

## Burke Contra Kierkegaard: Kenneth Burke's Dialectic via Reading Søren Kierkegaard

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Isaac—to his children  
Lived to tell the tale—  
Moral—with a Mastiff  
Manners may prevail.  
—Emily Dickinson

Kenneth Burke employs the term *dialectic* throughout his works and yet, despite its profuse recurrence, the term remains ambiguous. Much secondary scholarship has focused on Burke and dialectics, and still the term in Burke remains—if not already complicated—cloudy.<sup>1</sup> Part of the difficulty regarding this term stems from Burke's own ambiguity; another part from critics' tendency to rely on Burke's own use and definitions for clarification of this concept. The arguments have been helpful and illuminating, yet Burke's dialectic can be further clarified by going beyond what Burke means by the term by focusing on how he deploys dialectical criticism in his own work.<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on Burke's appropriation of the existential thinker Søren Kierkegaard as a particularly clear and remarkable instance of the operation of Burke's dialectic in his criticism. I maintain that although Burke's reading of Kierkegaard is arguably a misreading, his strategic appropriation of Kierkegaard in *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950) not only serves as a clear deployment of the dialectic, but also functions as a foil against which Burke defines his own critical method. Burke's reading of Kierkegaard emphasizes the function of resolution in Burke's critical project.

The current literature, although quite informative, does not put Burke's dialectic in sharp focus. Rueckert argues that Burkean dialectics "is really a branch of what Burke was to later call *logology*, the study of words, of language, of symbol systems" (1994, 14). Heath claims that dialectic "is an analytical tool to help us diagnose perspectives so that we can

examine whether they make sense and consider their implications for social relations” (1986, 162). Crusius contends that, “dialectic for Burke is the study of verbal universes, the disinterested pursuit of a vocabulary’s implications” (1986, 24). While Brummett and Crusius show similarity between Hegel’s and Burke’s dialectic, Heath and Wess distinguish Burke’s dialectic from Hegelian idealism and teleological history respectively.<sup>3</sup> Most of the arguments concerning Burke and dialectic focus on “The Dialectic of Constitutions” in *A Grammar of Motives* (1969), while *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1962), where Burke identifies humankind as *homo dialecticus*, is hardly engaged with regard to this concept.<sup>4</sup> Burke’s working through Kierkegaard in *A Rhetoric of Motives* demonstrates Burke’s dialectical criticism—thus providing an operational account of Burke’s dialectic—and allows for his revelation of the three motives in the realm of rhetoric: the Order, the Secret, and the Kill.<sup>5</sup> And yet, despite this centrality of *Fear and Trembling*, surprisingly little has been said about Burke’s Kierkegaard beyond passing mention.<sup>6</sup>

Despite editorial advice to the opposite regarding an article that would later become a part of the book, Burke evidently regarded his reading of Kierkegaard as important. Joseph Bennett, editor of *Hudson Review*, responded as follows to Burke’s 1948 submission of the article entitled “Imagery of Killing”: “I would like to request that you eliminate Kierkegaard from the article in question, confining it simply to literary exegesis and excluding the philosopher theologian.”<sup>7</sup> Although he complied for the article, Burke retained his reading of Kierkegaard in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Despite the lack of attention given to it, Burke’s engagement with Kierkegaard clearly demonstrates how Burke views ethical criticism as that which resolves opposition, negation, and paradox to a higher order.

### Burke contra Kierkegaard

The section entitled “Order” in *A Rhetoric of Motives* contains a detailed, twenty-three-page discussion of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. In this discussion, Burke primarily attacks Kierkegaard for encouraging what Burke enigmatically and elliptically identifies as the “cult of the Kill.” Burke’s portrayal of Kierkegaard is hardly flattering: at the crescendo of his analysis in *A Rhetoric of Motives* he claims that thinking such as Kierkegaard’s leads toward the Holocaust. Burke’s reasoning is based on the observation

that Kierkegaardian existentialism seems to exalt images of killing as that which cannot be recuperated by reason alone, and therefore leads to real killing.

The treatment of Kierkegaard is fairly difficult and likely to prove frustrating even for a reader with a good understanding of his work. Part of the abstruseness of this section in *A Rhetoric of Motives* derives from the relative obscurity and denseness of his thought. In order to clarify Burke's appropriation of Kierkegaard, I first lay out Burke's treatment of Kierkegaard, then bring Kierkegaard's own argument to bear upon Burke's treatment. This section focuses particularly on Burke's seeming description and subsequent critique of Kierkegaard's thought, and how that presentation of Kierkegaard relates to Kierkegaard's argument. Going through Burke's argument as articulated and measured against Kierkegaard's enables identification of what Burke is doing with Kierkegaard for his own critical project.

