Between Pragmatism and Realism: The Historical Setting of Richard McKeon's Philosophical Semantics

David J Depew, University of Iowa
THE VANDERBILT LIBRARY OF AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY offers interpretive perspectives on the historical roots of American philosophy and on present innovative developments in American thought, including studies of values, naturalism, social philosophy, cultural criticism, and applied ethics.

Series Editor
Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr.
Indiana University & Purdue University at Indianapolis

Editorial Advisory Board
Kwame Anthony Appiah (Harvard University)
Larry A. Hickman (Southern Illinois University)
John Lachs (Vanderbilt University)
John J. McDermott (Texas A&M University)
Joel Porte (Cornell University)
Hilary Putnam (Harvard University)
Ruth Anna Putnam (Wellesley College)
Andrew J. Reck (Tulane University)
Beth J. Singer (Brooklyn College)
John J. Stuhr (Pennsylvania State University)

Other titles in the series
Dewey's Empirical Theory of Knowledge and Reality
John R. Shook

Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency
Michael P. Hodges and John Lachs

Pragmatic Bioethics
Edited by Glenn McGee

Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism
Michael Eldridge

PLURALISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Richard McKeon and American Philosophy

Edited by Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan

Vanderbilt University Press
Nashville
that sets McKeon and his philosophy apart from accepted views and opinions. The paradoxical unity of his philosophy is to be realized in the future as a pluralism of activities and communications directed to the solution of cultural problems. In our own time, the provocative novelty of his pluralistic treatment of a wide range of cultural materials has led, as might be expected, not to a school of followers united by a common doctrine, but to diverse appropriations of his thought that are united by their common indebtedness to McKeon. This book presents some of the many ways in which McKeon's philosophy has been influential in our time.

Richard McKeon was a graduate student at Columbia University when its philosophy department, presided over by John Dewey and Frederick A. Woodbridge, was in its floruit. After a sojourn in France studying Medieval philosophy with Etienne Gilson and Leon Brunswig, McKeon began teaching the history of philosophy at Columbia. In 1935, he was summoned to the University of Chicago at the behest of its enfant terrible president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, who had been put onto McKeon by their mutual friend, the contentious neo-Thomist Mortimer Adler. At Chicago, McKeon served as dean of the recently organized Division of Humanities, as well as professor of philosophy and classics. As dean, McKeon had important, and delicate, responsibilities in the reform of undergraduate education that became known as the Hutchins College. Thus McKeon, having been educated at Columbia in its glory days, played a role in bringing the University of Chicago into what has seemed to many to be its glory days.

In these bare facts lies the germ of the tale I want to tell. It is a tale of two universities, of two philosophy departments, and of one man's answers to questions that were sharply debated within and between these institutions at a particular juncture of American intellectual history. My claim will be that McKeon's project of philosophical semantics, and his proposal for a philosophical rhetoric, can profitably be
Classical pragmatism—the pragmatism that culminated (and ended) in Dewey—was rooted in Charles Sanders Peirce’s recognition that all real thinking is problem-solving. No real problem, says Peirce, no real thinking. From this it followed that well-founded belief is cessation of genuine puzzlement through successful inquiry—“a demi-cadence,” as Peirce put it, “in the symphony of our intellectual life.” It also followed that ideas are dynamic instruments or tools of thinking, not inert pictures of a static reality. As Peirce’s defection from William James’s rhapsody on this theme indicates, however, what McKeon was to call the “problematic” conception of methodological thinking was only a necessary condition for full-blown pragmatism. What was needed in addition was eagerly provided by James. It was the claim that inquiry, ideation, and belief formation are organic functions. Thus, when A. O. Lovejoy, a realist opponent of classical pragmatism, characterized the pragmatic movement in terms of the view that “knowledge consists of those general propositions . . . which have in past experience proved biologically servicable to those who have lived by them,” he was doing no more than commenting on Jamesian remarks like the following: “Taking a purely naturalistic view of the matter, it seems reasonable to suppose that, unless consciousness served some useful purpose, it would not have been superadded to life.”

Unlike Peirce, James had more than vague ideas about the evolutionary etiology of mental traits. He was in fact explicitly Darwinian about them, claiming “that new modes of thought and conceptual innovations spring up in the mind as spontaneous mental variations. We come to accept them as representations of the environment only if they continue to meet the test of survival.” Yet, in his environmentalism James was very far from social Darwinism. Unlike Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., his Harvard contemporary, James did not think that people are necessarily up against the wall in a brutal struggle for mere life. For he believed that there had long been, as there still is, selection pressure for learning skills themselves. Reasoning that any adaptation that yields a capacity for reacting creatively to a wide range of environmental contingencies will, ceteris paribus, be more valuable than one that dictates only fixed reactions to relatively stereotyped occasions, James argued that the human mind is a highly valuable adaptation, the spontaneity and creativity of which allows us to respond flexibly to the contingencies and indeterminacies of experience by way of versions of the world that guide and shape further experience. James was, on this score, among the founding fathers of what I call Progressive Darwinism: Darwinism in the service of democratic ideals.

The degree to which Dewey was affected by this idea cannot be exaggerated. Yet, Dewey did not believe, as he perhaps unfairly thought James did, that such an account allows each of us individually to count as true whatever helps us get up in the morning. Rather, what Dewey called “the influence of Darwinism on philosophy” should lead us to favor a range of redescriptions of experience in which individual life is characterized as social and in which social life is described in interactive and cooperative terms that foster ongoing projects of social reconstruction through communal experimental inquiry and democratic decision making. This shift from individual reinterpretation to collective reconstruction is what Dewey meant when he remarked, in an autobiographical sketch far more insightful than most instances of this generally self-serving genre, that James did not “fully and consistently realize . . . the return to a biological conception of the psyche” that he was primarily responsible for reintroducing to a post-Darwinian world. By focusing on humans as social animals, Darwinian adaptationism, as Dewey understood it, provided a way of articulating a new Aristotelian naturalism, in which, in an open, unfinished world, humans appear as problem-solving animals, and their linguistically mediated social environment seems as natural to them as water to fish.

