Burkophiles,

A revised summary of points of intersection between Burke’s dramatism/logology and Terrence W. Deacon’s semiotic and evolutionary theory:

(1) Deacon’s “absential feature” motivates the activity of all living beings,

foreshadowing the Burkean “negative” as author of symbolic action, which is to say, drama. Deacon’s mentor, Gregory Bateson, called this force a “difference that makes a difference.” For a “difference to make a difference,” there has to be a negative influence somewhere in the mix, a “sense” or “recognition” of a kind that propels an organism toward Aristotle’s notion of a proper “entelechy,” rather than in some other direction. A “difference” can “make a difference” only in respect to a “no” or a “not” of one intensity or variety, or another. (Note in *DD*, pp. 57-58, the difference between Burke’s use of the term “entelechy,” and Aristotle’s.)

1. Deriving from that “absential feature” and the seeming “purpose” or

“end-directedness” that such “absence” induces, references to the Aristotelian “Four Causes” come into view for Deacon, which is to say, by implication, Burke’s pentad. Such “dramatic” terms become most manifest in the “teleology” of the “symbolic species.” Those causal-cum-pentadic terms are adumbrated, at least, in the “teleonomy” (distinct from “teleology”) of presymbolic living beings, where there is still behavior “predictably oriented toward a particular target state” (however that “orientation” may be inaugurated). Such “teleonomy” makes for a “middle ground between mere mechanism and purpose.” The existence of that necessarily vague “teleonomy” (vague in respect to living beings “low” on the “Great Chain of Being,” like unicellular life) takes credence from the evidence of its effect. “Learning” of a kind, “trial and error,” to borrow here from Bateson, seems to be taking place. The bubbling to the surface of dramatistic terms---in the wake of any “absence,” “negativity,” or “purpose”---would not be surprising in any case, given the inevitable promptings of language itself. (See *DD*, pp. 57-58, for Burke’s reading on the necessarily “dramatistic” nature of the word “entelechy,” Aristotle’s usage, or Burke’s.)

1. “Action” cannot be reduced to “motion” in Deacon’s scheme, nor,

we know, in Burke’s. For Deacon, “There are no components to what is absent.” For Burke, symbolic “meanings” cannot be derived from, or reduced to, electro-chemical neurological discharges.

1. Burke explicitly enough and Deacon even more so emphasize the airy

abstractiveness of symbols, their web-like relatedness to, and embeddedness in, a whole lexicon of terms none of which can be “mapped” in relationship to objects in the real world. Recall what Burke says about his pentadic terms in the *Grammar*: They refer to “no thing.”

1. Following on that similarity, Burke’s “Theory of Entitlement,” turning

reference on its head with “things” as the “signs of words” rather than vice versa, is echoed in Deacon’s Peircean notion of symbolic reference. Such reference , for Deacon, begins with recognition of an “icon” (a familiar thing, a “presentation”), which brings something familiar to mind (a “second icon,” or “re-presentation”), each icon pointing to the other (creating a “third icon,” so to speak), the three icons generating an “index” (or “pointer”) that provides “information,” all these juxtapositions then directing attention to, or bringing to mind, an “abstract symbolic proposition” (Second Ginn Lecture at the McAfee School of Theology, Atlanta, 2014).

Deacon: “This dependency of symbolic reference on indexical reference” mirrors the dependency of human symbolic action/communication on the “genetic,” even “phylogenetic,” capacities for iconic and indexical communication in animals in general, a theme of both Deacon’s and Bateson’s.

1. Deacon’s emphasis on the prelinguistic indexical as eventually

generating “embryos of a speech act [in early hominids] . . . focused on aiming for and achieving expressive,” or emotionally charged, “goals” fits well enough with Burke’s unscientific speculations. Iconic “significant forms” would prompt those nascent attempts at “speech” communication. Such arresting icons would be those that pose a danger or alert to an opportunity. Gestural reference to them would warn kin or other group members of a need to act cooperatively. The “absential feature,” the proto-negative, already functions in Deacon as the basic “engine of intentionality” Burke deems the negative to be. The command “Don’t do,” or “Don’t fail to do,” is implicit in the negative’s every guise. That negative basis of and for communication and its intentionality would infuse even “positive” declarations, the primitive ones as well.

Where Deacon may differ from Burke on the origins of language: The “vocal gesture” as “symbol” may have come late in the process. Varied forms of vacality were difficult, Deacon states, for early primates.