Burke claims that Kierkegaard, in the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, presents the reader with a different version of the story of Abraham and Isaac from Genesis 22.<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard's Abraham appears to turn into a scoundrel and tells Isaac that God does not really want Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, so that Isaac will not lose faith in a God who requires sacrifice (1962, 246). Burke claims that Kierkegaard needed to stimulate the dialectical "leap" and thus he psychologizes the Biblical story by placing "the leap into the story . . . and thereby he gets a generating principle" (251). Instead of amplifying the story to accentuate the themes of love and sacrifice in the story, Burke claims that Kierkegaard psychologizes the story by adding a new principle in order to allow the "leap" to take place (246). This psychologizing rather than amplification results in a "false emphasis" that Burke believes has negative implications (250). So, according to Burke's interpretation, Kierkegaard distorts and amends the biblical story to support his own position.

Kierkegaard's main claim in *Fear and Trembling* is that Abraham's actions cannot be rationally comprehensible. Burke argues that Abraham's actions are indeed explainable, and that the paradoxes of this story are not really as enigmatic as Kierkegaard claims. The paradoxical dual-injunction—obey God's command to sacrifice the son and obey God's commandment not to kill—Burke finds, is rationally resolved under the order of "sacrifice." Burke believes that religion "demands of the devout the willingness to sacrifice even the most precious thing" (253). For Burke, sacrifice—a term of the ultimate order<sup>9</sup>—organizes, orders, and resolves the

apparent paradox by uniting the two contradictory injunctions (obey God's commandment not to kill, and obey God's command to kill Isaac) under the domain of a single concept (253).<sup>10</sup>

Burke also argues that Kierkegaard's emphasis on the kill in the retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac sanctifies killing—and such exaltation manifests itself in the cult of the kill. Burke notes not only that Kierkegaard's retelling adds something to the story, but also that Kierkegaard's account of Abraham does not mention the moment where the Angel intervenes and tells Abraham to spare Isaac. Burke claims that God's request is for Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac and thus is not paradoxical because God did not want Abraham to kill Isaac—He just wanted a sign of Abraham's faith (252). Burke claims that Kierkegaard's truncated version of the story, ending before the Angel intervenes and stops Abraham, emphasizes the kill because the dialectical resolution—the intervention that makes sense of everything—is not featured in Kierkegaard's story. Burke argues that “the product thus got by a combination and overparticularization is then generalized, with the perversely exciting literary result that the cult of the kill takes on theological resonance. A story about Abraham's willingness to sacrifice is then cherished by the literati as though it were about the killing of Isaac” (253). Burke seems to indicate any imagistic exaltation of the kill has significant implications apart from the imagistic level. According to Burke, images that emphasize the mystique of the kill actually lead towards events such as the Holocaust (253). Burke believes that dialectical readings that transform the kill—or the negative—resolving such issues in a move towards identification are necessary to address the actual killing that occurs in what he calls the “Human Barnyard.”<sup>11</sup> Turning to Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*—as opposed to what a skeptic might call “Burkegaard's” *Fear and Trembling*—can help us see how Burke manipulates Kierkegaard for his own critical project.

Kierkegaardian existentialism emphasizes the individual and the choices one makes regarding his or her own existence. In *Fear and Trembling*, the pseudonymous author Johannes de silentio ruminates over Abraham, the ostensible “father of faith.”<sup>12</sup> In the first section, entitled “Prelude,” four different accounts of the Biblical story in Genesis 22 are set forth, each an attempt to understand or rationalize Abraham's actions. Version one is the retelling that Burke mentions, where Abraham turns to Isaac and makes Isaac think that his father is a scoundrel so Isaac does not lose faith in God (1941, 27). Version two posits that Abraham sees the goat and sacrifices it instead of Isaac, and then Abraham lives the rest of his life in despair due to his faltering faith (28). Version three has Abraham, when

he approaches Mount Moriah, throw himself to the ground and plead for God's forgiveness because he is unable to sacrifice his beloved only son (28–29). Finally, version four has Isaac spotting Abraham's hand trembling when he raises the knife to sacrifice his son; viewing a sign of his father's faltering faith, Isaac loses his faith in God (30). Kierkegaard sets out these four attempts at resolving the paradox of the injunction and Abraham's actions, and yet these stories invariably *fail* at rationalizing the paradoxes. As Edward Mooney (1991) argues, these stories are set out as a series of "false starts."