In Dewey’s opinion, the consequences of this view for philosophy are great. If beliefs are adaptations, and adaptations are, by their very nature, referentially tied to the particular environmental conditions and needs to which they respond, “interest shifts from the wholesale essence back of special changes to the question of how special changes serve or defeat concrete purposes,” as Dewey puts it in “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy.” This means that outside of their relevance to a real problem-solving situation, or what Dewey calls “inquiry,” ideas lose their meaning. Transcendental illusions, that is to say, will accompany thinking outside of a real problematic context, and not just, as Kant thought, thinking beyond the bounds of empirical sensibility. In the
naturalistic space thus secured by evolutionary psychology and epistemology, the problems of philosophy are not to be “dropped,” but “reconstructed” by translating them into a fruitful vocabulary for social reform. When Dewey claimed that reconstruction in philosophy would turn its practitioners toward “the problems of men” and away from “the problems of philosophers,” he was suggesting the primacy of technical-practical reason over contemplative theoria that was built into his adaptationism theory of mind. In homage to Marx, whose affinities to Dewey were first noted by Dewey’s student Sidney Hook, I will call this aspect of classical pragmatism the primacy of praxis.

By the thirties, another implication of classical pragmatism began to come to the fore, an aspect that by the early fifties would virtually define (or redefine) what it meant to be a pragmatist. As the penetrating work of C. I. Lewis made vividly clear, thinking does indeed take place in and through conceptual frameworks of various sorts, as Kant and Hegel had argued. (Atomism, for example, roughly approximates such a framework, as does Aristotelian essentialism or Platonic transcendentalism.) But, according to Lewis, and even more his student W. V. O. Quine, there simply is no matter of fact about which conceptual framework is the privileged medium for encoding basic truths about the world and human experience. The term pragmatism was soon assigned to this doctrine of conceptual relativism. Rudolf Carnap was alluding to this way of taking the term when he proclaimed that he had taken a pragmatic turn in recognizing that it is neither true nor false that numbers (for example) exist, although if you do adopt a framework of numbers it is as true as anything can be that two plus two equal four, and as false as anything can be that it equals five.

Dewey’s later philosophy, I believe, is increasingly vexed by the conceptual pluralism latent in his own philosophy. Especially after his extended visit to the Far East in the twenties, Dewey’s stock formula about the problems of men displacing the problems of philosophers came to imply that philosophers had not only been wasting their (and everybody else’s) time by obsesively trying to decide which conceptual framework is the privileged medium for representing the world as it objectively is, but were actually adding to the world’s woes by doing so. For so long as one harbors, however secretly, the conviction that one way of putting things is in principle capable of trumping all others, one will be placing constraints on communication, thereby increasing the chances of the sorts of misunderstanding that lead to violence, sometimes on a worldwide scale. If unreconstructed philosophers were a negative force in the world, reconstructed philosophers could be a positive force—but only if their belated recognition of conceptual pluralism leads them to offer their services as interdisciplinary and cross-cultural translators, interpreters, and conceptual therapists.

It was in this context that Dewey began to use the term “communication” as an architectonic concept. The problem was that in practice Dewey himself was not much of a conceptual pluralist. He still seemed to hope that everyone everywhere would adopt the semi-Darwinian argot in which he had formulated the problems and priorities of the Progressive era. In my view, it was primarily the tension between the primacy of praxis and the relativity of conceptual frameworks that turned Dewey’s intended masterwork, Experience and Nature, into the flop that he himself recognized it to be. As Richard Rorty has insightfully shown, Dewey retreated in this work from genuine pluralism by elevating his preferred adaptationist vocabulary to the status of a metaphysical first principle, when he might have (and in Rorty’s view should have) become a full-fledged relativist by abandoning his pious attachment to philosophy altogether instead of fruitlessly attempting to reconstruct it.

To more fully appreciate what pressures led Dewey in this direction, we must turn to his relationship with his professional philosophical colleagues in the period roughly between the mid-twenties and the mid-thirties. Sensing that philosophy could no longer preside serenely over an increasingly irrational culture, or indeed find a secure place as a professional discipline in the modern university, if it were reconstructed in Dewey’s prescribed manner, the majority of American academic philosophers, led by Lovejoy, Roy Wood Sellars, Morris Raphael Cohen, and Woodbridge, had by about 1930 categorically rejected both of the pillars of pragmatism that I have been describing: the primacy of praxis and conceptual pluralism. When they described themselves as “realists,” these men meant different, often contradictory things. But whatever differences might have cropped up between commonsense realists, new realists, critical realists, Brentanean realists, Aristotelian realists, or any other sort of realist (including the strange poetic realism of George Santayana), all American realists meant to affirm that the human mind is capable of contemplatively grasping the world the way it uniquely and actually is. By calling themselves realists, they were proclaiming precisely that they were not pragmatists.

The fact that Dewey, America’s preeminent philosopher, held views that were perceived to have a potential for destroying professionalized philosophy was felt especially keenly at Columbia, where Dewey had taught since leaving Chicago in 1904. This circumstance provoked an effort within the Columbia department to push Dewey back toward a more conventionally contemplative position. Woodbridge, chair of the department, sometime dean of the college, and editor of the Journal of...
Philosophy, the profession's journal of record, was an Aristotelian realist who tried hard, and in part successfully, to get Dewey to recognize the Aristotelian element in his (Dewey's) own thought. Woodbridge (who had long before been taught by the great German Aristotelian F. A. Trendelenberg) confessed in an autobiographical sketch that "Aristotle has said everything which I have ever said or shall ever say." McKeon says of him that he "taught that ideas are not inventions constructed by the mind, but discoveries forced upon us by compelling realities whose natures are basically intelligible." 11

What Woodbridge wanted Dewey to recognize was that Aristotle, Aquinas, Dewey, and Woodbridge himself all shared "the same" philosophy of mind, but simply differed about the biological machinery that supported it—a purely empirical, and at least for philosophers, relatively trivial issue. Dewey acknowledged that, in proclaiming that "By nature all humans have a desire to know," Aristotle too thought that inquiry was grounded in a largely naturalistic problem-solving impulse. He denied, however, that he shared Aristotle's and Woodbridge's philosophy of mind. For in his view, to agree with Woodbridge that the range of adaptive capacities we collectively call mind remains "the same" whatever material or organic conditions undergird them (a view curiously reminiscent of the functionalisms that flourish in contemporary American philosophy departments) would be to concede three crucial points. First, it would reify and substantialize quite disparate capacities, biasing the issue in question toward Cartesianism. Second, it would be to miss the whole point of the Darwinian revolution. For his part, McKeon studied with Dewey just after the latter's return from his extended stay in China and Japan, and thus at a time when Dewey was most alive to intercultural communicative problems and the possibility of cultural pluralism. Throughout his life, McKeon tried hard to honor his Deweyan inheritance by recognizing ineliminable interpretive diversity. Together with Dewey's mature stress on preserving and expanding the conditions of communication, conceptual pluralism forms the cornerstone of his own philosophy.