1. The above brings us to Burke’s hexad as integral to the symbolic mix,

language, for Burke, primarily expressing an “attitude,” Burke’s sixth term, creating an orientation toward certain pathways of action, giving cues to action and a command to follow those cues. For Deacon, that attitudinal, “expressive” dimension is denominated a “mood.” In respect to symbolic origins, “Within this frame of social communicative arousal, what might be described as the ‘mood’ of the speech or interpreted act is differentiated,” Deacon says. “This ‘mood,’” he goes on, “needs to be maintained.” It’s “a focused readiness and expectation with respect to social interaction.”

Remember from a previous post Deacon’s insistence on the interrelationship between cognition and emotion. The idea of an accompanying “mood” or “arousal” state that makes for “a focused readiness and expectation” comes rather close to Burke’s insight.

1. Burke famously defines humans as the “symbol-using, symbol-making,

symbol-misusing animal.” Burke acknowledges, as well, that symbols in a real sense “use” us as much as we “use” them. Hence, perhaps, the utility of Condit’s “bridging term”: *Homo Loquax* as essentially the “symbolizing animal,” and letting it go at that.

Deacon’s “symbolic species” functions as a virtual synonym. “In my work,” Deacon says, “I use the phrase symbolic species, quite literally, to argue that symbols have literally changed the kind of biological organism we are.” “Indeed,” Deacon adds, “there is ample evidence to suggest that language is both well integrated into almost every aspect of our cognitive and social lives, that it utilizes a significant fraction of the forebrain, and is acquired robustly under even quite difficult social circumstances and neurological impairment. It is far from fragile.”

“So rather than merely intelligent or wise (sapient) creatures, we are creatures whose social and mental capacities have been quite literally shaped by the special demands of communicating with symbols. And this doesn’t just mean that we are adapted for language use, but also for all the many ancillary mental biases that support reliable access and use of this social resource.”

This defining human trait or attribute gets locked in globally via “the near universal regularities of human language,” those regularities dependent more on the learned requirements of effective reference, or indexicality, than by any innate Universal Generative Grammar.

1. “Drama”---or to put it more logologically, “theological drama”---is, for

Burke, the master “screen” by which even the “positives of nature are seen through the eyes of moral negativity.” Deacon’s approximation: “We are ‘symbolic savants,’ unable to suppress the many predispositions evolved to aid in symbol acquisition, use, and transmission . . . . We almost certainly have evolved a predisposition to see things as symbols, whether they are or not.” E.g., “the make-believe of children,” “finding meaning in coincidental events,” seeing “faces in the clouds,” “run[ning] our lives with respect to dictates presumed to originate from an invisible spiritual world.” “Our special adaptation is the lens through which we see the world. With it comes an irrepressible predisposition to seek for a cryptic meaning hiding beneath the surface of appearances.”

That sought-after “cryptic meaning,” Deacon and Tyrone Cashman assert, tends toward belief in a God, gods, Mana, Divine Origin for things, a Spiritual Essence of some sort, which is to say, a religion (“The Role of Symbolic Capacity in the Origins of Religion,” 2009). The pith and marrow of the many posts I put on kb regarding Deacon and theology is as follows:

Across two million years of primate evolution, three “synergies,” or combinations of pre-existing mammalian brain structures and capacities, produced a symbolic species near-irrepressibly drawn to religious/metaphysical speculation, belief, and even worship. The three synergies made for “emergent,” or greater-than-the-sum-of-their-parts compositions, along these lines:

First, “procedural” and “episodic” memory-functions, extant but operating separately in all previous mammals, were assembled together by language. The result was “narrative,” with the particulars of episodic recall dropping into “slots” generated by the rote (procedural) second-nature memory function that followed the learned pathways of syntax and indexing. This facility for narrative came with that “absential” end-directedness that seeks for a meaningful “telos” beyond the stark and unfinished details of many, if not most, human lives. A religious denouement of a kind most satisfactorily provides that telos.