These narrative reconfigurations demonstrate that rendering Abraham, the father of faith, understandable and articulable is impossible. For according to Silentio, "Abraham was greater than all. Great by reason of his power whose strength is impotence, great by reason of his wisdom whose secret is foolishness, great by reason of his hope whose form is madness, great by reason of the love which is hatred of oneself" (31). Abraham, who is the exemplar of the religious mode, "believed and did not doubt, he believed the preposterous" by both believing that the sacrifice was required and at the same time believing that he would get Isaac back (35). Silentio states that if Abraham doubted, he would have done otherwise than he did (35). Silentio is stunned, "annihilated," and "paralyzed" at the thought of understanding the "enormous paradox" of Abraham (44). The root of the paradox is that "before the result, either Abraham was every minute a murderer, or we are confronted by a paradox which is higher than all mediation."<sup>13</sup> This paradox is beyond all dialectical sublation, since it is "a paradox which is capable of transforming a murder into a holy act well-pleasing to God, a paradox which gives Isaac back to Abraham, which no thought can master, because faith begins precisely there where thinking leaves off" (64).

Although many problems regarding faith pervade *Fear and Trembling*, three specific paradoxes of faith are separated out and become the focus of extended meditation, each with its own section. Paradox one is that normally the universal is always higher than the individual, but with faith (as in the case of Abraham) the individual is higher than the universal. The second paradox indicates that usually the outer is superior to the inner, but in the case of Abraham the inner (faith) is incomprehensible and therefore the outer countenance of an individual cannot correspond with the inner expression of faith (79). Faith cannot be mediated into a universal without the destruction of the concept-as-such and therefore faith presents an interminable paradox to a unifying rational system. The third paradox concerns Abraham's silence when he sets out with Isaac—he does not tell Isaac or Sarah of his duty. In the universal realm of the ethical,

Abraham would have a duty to break his silence about his task (121). However, Abraham cannot speak about his faith—it is absolutely incommensurable in terms of rationality or language (123). Hence, the importance of the pseudonymous author’s name, Johannes de silentio. The silence with regard to faith relates to its incommensurability and incomprehensibility, thus disabling its rendering within language.

Burke’s presentation of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* misses Kierkegaard’s point in certain ways. First, Burke appears to only acknowledge one of the four retellings of the story, and he repeatedly refers to Kierkegaard’s retelling of the story as if there were only one. Burke claims that Kierkegaard’s retelling adds a personal element in order to redeem himself from being a “scoundrel.” Kierkegaard jilted his fiancée, and many inevitable biographical connections have been drawn between Kierkegaard and Abraham with regard to making oneself seemingly a scoundrel in order to follow faith that eludes explanation. The story Burke claims as Kierkegaard’s, however, is not Kierkegaard’s version at all. Burke seems to psychologize the one version that seemingly mirrors Kierkegaard’s own biography as Kierkegaard’s one and only retelling. However, remember that *Fear and Trembling* begins with the “Prelude” consisting of four attempts at rendering the account of Abraham on Mount Moriah rationally comprehensible. None of the four representations succeeded; none of the retellings is to be taken as Kierkegaard’s account of the story—silentio still finds Abraham incomprehensible. The retellings of the story that begin *Fear and Trembling* merely indicate the incomprehensibility of the story through various unsuccessful attempts to render rational Abraham’s moment of choice.

Burke is correct that Kierkegaard’s retellings stop short of the angel’s intervention—not one of the four retellings mentions it, since silentio is trying to understand the moment of choice. Burke claims that Kierkegaard’s “retelling” of the story accentuates the kill and creates a cult of the kill because the resolution is not mentioned. For Burke, an essential part of the story is that Isaac is spared, and Kierkegaard’s “retelling” stops short of this resolution. Kierkegaard’s work, overall, forms a response to Hegelian idealism, particularly where paradoxes and oppositions are synthesized into an ordering resolution. Kierkegaard’s most extensive refutation of Hegel occurs through the pseudonymous *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*<sup>14</sup> by Johannes Climacus, and yet such a position is quite clear in *Fear and Trembling*. *Fear and Trembling* can be viewed as a counter to systemic accounts where one judges an act based upon the *telos* or consequence of the act (and, hence, a resolution or a “saving”)—

one cannot forecast the end of the story at the point of choice. In *Fear and Trembling*, silentio confronts consequentialism and Hegelian idealism when stating that if “he who should act were to judge himself according to the result, he would never get to the point of beginning . . . for he would get to know the result only when the whole thing was over” ([Kierkegaard 1941, 73–74]).