If McKeon had more success than Dewey in actually being a conceptual pluralist, it was in part because it was a perspective that was natural to him. Recalling his early years studying the history of philosophy, McKeon says that he was delighted to find himself exposed by Gilson to a whole range of positions that he had not previously known in any detail. "It did not seem necessary to me," he wrote, "to assume that one of these modes of philosophizing was the unique, true philosophy, [just as] the later revolts of neopositivistic, analytical, linguistic and existentialist philosophies provided further diversification of materials and orientation with even less temptation to be converted to the new testaments." 12 It was also from Gilson, and not from Woodbridge or Dewey, that McKeon acquired a taste for what is called "the perennial philosophy"—the idea that all great thinkers, by the very fact that they are great, participate in a timeless conversation in which a finite number of possible philosophical positions are accessed themselves "empirical naturalists," thereby nesting in one of the professional pigeon holes that pragmatism was ostensibly designed to destroy.

III

McKeon was a graduate student in an atmosphere dominated by the realist-pragmatist debate, and in particular by its local version at Columbia. This was an atmosphere in which younger faculty members and doctoral candidates vied with one another to mediate the differences between Woodbridge and Dewey. It was an atmosphere in which John Hermann Randall was soon to write a book about an Aristotle who sounded a lot like Dewey and in which Ernest Nagel, who, like Hook, had been the realist Cohen's student before he was Dewey's, would help nudge pragmatism toward playing the philosophical underlaborer on behalf of the hegemonic role of scientists in reforming society—an elitist attitude hitherto monopolized by realists, which stood in stark contrast to the plebian participatory democratic impulses of classical pragmatism and foreshadowed the subsequent assimilation of pragmatism to expertise-oriented logical empiricism in the forties and fifties.

For his part, McKeon tried to rebut this threat by showing that the problems of metaphysics could only be resolved by assuming his own version of Darwinian adaptationism. To put the matter this way, however, was for Dewey to become something of a metaphysician himself. It was from this time that Columbia pragmatists began calling themselves "empirical naturalists," thereby nesting in one of the professional pigeon holes that pragmatism was ostensibly designed to destroy.
McKeon's academic genealogy as well as his uncompromising conceptual pluralism should allow us to count him as a pragmatist rather than a realist, as these terms were then understood, were it not for the fact that McKeon declined to acknowledge, as Dewey forthrightly did in proclaiming the primacy of praxis, that the contemplative stance of philosophers is itself no more than an ideological reflection of static, hierarchical, authoritarian societies. Historical materialist talk of this sort would have sounded a bit Stalinist (and in consequence hostile to professional philosophy) in the ideologically charged cultural environment in which McKeon was working. Indeed, McKeon sounds like a card-carrying realist (and orthodox anticommunist) when he confesses that he had "never felt attracted to the use of pragmatic principles or dialectical methods, preferring to treat theoretical and practical questions separately rather than to assimilate theory to practice or practice to theory;..."

or when he asserts that the problems of philosophy, which Dewey had invidiously contrasted with "the problems of men," now "have greater importance beyond philosophy than they have ever had before;..." or when he says that "we have found no means of making explicit and effective the underlying common values which would save values from the relativism into which they fall when they are naturalized and localized in cultures;..." or finally when he proclaims, in an explicitly anti-Deweyan remark, that "The cultivation of scientific method and 'real problems' may be the excuse for the neglect of truths that have been discovered and of errors that have been exposed.""

I am now in a position to restate my main contention a bit more precisely. I believe that McKeon's philosophy splits the difference between realism and pragmatism. He agrees with realists that contemplation, and so philosophical inquiry, has priority over practice. At the same time, he forthrightly proclaims that pragmatists are right about conceptual pluralism. Just what this position amounts to remains to be seen. But whatever it might mean, it probably seemed to McKeon to have practical advantages as well as theoretical ones. It was a way of keeping philosophy professional while at the same time making it profoundly useful. For if a discipline, even a science, could be devoted to studying the many ways in which equivalent or at least comparable truths could be encoded and translated, philosophers could lend a hand to policy makers in disentangling substantive differences from mere matters of formulation, thus preventing the latter from freezing up into dangerous ideological fixations of belief. Without being liquidated into praxis, philosophy could thereby acquire something that would have seemed important to a man whose first studies were, after all, as an engineer—an applied side.

These reflections yield some clues about why Hutchins may have brought McKeon to Chicago in the first place. The fact that a student of the Thomist Gilson came to Chicago at the behest of the truculent Thomist Adler might encourage one to believe that McKeon was also a Thomist, or at least a secular Aristotelian. It is a myth that has bedeviled McKeon's image ever since. The fact of the matter is, however, that whatever Hutchins or Adler might have hoped, it was sufficient that the new dean of the Division of Humanities be an intellectualist, a moral realist, and a studiously anticommunist liberal. McKeon fit that bill to a tee. Conceptual pluralism combined with ardent philosophical intellectualism supported liberal values, liberal education, and liberal institutions without in the least flirting with moral scepticism. It also meant that McKeon could be counted on by Hutchins and Adler to at least tacitly acquiesce in their efforts to rid the University of Chicago of the remnants of the praxis-centered pragmatic Progressivism that, in the person of such figures as George Herbert Mead, had taken root in Chicago in Dewey's day.