Second, a “two-world” synergy came with symbolic power, as well. The mundane world accessed and reconnoitered iconically and indexically by dolphins, lions, and chimps, via one-to-one signs and gestures “mapped” by way of signifier and signified, was now grounded upon a hidden world of internal symbolic relationships. This second tier of a now “bi-layered” understanding of “reality” comes most conspicuously to the fore in dictionaries and thesauruses. Here is epitomized an interior set of connections that symbols have with one another, but not directly with “objects” on the “outside.” From thence a leap is so readily made, via the dialectical “Upward Way,” toward that “virtual” world of “fantastic pageantry, a parade of masques and costumes and guildlike mysteries,” nature “gleam[ing] secretly with a most fantastic shimmer of words and social relationships,” as Burke describes it. Thus is born “theology” and “religion.” Thus, also, as Burke tells the tale anyway, theologians, at least those of the modern kind, tend to “recognize explicitly that [their] words about the supernatural are but analogical, figurative, metaphorical, [whereas] the naturalist would persuade us that his [sic] observed nonverbal realm is available to us in its immediate sensory aspects, completely free of verbal and sociopolitical elements” (“What Are the Signs of What?”). A mantra I’ve read and heard many times from the Barths, Brunners, and the Bultmanns: “Language breaks down” in the face of the Divine “mystery.”

Third, unprecedented emotional experiences of the kind often associated with religious experience emerged, as the evolving symbolic equipment fused primary mammalian arousal states into the likes of awe, reverence, sacredness, elation, transcendence and spiritual renewal, perceptions of unity with the cosmos, a sense of the holy and the sacred. Other feelings tied especially to the highest of human ethics, experienced within and outside the bonds of conventional religion, surfaced as well: charity, humility, lovingkindness, selfless action for others. Humor, Irony, and the “eureka” moments of discovery, scientific and otherwise, derived from the same kind of often-contradictory syntheses.

Like Moliere’s “Doctor In Spite of Himself,” Burke, the self-described nontheist, appeared to many very much like a theologian in disguise. His religious obsessions, as well as the implications of his “grammar of motives” as energized by the “theological motive of perfection,” imply a “theotropism” (thanks to Steve Mailloux) in symbolic action.

Deacon, along with co-author Cashman, make explicit a theotropic trajectory in human symbolic evolution. Linkage of religion to such derisives as “idiosyncratic” and “idiot,” as in “idiot-savant,” do cast doubt on the validity of this ubiquitous human impulse. Its actual transcendental nature is also downplayed. Religion’s etiology is as easily explicable, naturalistically, as any sickness, Deacon told his audience in Atlanta (absent there any invidious implications). Yet, as the “synergy of synergies,” and as associated in its highest forms with what are widely considered the noblest of human aspirations, religion seems, for Deacon, to bring significant value to the human experience.

1. Just as he adumbrates Burke’s pentad/hexad in his descriptions of

dynamical processes on varied levels of biological organization, so, too, does Deacon echo Burke’s “terms implicit in the idea of order,” or guilt-redemption cycle, in his mind-from-matter trajectory of evolutionary development. Once again, Deacon uses these “order” terms more loosely than Burke. Concepts analogous to Burke’s “Iron Law of History” are projected downward into realms of the nonsymbolic.

Recall Burke’s “Iron Law” poem in *RR*. The stages of drama anatomized there go from “order,” maintained by “commandments” (the *thou-shalt-not*s) that inevitably lead to violations and “guilt,” the resulting disorder rectified and redeemed through “sacrifice” by way of “victimage” directed at self or other. Later in the book, Burke elaborates in his famous diagram on p. 184.

Deacon’s analogous terms, or in some instances repetitions, are “order”; “constraint,” “restriction,” and “resistance,” which is to say, rules or “commandments,” brought on by the “absential” or the “negative”; the “differences” that “make a difference” resolved by way of “work,” a concept within hailing distance of self-sacrifice.

Unpacking his version of the “terms for order,” Deacon says, “Order and constraint are intrinsically related concepts.” He calls his approach “a negative way of assessing order.” “The nature of constraint (and therefore the absent options) indirectly determines which differences can and cannot make a difference in any interaction.” In fact, “By recasting our understanding of habit (from Peirce) and order in negative terms, we can begin to disentangle ourselves from the ‘something more’ fallacy of traditional emergence theories. . . . Emergent properties are not something added, but rather a reflection of something restricted and hidden . . . .”

What is the nature of this “work” that generates or perpetuates emergent, or higher, levels of “organization”? Deacon says, “In general terms, then, we can describe all forms of work as activity that is necessary to overcome resistance to change. Resistance can be either passive or active, and so work can be directed toward enacting change that wouldn’t otherwise occur or preventing change that would happen in its absence.” Which is to say, “work” is activity that thwarts the “spontaneous” drift toward the “entropy” the Second Law of Thermodaynamics says “mechanism” is “naturally” careening us toward across billions of years of the “teleomatic,” un-“teleonomic,” very definitely un-“teleological” processes physicists and chemists study and account for via their observations and experiments.

A bit of “Deacon”-struction of Burke, and a few summary observations later.

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