Even *Fear and Trembling*'s subtitle, “A ‘Dialectical Lyric,’” implies that the discourse that follows is not the proposition of a systemic account of faith, but a *lyric*, an account that does not need to rely solely upon the rational (Heiss 1963). The leap of faith is not a dialectical sublation, rationally resolving the paradoxes of existence by ordering the paradoxes under a larger principle-of-principles like sacrifice (or god term), as Burke claims. The leap of faith is taken in the recognition of absurdity; there is no rational principle that accounts for and orders it. The leap of faith in Kierkegaard is an interruption of Hegelian sublation—the transition to the religious mode does not happen dialectically, it happens through choice in virtue of the absurd.

Kierkegaard is attempting to interrupt the systemic dialectic that Burke is trying to use to explain why Kierkegaard is wrong. Instead of following the dialectic movement of sublation—ordering the two opposites into a higher, transcendent order—Kierkegaard's argument demonstrates the impossibility of that transcendent jump to a higher order. Burke says that Abraham is rationally resolvable, but Burke never even acknowledges, let alone addresses, the three paradoxes of faith that silentio uses to interrupt the very system that Burke is trying to impose upon the story of Abraham. While sacrifice seems an appropriate term to describe what God is asking for in the command to slay Isaac, the term *sacrifice* does not resolve the contradictory set of two injunctions (that such a sacrifice would directly violate the commandment against murder). The paradoxes remain unresolved at the moment of choice—when Abraham raises the knife to Isaac. Burke claims that the emphasis should instead be on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son—but that willingness must occur at the moment of choice, a moment of unresolvable paradox involving contradictory injunctions and paradoxes. At the moment of choice, Abraham cannot know that the angel will intervene since Abraham does not experience his own story knowing how it ends (resolution) as we do. From Kierkegaard's contra-Hegelian perspective, the resolution of the story is beside the point—it is the moment of choice at the contradictory injunction where the leap of faith takes place. In short, Burke is using the position that Kierkegaard is already disrupting as an argument against Kierkegaard.

Abraham, at the point he raised the knife, did not know of God's motives—as he did not know that Isaac was to be spared. Kierkegaard explains that Abraham, by virtue of the absurd, resigned himself to the infinite yet at the same time re-embraced the finite. Thus, Isaac was spared. At the moment he acted, he did not know the ending of the story—the rational resolution provided by the intervening angel—he only knew his faith. Kierkegaard's excursus on Abraham emphasizes the moment of choice and not the post-hoc resolution that is impossible to foresee at said moment. Kierkegaard's account of Abraham, then, does not emphasize the kill; instead, to use Burkean terms, Kierkegaard actually emphasizes the absolutely incommunicable and incommensurable secret. *Silentio*, like Sarah, remains silent with regard to Abraham's actions—nothing can be said regarding the incommensurable moment of choice and faith.

Burke's main charge against Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* seems to be that Kierkegaard chooses a representative anecdote that involves killing, and tells that story in such a way that does not resolve the paradoxes or contradictions. While Burke views the examples of killing in Milton and Arnold as cathartic, Burke views the emphasis on killing in Kierkegaard as non-transformative. Burke's argument appears to presume that Kierkegaard chose the story from a range of other possibilities, and that Kierkegaard's choice of such a representative anecdote is ethically suspect for its purported emphasis of the kill. However, the story of Abraham and Isaac is not just one chosen from many potential other stories—this is *the* given story that purportedly recounts the origin of faith (as Abraham is identified as the father of faith in the tripartite of monotheisms). Faith is an issue of choice, and Kierkegaard merely goes back to the 'first' story about faith to talk about the moment of choice—a moment in which one does not have knowledge of the outcome. Kierkegaard amplifies the moment of choice in the story that is already given by Christianity as a purported explanation of faith, but Kierkegaard investigates faith and choice as modes where one does not have the convenience of foresight.

To critique Burke's reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and existentialism as if there could be some trans-historical understanding of existentialism, however, is too simple. Many of Kierkegaard's major works only became available to an American public by the mid-forties. Even after it became available in America, Kierkegaard's work, like Nietzsche, had attracted some admirers who, as Kraushaar wrote, had "been too ready to welcome 'discipline' and 'stern authority' without inquiring carefully into its forms and objectives" (1942, 603).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, as Kierkegaard is often identified as the father of existentialism, attitudes to-

ward Kierkegaard became intertwined with attitudes toward existentialism in general. Cotkin notes that “the popular press undermined their [French existentialists’] respectability by the American intellectual community. . . . It was nearly twenty years before existentialism was accepted as a viable philosophy relevant to the modern American intellectual community” (1999, 328–29). Burke did not hold a flattering view of existentialism in general either, as he states: “the Existentialists may amuse themselves and bewilder us with paradoxes of *le Neant*. . . . It’s good showmanship. But there’s no paradox about the idea of ‘don’t,’ and a child can learn its meaning early” (1968).<sup>16</sup> Burke’s reaction to Kierkegaard and existentialism should not necessarily be viewed as idiosyncratic: his conception, to some degree, seems to have aligned with a popular characterization of the early reception of existentialism in America.<sup>17</sup>