The intellectualist spin that McKeon and his allies managed to put on the humanities curriculum of the undergraduate experiment known as the Hutchins College testifies to McKeon's effectiveness as an academic politician. At a time when undergraduate education was a hotly debated topic, Hutchins, as is well known, was interested in integrating the undergraduate curriculum and stripping it of its overly disciplinary and preprofessional cast. In his view, the allegedly liberating aims of the liberal arts were to be achieved by inviting students and faculty to jointly interpret, on a nonexpert basis, the great texts of the Western civilization. These were conceived, as in Medieval universities, as including both the quadrivial mathematical and the not-so-trivial verbal arts, and therefore as embracing the foundational texts of the natural and social sciences as well as those of the literary and humanistic tradition. It was a distinctly intellectualistic program, which has given a certain cast to a Chicago undergraduate education to this day, long after Hutchins's way of institutionalizing this vision has disappeared. What was most novel, I think, about this program for undergraduate education was that the freedom allegedly granted by theoretical wisdom was no longer to be associated with authoritarian teaching. Indeed, in a quirky reversal, the democratic and participatory pedagogy of the pragmatic movement, which had been developed during the Progressive period at Chicago and at Columbia, was to be reoriented toward an intellectualist rather than toward a pragmatic and "progressive" goal, in large part as a way of immunizing reflective students against nonliberal political ideologies of all sorts. In
institutionalizing such a curriculum, the Hutchins College was to a considerable extent the McKeon College.

IV

I can say little more to support my interpretation of McKeon without leading the reader some way into the icy waters of the interpretive scheme that he spent much time devising as a method for parsing and comparing philosophical claims. Beginning from so simple a distinction as that between holoscopic (whole-oriented) and meroscopic (part-oriented) thinkers (Plato was holoscopic, Aristotle meroscopic), what McKeon called “philosophical semantics” eventually ballooned into a sixteen-fold categorial matrix characterized in the following way by McKeon’s friend and colleague Elder Olson:

[McKeon] produced no philosophy, as such, of his own, no system of doctrines. What he did produce was something that I have likened elsewhere to a Copernican Revolution; not a philosophy, but a metaphilosophy, which, in its systematic display of the oppositions and correlations of diverse philosophies, adumbrated a matrix from which all valid philosophies were generated, as well as a general dialectic explaining how the diverse dialectics operated. He produced a key—hinting at the key—to all philosophy.20

McKeon’s philosophical grammar begins from the fact (already known by Aristotle) that every argument has (1) terms or elements, (2) premises, (3) inferences, and (4) conclusions. Rather in the manner of Kant, McKeon puts a slightly more categorial spin on this fact when he claims that every argument has a selection of materials with which to work, principles from which to proceed, a method by means of which it can get from premises to conclusions, and an interpretation of what the method establishes. Following Walter Watson, McKeon’s most fertile and insightful successor in the art of philosophical semantics, we may say that each of these four rubrics constitutes an “archic variable.”21 In turn, these archic variables may take any of four values. The matrix thus generates sixteen categories, between which (if no constraints interfere) there will be 256 possible combinations. By identifying one value for each variable, what Watson calls an “archic profile” may be produced for any argument that has a significant conceptual dimension (even when it is not produced by someone who happens to be a professional philosopher). Since most philosophers tend to favor the same archic variables throughout their careers, we can also draw up archic profiles of philosophers themselves, that is, of the general tenor of their entire oeuvre. (The greatest geniuses are, of course, their own best refusers. Thus one might gain insight by representing the difference between middle and late Plato, or early and late Wittgenstein, as a change in the value of one or more archic variables.) Summed up, the full matrix looks something like this: (I have taken the liberty of replacing some of McKeon’s preferred names for his rubrics with terms I believe are more connotative.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts</td>
<td>Holistic</td>
<td>Dialectical</td>
<td>Noumenal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things</td>
<td>Reflexive</td>
<td>Problematic</td>
<td>Essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Elemental</td>
<td>Computational</td>
<td>Substrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Agonistic</td>
<td>Phenomenal2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why, we may well ask, are there exactly four values for each archic variable? McKeon says that Aristotle had four causes, or explanatory factors, and that he could not hope to improve on him.21 The idea behind this cryptic statement, it seems to me, is that the four horizontal lines of the matrix correspond to the four main positions in classical Greek philosophy as Aristotle distinguishes them in the introductory etiological books of his various treatises. Aristotle assigns to Democritus an emphasis on material causes, to Plato a stress on Aristotle’s formal cause, to the Sophists a stress on efficient cause or agency, and to himself the explanatory primacy of the final causes. In itself, this is obviously an inadequate account of why archic variables take four values. Its implicit reference to Aristotle’s efforts to parse the history of ancient Greek philosophy into a number of distinct voices (an effort renewed by Hegel at the very birth of modern history of philosophy) does, however, provide something of a clue about how one might construct at least an inductive argument for this fourfold scheme. The insight is that the development of classical Greek philosophy arises from an unconstrained, leisured dialogue about the most important problems that confront reflective human beings, a dialogue that tends, accordingly, to embody in itself a fairly full range of archic profiles. Following this clue, one might find deeper insight into the genesis of McKeon’s thinking by performing a thought experiment: Let us represent philosophical semantics in at least its elementary phases as an attempt to analyze the four main voices in the Greek dialectic between

38

39
invention and tradition, as the ancient epic-heroic religion came into conflict with more rational, civic forms of discourse, and then see what might have happened after that.

Consider Protagoras, the paradigmatic Sophist. Sophists—the first professional teachers of Greece, the founders of rhetorical study, the inventors of humanism—do not challenge the old epic and tragic worldview. Inventive as they are, they want to defend the continuity of modern with traditional life. Thus Protagoras, the head of Pericles' brain trust, proclaims that poetry—its invention, its interpretation, and its criticism—is the most important part of paideia (education or upbringing). Protagoras wants the old epics to do what they have always done: encourage young males to live a life no less combative than those of Achilles or Odysseus. Let the young contend for preeminence with one another, then, as fiercely as the heroes of old in the logomachies, or verbal battles, of modern civic culture. According to Protagoras, every man can be such a hero in a modern democracy, because all are free to compete in the discursive battles of civic life. However, the most successful word warriors will secure the willing assent of their hearers by making it appear that the bill of goods they are selling is simply an expression of the hearer's own most cherished views. It is persuasion by solicitation. One person's framework attracts others into it.

