" as the ground of human morality and human personality. For if act and agent are to share the quality of the scene, the scene that con­tains them must possess personal and moral attributes to serve as

the motivational sources of the personal and moral. Rather than "reducing" moral and personal elements into references to non- moral and impersonal contexts (that is, discussing the moral and personal *in terms of* non-moral and impersonal conditions) a strict obedience to the dramatistic ratios would have to situate moral and personal principles in the ground itself, and then "de­duce" these from the ground.

3

Whatever one may think of this theological obedience to the requirements of the two ratios (the dramatic or scene-act ratio, and the lyric or scene-agent ratio), I think the formulation serves, on the purely *naturalistic* level, as a handy way of "anticipating" the distinction between naturalistic and supernaturalistic strate­gies of motivation. The supernaturalistic strategies attribute to the scene the qualities that they would then derive as motivations of act and agent. But the naturalistic strategies are content to sac­rifice this strict synecdochic kinship, allowing for the origin of ultimate motivating principles within the agents themselves, re­gardless of what may be the quality of the scene in which these agents are placed. In brief, they assign to man an *inherent* or *in­trinsic* dignity, rather than seeking to derive this dignity from "God."

There is a paradox of definition that may, in a roundabout way, come to the aid of the naturalist here. One may think of definition in either tribal (familial) or geometrical notions of substance. By tribal or familial definition, I refer to that prototype of thought according to which creatures and creation are descended from a creator, and share "substantially" in the quality of this "ancestral cause" from which they are derived. "Tribal" or "fa­milial" definition would involve any variant of the idea of bio­logical descent, with the substance of the offspring being derived from the substance of the parents. We here contemplate an area where the meanings of "general," "generic," and "genetic" subtly overlap.

By geometric definition, or "definition by location," I have in mind a mode of definition got, as the very etymology of the word suggests, by ways of *delimiting* a thing, of marking off a thing's

boundaries, of de-termining a thing by "placing" it in a context of things-not-it. As there was a paradox of substance implicit in the prototype of familial descent (since a human creature de­scended from a god shares "substantially" in the quality of this ancestry, so that he both is and is not divine, somewhat as we can avoid saying that we were wrong by saying that we were "sub­stantially" right) ; so there is a paradox of substance implicit in the geometrical, or contextual, strategy of definition. For a thing's context is what the thing is not; hence, to define a thing in terms of its context is to define it, not in terms of what it is, but in terms of what it isn't. The total context of this page, for instance, is everything in the world except this page. Hence, were I to define the page contextually, or by location, I should define it in terms of everything but itself.

32

Thus, I believe there is a deeper reason than a mere matter of style behind Spinoza's decision to construct his Ethics after the manner of Euclidean demonstration, as a series of steps from proposition to Q. E. D. His treatment of substance was in itself more geometrico, hence quite in keeping with the nature of the contextual paradox. Hence his basic formula to the effect that all definition is negation (omnis determinatio est negatio). In brief, he defined any part of the universe by placing it in the whole, which was its context (and obviously the whole was what the part was not). Hence, to treat the part in terms of the whole (or, as he put it, sub specie aeternitatis), was to consider it in terms of its "other," or in terms of its negation. This aspect of Spinoza was subsequently explicitly intensified in the philosophy of Hegel.

Because Spinoza's pantheistic equating of God and Nature could serve as a transition from supernaturalism to naturalism, his paradox of definition could be taken over in purely naturalistic thought. One will note its presence in Mr. Nagel's remarks about the scientist's search for the "conditions" or "context" in which such manifestations as we call "mind" can occur. And I believe that we could better understand the dialectical paradoxes underly­ing his speculations at this point if we traced them back to Spino­zistic naturalism, where the philosopher formally and explicitly

recognizes what Mr. Nagel would seem to deny: namely, to treat "mind" in terms of its "conditions" is to "negate" it. Similarly, Mr. Dewey's desire to find a kind of unified vocabulary that would resolve the "split" between "mind" and "matter," or the mental and physical, would seem to aim at a variant of the Spin­ozistic substance which, having extension and thought as its modes, must itself be a ground that is neither and/or both.

33

In any event, one may note that geometric substance readily lends itself to the *humanistic* split between personal agents and impersonal scene, with each providing a distinct order of motives (a split that naturalistic poets have often idealistically bridged by the variants of the "pathetic fallacy" whereby the imagery of nature can serve as a terminology for conveying states of mind). One may further note that the two strategies of definition, the tribal and the contextual, are not kept wholly distinct in any thinker. Supernaturalists, for instance, have treated God as in­determinately "causal ancestor" and "ultimate ground." And whatever may be the motives behind Mr. Dewey's desire to re­deem "matter" from its former low status while at the same time merging "mind" with a substance that possesses this more digni­fied and active nature, we may note that the derivation of "mind" and "matter" alike from such a principle, as its ground, could serve well as a naturalistic variant of the tribal strategy. At least, if one calls the natural ground "active," and means it literally, one has thereby just as truly read a personal principle into the natural ground as the supernaturalist reads into his doctrine of God as ground. And if he does not mean it literally, but speaks of "action" in a merely figurative sense, as one speaks of a ma­chine's "action," then so far as I can see, he cannot consistently maintain the position that "naturalism" differs from "material­ism," which is by definition the treatment of motives in terms of motion.

\* \* \*

[Mr. Burke's article will be concluded in the Summer number]