#### Burke’s rhetorical appropriation of Kierkegaard

Burke’s reading—arguably misreading—of Kierkegaard, however, cannot be exhaustively explained as a common reaction. Burke does seriously engage with Kierkegaard early; more crucially, Burke’s engagement with Kierkegaard is critical in Burke’s articulation of his own critical project. Burke’s main attack is predicated upon Kierkegaard’s unwillingness to resolve the paradox in a representative anecdote that involves killing. Burke looks for an ultimate term—“sacrifice”—that does resolve the paradox, and instead really drives home the importance of the resolution: the angel’s intervention that makes sense out of the story and distracts attention from the image of the killing. Burke’s reading of and argument against Kierkegaard is quite revealing about his own project by way of emphasizing resolution and mediation of contradiction and paradox. This final section focuses on these emphases and how they help characterize Burke’s dialectical criticism.

Burke uses many characteristic terms when referring to the realm of human relations—the realm of rhetorical interaction. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke claims,

The *Rhetoric* must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure, the Logomachy, the onus of ownership, the War of Nerves, the War. . . . The Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the fall. (1962, 20)

Thus, the *Rhetoric* at least aims to provide some answer to the question—what can be done in the agonistic realms of human relations, the “Human Barnyard”? Burke’s dialectic and its critical deployment seem to focus on ordering such oppositions in the parliamentary jangle, not to eliminate the oppositions, but instead to organize the oppositions under an ultimate or god-term that transcends the deadlock of the opposites and transforms the deadlock into order. This realm of rhetoric, of constant movement and negotiation, is undergirded by what Burke identifies as the three motives: order, the secret, and the kill.

The “kill” is one of the three main motives to which Burke reduces human behavior in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. In an unpublished letter to Kenneth Burke, Francis Fergusson observes “Your remarks in the Hudson Review on killings are very nourishing. There seems to be some common psychic root underneath the maladif modern flowers of narcissism, heroism, suicide, and murder. . . . All of which leads me once again to believe that we *are* talking about something of fundamental importance.”<sup>18</sup> In the opening pages of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, we are given images of killing that are transformative, or dialectical. Burke illustrates how Milton was able to transform himself vicariously through the killing of Samson, a character with whom he identified. Thus, the images of killing in Milton are transformative, since the dialectical resolution is emphasized in his account—identification, rather than disjunction and irresolvable paradox. Similarly, the images of self-immolation in Matthew Arnold serve, for Burke, as instances where “killing” is transformative and dialectically productive. In these examples, “the imagery of slaying is a special case of transformation, and transformation involves the ideas and imagery of *identification*. That is: *killing* of something is the *changing* of it, and the statement of the thing’s nature before and after the change is an *identifying* of it” (Burke 1962, 20). The killings are transformative, according to Burke, since the author identifies with the one killed and, subsequently, the killing serves a psychologically cathartic function of purging the negative self-associations the authors have. William Rueckert notes that in the instances of Milton and Arnold, killing is used as the adaptation of “the resources of poetry and symbolic action to non-violent solutions to their problems” (1994, 76).

Burke’s use of the term *kill* refers to far more than merely the imagery of killing—it also comes to stand for the unmediated or unsublated negative. The negative serves an essential function, but for Burke the dialectical resolution of the negative is absolutely essential for avoiding the cult of the kill. Heath states that Burke recognizes the negative “as the

perfect purgation, it can lead to horrifying ends when the symbolic kill becomes literal” (1986, 102). Thus, thinkers like Kierkegaard, according to Burke, stand for the cult of the kill when they fail to emphasize and insist upon the dialectical resolution of the negative, in general, or with unresolved images of killing, in particular. Burke’s use and critique of Kierkegaard produces one of the clearer enactments in Burke’s writing of his dialectical solution to the self-destructive path that characterizes “the Wrangle.” Although Burke can hardly be considered an optimist, the Wrangle, or any of the other terms Burke uses to describe the realm of human relations, is not to be viewed solely in a pessimistic light. The agonistic jangle of oppositions is not necessarily deleterious—these oppositions become so only if they are left in deadlock without any resolution or ordering that mediates or negotiates a resolution, no matter how compromised or strategic such a resolution may be. When the kill, or the negative, is left unresolved or unordered—which is how Burke characterizes Kierkegaard’s existentialism—then this leads to the cult of the kill, the exaltation of non-transformative imagery of killing that results in real killing.