Given these facts, we may now draw up Protagoras' archic profile. It runs smoothly along the bottom horizontal of the matrix. Leaving selection aside, we may say that the Sophist's principles are creative or actional insofar as the arche, or beginning point, of any argument is an act, often a speech act: I assert, I posit, I challenge. His method is agonistic, as befits one who thinks of himself as a warrior in words. I thrust, you parry. One of us carries the day. This is the method of debate. In general, the interpretation that one places on a conclusion depends on the ontological region, site, or level at which the argument comes to rest. The clue to Protagoras' ontology is that for him the best warrant for the persuasiveness of my argument is the very fact that I have persuaded you. This stress on what actually appears shows that the Sophists' interpretation is phenomenalistic about things or existentialistic about persons. If this were not so, something fixed in the nature of things, but not immediately available in experience itself, would constrain my argument and your acceptance or rejection of it. There would be (as Plato's Socrates in fact insists there is) another court of appeal. But this is precisely what the Sophist denies. Protagoras takes appearance to be the really real. He is a phenomenalist. What you see is what you get.

Archic profiles make themselves useful by their explanatory, or at least diagnostic, power. In Protagoras's case, we may see why McKeon thinks that the sophistic profile is the home of the rhetorical tradition, and why periods (our own may be one) in which rhetoric expands toward cultural hegemony and methodological universality are times in which components of this profile, whether terminist selections, actional principles, agonistic methods, or phenomenalistic ontologies, cease to be confined to the limited sphere to which more sober types typically want to consign them. Contemporary debate about whether scientific theories are social constructions illustrates the rhetorical profile in its hegemonic or universalizing style. This debate cannot even be formulated, let alone resolved, outside of the so-called "rhetorical turn in science studies." We may also see why Protagoras can be considered a theorist of democracy, and why latter-day Protagoreans present themselves as defenders of often more radical kinds of democracy than those we presently enjoy. It is precisely because there is no higher or lower court above the lived world or beneath it that argument can preserve, indeed enhance, the giddy autonomy and ungrounded responsibility of both speaker and hearer: their ability to bind up human time into shared projects, and hence their ability to live a distinctly political life.

Not everyone, of course, agrees with the Sophists. Since the primitive mythology on which the appropriations of the Sophists are based is itself false, scientific sorts can be counted on to rise up saying that the heroic, if egalitarian, anthropocentrism of the Sophists' project is mistaken. It must, therefore, be replaced with a materialistic, causal account of how things work, with attendant doubts about the intelligibility and viability of a civic life based on mere myths. For scientific folk, valid conclusions are not reached by trying to solicit the consent of an audience, but by computing units that are added and subtracted until the truth is arrived at by some sort of algorithm. Whatever does not add up is to be dismissed as ungrounded, untrue, illusory, meaningless or nonexistent. There is a strong implication that social discourse, and especially narrative discourse, is full to the brim with this sort of flotsam and jetsam. To find the truth, you must strip off the veil and look unblinkingly at the clanking machinery behind the theatrical sets and the wordy display. You must liberate yourself from illusion through value-free knowing. This is the voice of the materialist enlightenment. Having arisen in Ionia and Sicily in the sixth century, this archic profile becomes in fourth-century Athens the fully mature voice of Democritus and Empedocles. Democritus' principles are simple, atomistic units. They are combined computationally to form the complex furniture of the world. As for interpretation, what you see is precisely what you do not get. For the level at which causality operates is below the visible world, hidden, as Democritus says, at the bottom of a deep, dark well. McKeon calls this an entitative interpretation. I dub it substantive.

The restoration of elements of this archic profile to prominence in the early modern period constitutes the birth of modern science. In point of fact, classical modern science is, to a large extent, an effort to encode
the world in the archic profile of ancient materialism. Hobbes's Levithan is a locus neoclassicus of this kind of thinking. Hobbes not only puts people into a physical world conceived explicitly along Galileo's lines, but, in his denial of dualism, contends that persons are themselves "nothing but" (the signature phase of the reductionist) atomistically conceived points of self-interest. Actions originate from drives and compulsions rather than from spontaneous assertions of freedom. They are exposed to the competitive force field exerted by the self-interest of other such atoms. And they necessarily, indeed deterministically, follow a trajectory that yields the best deal possible under the circumstances. The influence of this model on modern economics, politics, and most recently biology is hard to exaggerate.

We may now imagine a third voice, a voice troubled by both Sophists and scientists. This is the voice of Plato, who asserts that Protagoras is right to think of human values as more important than physical facts, and who therefore opposes scientism, but who also thinks, quite unlike Protagoras, that the right values cannot be had if the old poetic heritage is retained, under any conceivable reinterpretation or reappropriation. The old poets, and their modern avatars, the tragedians, are as false as a Democritus might think. Democritus is also right to say that the truth about the world lies beyond the illusory appearances of social life. But he, and the whole line of scientific thinkers from Thales to Empedocles, is wrong to assume that the truth is to be found in the material workings of nature, a new archic realm below. Rather, it lies in a new sort of Olympus above, in the divine sphere of ideas, which we contact with our reflective mind (nous). Plato's voice is the voice of idealism. His dialogues begin with a confused comprehension of the whole. Through dialectical regress, the interlocutors, where they are not mired down by worldly attachments, ascend to blinding clarity that is achieved only with our reflective mind (nous). Plato's voice is the voice of idealism. His dialogues begin with a confused comprehension of the whole. Through dialectical regress, the interlocutors, where they are not mired down by worldly attachments, ascend to blinding clarity that is achieved only when they realize that behind, and above, phenomenological experience lies a realm of transcendent beauty apprehended lovingly by the mind. Plato's principles are holistic, his method dialectical, and his interpretation noumenal. Christian appropriations of this otherworldly vision eventuated in the neo-Democritean revolt against it in early modernity to which I have already referred.