Burke accuses Kierkegaard of emphasizing the image of the kill since his retellings stop short of the angel’s intervention. Kierkegaard emphasizes the moment that Abraham raises the knife to Isaac—the moment of choice. Burke argues that because Kierkegaard does not emphasize the resolution of the story, Kierkegaard is exalting the kill through the story’s emphasis. Burke states that Kierkegaard

so picturesquely reduced his dialectic to an anecdote featuring the mythic imagery of the kill, this image may come to stand for the spirit of his dialectic. Hence readers in their awareness that man’s way is through conflict, are invited to think that the cult of the kill is not a lower morality, but a higher one, even religious one. Ironically, if the image is stressed more than the dialectic, such doctrine leads *toward* the Holocaust rather than *away from* it. For where personal conflict is solved by the kill, what do you have ultimately but the man who is at peace with himself only on the battlefield, in the midst of slaughter. (1962, 253)

Burke here seems, understandably, highly sensitive to the Holocaust, and in this section of *A Rhetoric of Motives* the Holocaust serves as a litmus test for ethical criticism. Criticism that emphasizes the kill—which also stands for the irresolvable, absurd, or irreconcilable—is, for Burke, irresponsible in that it results in events such as the Holocaust. Contrarily, criticism that emphasizes resolution, resolvability, and rationality is ethical because it leads away from tragedy, violence, and killing. Burke’s use

of the Holocaust as a measurement for criticism is quite unusual for his time. Peter Novick, who analyzes Holocaust discourse as shaped and reshaped by historical contingencies, observes that “between the end of the war and the 1960’s, as anyone who has lived through these years can testify, the Holocaust made scarcely any appearance in American public discourse” (1999, 103). Burke was one of the few American intellectuals who seriously grappled with the question of how to avoid events such as the Holocaust decades before that discourse became quite popular in American culture.

Burke’s main problem with Kierkegaard is that Kierkegaard tries to say that some things are just not orderable under the principle-of-principles in a System. By contrast to this element of Kierkegaard’s rejection of Hegelian thinking, Burke advances his own proposal. Burke states that the principle-of-principles, identification, is the key to his dialectical criticism. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke states that “We begin with an anecdote of killing because invective, eristic, polemic, and logomachy are so pronounced an aspect of rhetoric” (1962, 20). “The Scramble” is the realm of killing, both symbolically and literally if images of killing are not seen dialectically, as transformative. Burke is saying that in the realm of rhetoric, the parliamentary-wrangle in the Barnyard, if things go unchecked as they are, this leads toward events such as the Holocaust. In the sections under analysis here, there is a proliferation of killing vocabulary—Kill, genocide, Holocaust, infanticide, parricide, suicide. Furthermore, the section entitled “Order, the Secret, and the Kill” ends with a quote from Revelation. Through the evocation of this vocabulary and the images of destruction Burke is demonstrating that the Barnyard is heading in this direction (Apocalypse) unless critical intervention happens (dialectics). Through the repeatedly amplified apocalyptic terms in this section, Burke linguistically associates Kierkegaard with tragedy.

Thinkers like Kierkegaard and the existentialists, according to Burke, accelerate humankind along this apocalyptic trajectory because these thinkers do not provide resolution to opposition in the human realm. Kierkegaard’s philosophy of faith, via the Biblical retelling of the story of Genesis 22, “lays too much stress upon the difference between the image, infanticide (which *in itself* would be morally criminal) whereas it should lay more stress upon the idea, supreme sacrifice” (Burke 1962, 253). For Burke, criticism must function as mediation (in the Hegelian sense), whereas the image of the kill has a proper and transformative function if and only if the negation is resolved via the principle of identification. In terms of faith, what *Fear and Trembling* is ultimately about, Burke states “Admittedly,

there are absurdities here. But a cult of the Absurd in effect sanctions them, whereas an attempt to derive them from rational steps, ‘dialectically,’ implies the hope of mitigating their rawness” (255). Thus, according to Burke, solutions in the realm of the Barnyard must accentuate the dialectical sublation of conflict, strife, eristic, polemic, and war.

Burke misreads Kierkegaard, but the Kierkegaard that he presents functions as a foil against which Burke is defining his own critical project. This reveals much about where Burke is going particularly in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke states, in the section on “The Kill and the Absurd,” “for the moment we are centering our attention upon the Kill. And we are trying to show the difference between an approach to the Kill through dialectic, and an approach to dialectic through the Kill” (265). Burke is claiming that Kierkegaard is approaching the dialectic through the kill, whereas the kill (or principle of negation) is the primary emphasis from which one then approaches dialectics. In contrast, Burke wants to approach the kill through the dialectic, where the kill can have a cathartic and transformative function only when the conflict is sublated, only under the principle of identification. Kierkegaard’s account of faith, contrary to identification, indicates that faith produces ulterior alterity—noncommunicability and incommensurability. These elements, in Burke’s figuration, simply emphasize the negative in a way that dialectics cannot sublimate, and therefore these existential readings do not lead us out of the aporias of the Scramble.

Dialectical resolution, the move to a higher order that serves as an organizing principle, is critical to Burke’s solution through the means of criticism. Burke states that the use of the “dialectical device (the shift to a higher level of generalization) that enables us to transcend the narrower implications of this imagery, even while keeping them clearly in view. We need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction, as a characteristic of motive of rhetorical expression . . . yet we can at the same time always look beyond this order to the principle of identification in general” (20). In terms of the role of critics in the Scramble, “we must consider how the fullness of dialectic (‘reality’) is continually being concealed behind the mists of one or another of these rhetorical emphases [motives]. Here would be the outer reaches of a Rhetoric of Motives” (265). Leading away from the Scramble seems to be leading towards the enigmatic “Symbolic,”<sup>19</sup> where unicuity and identity are emphasized. Burke best summarized his own dialectical-critical solution to the Scramble when he wrote, “we must keep trying anything and everything, improvising, borrowing from others, developing from others, dialectically using one text as comment upon another, schematizing; using the incentive to new wanderings, returning from

these excursions to schematize again” (265). Burke seems to be commenting upon the manner in which he assimilates other thinkers into his works. In this declaration, Burke reveals that he analyzes the thinkers that appear in *A Rhetoric of Motives* dialectically—he demonstrates dialectical criticism through the treatment of the figures to which he refers. When he discusses Kierkegaard, he is not merely presenting or representing Kierkegaard’s thought as if presenting a summary. Burke is instead commenting upon Kierkegaard, retelling Kierkegaard’s story in a manner that dialectically resolves the contradictions that Kierkegaard deliberately refuses to resolve in *Fear and Trembling*. Burke is working through Kierkegaard, defining his own method through his reading, and contra Kierkegaard.

Burke’s dialectic is both similar to and distinct from Hegel’s dialectic. So, in a sense, points raised on both sides of the Burke and Hegel debate seem to be valid. While, as Wess notes, Burke’s understanding of history is not teleologically determined as Hegel’s is, Brumett’s observation that Burke’s dialectic takes the *form* of Hegel’s seems valid. Precisely this movement of mediation and resolution as ordering yet maintaining the oppositions—this movement of sublation—seems a fitting description for the movement of Burke’s dialectical reading and its emphasis on ordering resolution. Whether idealist or not, the emphasis on the negative insofar as it operates to spur the move to resolution seems a similar movement in both Burke’s and Hegel’s dialectics, noting that numerous other lines of comparison may be problematic.

The manner in which Kierkegaard is presented in *A Rhetoric of Motives* allows Burke to articulate his poetic and critical solution to avoiding the trajectory of destruction inherent to the Barnyard as an order. Recognizing that Burke is misreading Kierkegaard is important, but, more significantly, Burke’s tangled reading of Kierkegaard reveals how, for Burke, the dialectic resolution is the only way to move humankind away from such tragedies as the Holocaust. The critic has the obligation, even when retelling a Biblical story, to emphasize ultimate terms that resolve contradiction and provide resolution to strife. Although Burke’s appropriation does not reveal much to the reader about Kierkegaard, these three sections dealing with Kierkegaard reveal much about Burke’s dialectic. Through Burke’s reading of Kierkegaard, one can see the powerful role that mediation and resolution play in Burke’s vision as to how criticism can transform the realm of human interaction.

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### Notes

1. Some writers who engage the topic of Burke and dialectics include Crusius (1986 and 1988), Heath (1986), and Wess (1991 and 1998).

2. Chesebro's article on epistemology and ontology goes in the direction of observing the function of dialectic in Burke's work by arguing that epistemology and ontology operate dialectically in Burke. See Chesebro (1993).