Finally, let us envision a fourth, somewhat belated voice—that of the peripatetic scholars, who by the later fourth century were trying to settle the Athenian cultural wars by professionalizing inquiry, turning it into a problem-solving industry. For McKeon, what most saliently distinguishes Aristotle's work from that of Plato's academy is his effort to mark off the problems that arise in each separate field of inquiry so that appropriate disciplinary criteria and methods for solving these problems can be found. Once a disciplinary field is marked off, and criteria appropriate to it laid down, data can gathered and problems can be enumerated. Sorting inductively through this data yields first principles or definitions, whose explanatory fecundity is rooted in their identifications of the essential, constitutive properties of the phenomena under investigation, by reference to which the puzzles (aporiai) that have been accumulated during the course of inquiry may be resolved. Problem-solving success itself reflexively warrants our confidence in the essential definitions that produce solutions to the range of problems falling within the range of the subject matter. To think well, Aristotle says, is to follow the track of the problem at hand, until what John Rawls calls "wide rational equilibrium" is established. In this way, Aristotle could be scientific without being scientific; dialectical without being totalistic; and rhetorical without being sophistical.

In the classical Greek dialogue that I have sketched, there seems to be a natural alignment between principles, methods, and interpretations. It seems as fitting that Sophists should have actional principles, agonistic methods, and phenomenal interpretations as that Platonists should have holistic principles, dialectical methods, and noumenal interpretations. One of McKeon's richest insights, however, is that the values of archic variables can float freely and that in postclassical phases of culture archic elements are shuffled and reshuffled as each intellectual tradition tries to respond to challenges by conceding some things in order to retain others. Post-Aristotelian Greek and Roman philosophy clearly exhibit this phenomenon. Academic scepticism, for example, arose out of an epistemological crisis within Plato's academy. Plato was right, the argument goes, to think that knowledge, if we could get it, would be the perfect grasp of perfect Forms. Trapped in the empirical perceptual conditions to which we seem to be subject, however, academic sceptics concluded that we cannot get any knowledge at all. They thus combine the sensory phenomenalism of the Sophists with Plato's dialectics to show that the ascent to knowledge can never take place. The Stoics, meanwhile, whom the Sophists called "dogmatists," inherited what was left of Aristotle's school in late antiquity. They were much more impressed, however, with mathematical and computative conceptions of rationality than the Peripatetics. (The Stoics virtually invented the propositional logic that came to fruition in the early twentieth century.) So they replaced Aristotle's problem-solving methods with computational ones. Cicero's unique blend of philosophy and rhetoric, meanwhile, comes from using the method devised by the New Academics, who were his teachers, to find a path between Platonism and the sort of academic scepticism that is nothing but epistemologically disillusioned Platonism. The New Academy abandoned the positive dialectics of the Old Academy and the negative dialectics of the academic sceptics by using the agonistic method of debate to find a way of fixing reasonable opinions by weighing probabilities, thereby arriving at a probabilistic
analogue, in a mutable world, of Aristotle's problem-solving method, which was as biased toward immutability as Plato's. That is the source of Cicero's hope for a new birth of philosophy—or so, in any case, McKeon argues.

V

Coming closer to home, I think that another of McKeon's most fertile insights was his recognition that the classical pragmatists, in whose philosophical shadow he himself came of age, all used the Aristotelian problematic method or method of inquiry. (An indication of this is their insistence that organisms are well adapted by evolutionary history to be problem-solving beings.) Well-known differences among the founders of pragmatism can then be elegantly explained by their having opted either for different principles or interpretations. Both James and Dewey insist that all problem solving begins and ends in action, just as evolutionary adaptation begins with spontaneous variation and ends with adaptive behavior. They employ actional or creative principles—and precisely not the contemplative, allegedly self-evident reflexive principles of their realist opponents (including, ultimately, Peirce). Dewey's complaint that James puts too subjective a spin on how organisms solve problems can then be rewritten as Dewey's preference for a more essentialist and less phenomenal mode of interpretation: for more Aristotle, as it were (with whom, as we have seen, Dewey was preoccupied) and less John Stuart Mill (to whose memory James dedicated his volume of lectures, Pragmatism.)

This story can be protracted by taking note of the gradual displacement of problem-solving conceptions of scientific inquiry by computational theories of scientific method in the United States during and after the Second World War. As I have argued elsewhere, this shift was facilitated by an explicit assimilation of pragmatism to logical positivism during the forties. One marked effect of this shift was that, in an environment marked by the rise of a national security state, of managerial forms of capitalism, and of a privatistic, utility-maximizing, consumption-oriented economy, meritocratic communities of expertise displaced the problem-solving conception of participatory democracy favored by Dewey. Among the results were an enormous rise of pseudoscientific theorizing in the social sciences, the degrading of public discourse into media techne, and the transformation of the schools into meritocratic sorting factories.

The beginnings of this shift were visible at Columbia, where Ernest Nagel was turning Dewey's philosophy of science into something closer to logical positivism, as well as at the University of Chicago, where the pragmatist logician Charles Morris facilitated dialogue between his tradition and Viennese neopositivism by offering the University's sheltering arms to the refugee Rudolf Carnap. In his famous Logische Aufbau der Welt, Carnap's aim had been to screen off the cacophonous rantings of pseudotheory from verifiable scientific claims by using rules to compute truth values on the basis of atomic statements. Here was a modern expression of the voice of Democritus: computationalism under a linguistic or term-oriented mode of selection, rather than under Democritus's mode of "things," or Locke's "new way of ideas." Eventually, Carnap was forced to moderate his original program by recognizing that an infinitely large number of linguistic or conceptual frameworks might equally efficiently aggregate the same data. Under the tutelage of American philosophers, Carnap called this conceptual relativism a turn toward pragmatism. In point of fact, the computationalist method embedded in the resulting pragmatized positivism meant that problem-centered classical pragmatism was now effectively dead.

McKeon not only articulated his interpretive matrix during the time Carnap was his colleague, but curiously enough called it by the same name that Carnap, Morris, Quine, and others were using to describe their inquiries into the relationship between empirical data and conceptual frameworks: "philosophical semantics." We might advance our aim of locating McKeon's work in its time and place by speculating on whether in bestowing the same name on his quite different "philosophical semantics," McKeon may have been criticizing Carnap more than paying him a compliment. For as his matrix expanded, McKeon might well have reflected that in restricting meaningful, useful, truth-functional languages to those whose connectives could be computed by some sort of rule-governed, algorithmic process, Carnap was arbitrarily restricting discourse to an impoverished subset of conceptual frameworks, no matter how pragmatically open to alternatives he seemed to be. McKeon seems to me to reaffirm his Deweyan legacy by intimating that a society that links free speech to democracy must put all discursive frameworks, and not just those that can be computed, into play. The matter is some importance. For constriction of discursive possibility space will always be attended by the illusory assumption that there is some one nondiscursive reality that is to be captured by some one right semantical framework. The discovery of conceptual relativity as a deep philosophical truth about our way of using language to interact with the world, that is to say, cannot be made until the full possibility space of discursive pluralism has been recognized and welcomed.

"The most significant philosophical discovery of the present century," Watson has proclaimed, "is the fact of pluralism, that the truth admits of more than one valid formulation, and, secondly, of the reason for this fact in arbitrary or conventional elements, inseparable from the
nature of thought itself." Watson attributes this discovery to McKeon. What we may ask, was the significance of this discovery in McKeon's own eyes? Certainly, he thought that the practical problem solving he took to be the essence of political and social praxis would be facilitated by making it illegitimate for any contributor to a discussion to insist that his or her most cherished conceptual framework is the only one in which the most salient aspects of the problem at hand can be expressed. He probably also thought that problem-solving power increases roughly as a function of the engagement of multiple frameworks. This practical, pragmatic, solidly liberal point seems to me to have been less important to McKeon himself, however, than his belief—a belief preserved and expanded by Watson—that all frameworks are equally valid vessels of theoretical truths, and that the discovery of conceptual pluralism is itself, as Watson says, a philosophical truth. So construed, the implications of conceptual relativity for reconstructing the discipline of philosophy are in many ways quite the opposite of those drawn by Dewey. For Dewey, conceptual relativity entails the primacy of praxis. For McKeon, and certainly for Watson, it grounds the possibility of first philosophy.

The very fact that great thinkers, by virtue of their greatness itself, have been able to understand one another suggests to McKeon that they are already pluralist enough to be able to translate each others' claims into their own preferred terms, even across the gulf of ages, and so to generate the genuine conversation that in McKeon's view takes place among them. McKeon professes his faith in what has come to be called "commensurability" between different discursive paradigms when he says, in a passage I have already quoted, that there arises among great thinkers "a homogeneity in the discussion inasmuch as they raise the same or comparable questions and give different answers to them." The explicit discovery of conceptual relativism cannot help but enhance this conversation by making mutual comprehension easier and translations less distorted. This proposition slides rather easily, however, into another. To be able to talk about the same thing in what all participants now recognize as different ways may also make it possible, perhaps for the first time, for thinkers to arrive at least at some identical conclusions precisely by setting aside the conventional aspects that ex hypothesi they now recognize. Watson raises this very possibility when he writes, "With this discovery the very thing that was formerly thought to be a scandal and a disgrace to philosophy, namely, that philosophies do not agree, turns out to be its great virtue, for through it are revealed essential features of all thought, present everywhere indeed, but nowhere so clearly as in philosophy."

Note that in saying this Watson seems to be asserting that it is philosophical claims—claims about the ontological and epistemological foundations that precede, and indeed make possible, the inquiries of the special sciences and arts—whose validity and soundness are enhanced by the discovery of conceptual relativity. The insight we are to derive from deploying McKeon's semantic matrix is not what conceptual pragmatists from C. I. Lewis to W. V. O. Quine made of it. They held that conceptual relativity means that apart from their uses in encoding first-order claims frameworks have virtually no reference at all. They are arbitrary and conventional because, as Quine famously put it, "to be is to be the value of a variable," and not to be a variable itself.

Moreover, for most conceptual relativists the utility of different conceptual schemes is that they encode different first-order truths, not the same ones in different "forms." Indeed, the postmodern pragmatism associated with Rorty radicalizes the conceptual relativity of earlier pragmatists just because it makes the expression of difference and otherwise the whole point, regarding the imposition of sameness as little more than an ideological tool. From this perspective, it is difficult even to imagine what sort of truths could conceivably remain "the same" over different formulations. Yet in spite of this, Watson's view is that McKeon's philosophical semantics at last makes it possible for philosophers to state the same deep truths about the conditions of the possibility of knowledge in different, but ultimately commensurable, idioms. Truth-functional business, it seems, can be done at an explicitly conceptual level. To hold this view, Watson must flatly deny Carnap's claim that nothing important can be said about "second-order" categories apart from their first-order uses. And so he does. Watson wants to assure us, in fact, that among the things that can be said at this higher level is that McKeon's semantic matrix puts first philosophy, after its many false starts, at last on the path to strenge Wissenschaft, and not on the road to self-destruction, since it allows us to affirm that all the philosophers who participate in the "Great Conversation" only can understand one another, but can in principle come to a number of agreements.

One who affirms this also appears to be committed to the view that philosophy should continue to preside over culture, as Plato said it should, but turns the tables on the standard objection to that claim by asserting that its right to so preside depends on the discovery of conceptual relativity rather than being undermined by it. We know that Watson takes this position because he is brave enough to say so. And although there is a different, more practical and rhetorical direction in which McKeon's work can be interpreted and developed, as I will show below, we may suspect that McKeon, with his hankering after a philosophia perennis, takes it too. If so, our conclusion will be as follows: McKeon may well have disagreed with the realists of his day on the matter of conceptual pluralism, and especially on their touchingly naive belief that the ultimate truth about the world can be encoded in only one interpretive
framework. But on the matter of the primacy of theoria over praxis, and maintaining philosophy as a foundational discipline, he sided with the realists, defenders of the traditional cultural aspirations of philosophy, against his mentor Dewey.  

VI

McKeon’s philosophical pluralism has never been well-received by the professional philosophical community. On the other hand, his approach has sometimes intrigued rhetorical theorists, who have seen in his work an effort to elevate the categories, methods, and indeed the worldview of rhetoricians to central status in making, interpreting, and criticizing discourse of all kinds, and in resolving the problems of a pluralist society. There is no doubt that McKeon had an abiding interest in, and considerable knowledge of, the history and philosophy of rhetoric. Moreover, one of his most distinctive theses, as we have seen, was that at several periods in the history of the West the rhetorical approach initiated by the Greek Sophists has been elevated to hegemony over other spheres of culture, functioning as what McKeon, following Aristotle, calls an architectonic art. In such times, the fertile and fluid logic of commonplaces, which are aimed at illuminating and judging complex particulars, displaces formal logic, with its emphasis on the universal and necessary.