3. See Brummett (1995, 239), Crusius (1988, 116–20), Heath (1986, 159), and Wess (1998, 154).

4. The discussions of Burke's dialectic that focus primarily on *A Grammar of Motives* include Crusius (1986), Heath (1986), Kenny (2000), and Wess (1991).

5. These three motives are only here claimed as the three main motives as developed in *A Rhetoric of Motives*. These three become integrated and reconfigured in Burke's later logical works into what has been termed the guilt-purification complex.

6. Chase (1969, 252) briefly refers to Burke's attention to the story of Abraham and Isaac, and Clayton (1984, 374) spends a paragraph on Burke's treatment of Kierkegaard, observing that Kierkegaard, likening himself to Abraham, transforms his own actions in order to purify his motive.

7. Joseph Bennett to Kenneth Burke, 11 April 1948, *Kenneth Burke Papers 1906–1960*, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Pennsylvania State University.

8. In the "Acknowledgements" section of *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke indicates that he quotes from Walter Lowrie's 1941 translation of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. There is much debate in Kierkegaardian scholarship about the translations, so I will use the same translation that Burke does—a translation that was widely available at the time of the publication of *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

9. At the beginning of the section entitled "Order" in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke (1962) argues that there are three levels of terms: positive, dialectical, and ultimate. Positive terms name things and have particular referents, like "tree" (183). Dialectical terms do not have such particular referents, and are more words of principles and essences, like "capitalism" (184). Ultimate terms order and hierarchize conflict and tension, and resolve contradiction by including two contradictory elements under an overarching term (187).

10. Burke's reading pertaining to the concept of sacrifice is not an idiosyncratic one; quite commonly the story is read regarding the notion of personal sacrifice. Yet, this notion must not be confused with the logic of human sacrifice. For, as Alisdair MacIntyre notes, "It is important to note that there is not one hint in Kierkegaard of the view taken by some Old Testament critics that the function of the story was to preach the abolition of human sacrifice and to educate the Hebrews into a belief that such a killing was, in fact, *not* what God wanted" (1998, 218).

11. Some recent work on Kierkegaard and the theology of sacrifice seems to align with the spirit of Burke's approach to the images of killing and sacrifice. Delaney (1998) identifies the problems of reassigning the story of Abraham and Isaac as the origin of faith, for the perpetuation of the story links up with modes of violence and domination in society. Bartlett (2001) indicates that the logic of Christian atonement is predicated upon the violence of sacrifice and scapegoating, and alternatively advocates atonement predicated upon the logic of compassion.

12. Kierkegaard wrote most of his works employing pseudonyms of individuals expounding a position from a particular vantage point. Pseudonymous authorship makes Kierkegaardian scholarship rather intriguing, for definitive ascription of a position as genuinely Kierkegaard's becomes difficult. Since *silentio* is articulating the passage to the religious mode of existence, the mode Kierkegaard chose for himself, *silentio*'s position is taken as Kierkegaard's own.

13. The term *mediation* here is meant in the Hegelian sense of *aufhebung* (sublation, or synthesis) (Mooney 1991, 77).

14. To summarize such a humorous and sophisticated attack on Hegelianism seems radically unjust, but a brief synopsis may be helpful. Hegel's System, the dialectical progression of History, purports to include and subsume everything. Kierkegaard argues that a "logical system is possible" in that logic purports to be systemic and can purport to account for all. However, "an existential system is not possible" since existence—of the moment—can never

be arranged into a System that presumes to account for things that have not yet arrived. This is the work in which Kierkegaard distinguished subjective (existential) from objective (Hegelian Idealist) truth.

15. The irony here is that thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are absolutely in philosophical opposition to political theories such as fascism. Even if they are misappropriations, the connections nonetheless function in relation to the thinkers and cannot merely be ignored.

16. This essay was originally published in *Hudson Review* in the winter issue 1963/4, and thus this statement must be recognized (while still an important expression of Burke's view on existentialism) as being thirteen years after the publication of *A Rhetoric of Motives*.

17. For further information about this popular reaction against existentialism, Cotkin's article (1999) provides a detailed account of the early reception of existentialism in America.

18. Francis Fergusson to Kenneth Burke, 15 July 1948, *Kenneth Burke Papers 1906-1960*, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Pennsylvania State University.

19. *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* were initially conceived as the first two parts of a trilogy that was to be completed with the third installment, *A Symbolic of Motives*. Many critics, including Robert Wess, believe that Burke worked out what was to be the critical problem of *Symbolic in Rhetoric*, thereby rendering the third volume redundant. In any case, Burke never completed *Symbolic*, and instead pursued his logological works (Wess 1998, 186).

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