Cicero’s expansion of the scope of rhetoric in the troubled days of the Roman Republic occurred in one of those periods. An expanded rhetoric was to restore vigor to public discourse, which had been abandoned by thumb-sucking sectarian philosophers. The humanism of the Renaissance, which was directly influenced by Cicero, placed rhetoric and the probabilistic logic of commonplaces on a similar footing. McKeon clearly thinks that ours, too, is a time in which commonplaces can serve as a fertile source of discovery and innovation. “As we enter into the final decades of this century,” he wrote in 1971,

We boast of a vast increase of output in all arts, and we are puzzled by the absence of interdisciplinary connections and by the breakdown of interpersonal, intergroup and intercultural communication. We need a new architectonic productive art. Rhetoric exercised such functions in the Roman republic and in the Renaissance. Rhetoric provides the devices by which to determine the characteristics and problems of our times and to form the art by which to guide actions for the solutions of our problems and the improvement of our circumstances.  

Calls for the expansion of rhetoric to serve as the primary medium of argument, and for its topical and tropological methods of analyzing and assessing arguments to become canonical in every sphere of discourse, I will call programs for “universal rhetoric,” in homage to Hans Georg Gadamer’s parallel calls for “universal hermeneutics.” Such calls typically arise when diversity in an expanding social realm runs ahead of social integration, when incommensurability among paradigms in the realm of theory overtakes unification among the sciences, and when plurality in the sphere of values seems to stultify common action. McKeon was very concerned about problems like these. After the Second World War, he became involved with the United Nations in trying to find ways to facilitate communication and common action in the new world ecumene that had been created by the collapse of European imperialism and the rise of a new multicultural international order. It was in these contexts that McKeon raised the call for rhetoric to become a new architectonic art.

McKeon’s project, like Cicero’s, depends on allowing rhetoric to intersect with philosophy. There are at least two ways, however, in which McKeon might have meant this. He might have been trying to elevate rhetoric to the architectonic status of philosophy, shifting the focus from inaccessible universals to the resolution of complex cases calling for judgment. Alternatively, he might have been using rhetoric to revitalize the claims of foundational philosophy in a world that was more shot through with pluralism than philosophers had previously assumed, and in which, accordingly, the fact of pluralism had itself become a philosophical problem. In introducing a collection of McKeon’s essays on rhetoric, Mark Backman argues for a version of the first view. He claims that McKeon’s “essays on rhetoric constituted the critical core of his intellectual activities;” that “McKeon rejects the notion that rhetoric and philosophy are separate disciplines;” that McKeon “passed from a rational philosophy founded on universalizing vocabularies and derived from fixed principles of being to a rhetorical philosophy based in the circumstances of experience;” and that McKeon would approve of Rorty’s distinction between systematizing and edifying philosophy and would locate himself among the edifiers. I believe that these statements are misleading, and that the second way of looking at McKeon’s work is closer to the truth.

As I have argued, McKeon can profitably be seen as responding positively to Dewey’s recognition of diversity and his call for “reconstruction in philosophy.” But his solution to the problem of pluralism was not to proclaim the primacy of praxis over theoria, and not, accordingly, to replace a theory-oriented philosophy with an action-oriented rhetoric, as Backman suggests it was. It is quite true that McKeon called for use of commonplaces as instruments of discovery and judgment. It is
a long time," he wrote, "since topics have been used as an art of invention in rhetoric ... A reconstituted verbal art of invention, adapted to our circumstances and arts, might be used to shadow forth the methods and principles of an archetectonic productive art generalized from invention in language to discovery in existence." He was also true, at least in my view, that McKeon's semantic rubrics are best conceived as commonplaces that function interpretively and inventively in this new productive art, and that in these roles they have a considerable amount of power. Yet the fact is that McKeon himself drew back from endorsing a purely practical use of his semantic system, probably because he did not want to undermine or eliminate the classical distinction between theoria and praxis, as Dewey had done. Anyone who holds, as both Dewey and Marx did, that theoria is entirely an ideological fiction that functions to preserve social class hierarchies will believe that eliminating the theory-practice distinction cannot help but improve the quality of free discourse. Someone who doubts this, however, as McKeon plainly did, will believe the exact opposite: that collapsing the theory-practice distinction will have a devastating effect on freedom of speech and thought. With the philosophical realists of his day, McKeon was unwilling to accept that consequence; and I suspect that he would continue to resist it in the postmodern cultural environment in which we find ourselves today.

Certainly, in calling for his new archetectonic art, McKeon com­mends the rhetorical tradition, especially when it follows in Cicero's wake, for recognizing and reveling in a multiplicity of interpretive frameworks. But the ineliminable plurality of interpretive frameworks entails for McKeon not that foundational truths—truths more secure than the shifting first-order claims for which they provide a stable context—are unavailable. On the contrary, the main thrust of his argument is that, when the arbitrary and conventional elements in which speech is necessarily encoded are recognized, the same deep truths are capable of expression in quite different, and only seemingly contradictory, frameworks. In consequence, McKeon's universalized rhetoric does not use philosophy as an ancilla rhetoricae. It uses rhetoric as an ancilla philosophiae.

Support for my interpretation comes not only from the argument that I have been building in this essay, but from the fact that we have McKeon's word for it in the very essays Backman anthologizes. He says, for instance, that while the universal rhetoric of Cicero's time was aimed at reorienting praxis, and the universal rhetoric of the Renaissance had a poetic or productive orientation (poeisis), "there is every reason to think that the art we seek is rhetoric with a theoretical orientation (theoria)." McKeon puts a theoretical spin on Cicero himself when he writes, "I read Cicero [as saying] that all philosophies . . . are particular expressions of the same truth, and that, insofar as they succeed in expressing that truth, they differ only verbally." His reason for insisting on this is that in a world that had passed through two ideologically instigated wars, and numerous revolutions, and countless bloodbaths, McKeon was convinced that we need to see "what is common is constant and common" in diverse value systems, and not merely to appreciate difference. He was convinced that this cannot be achieved if the fact of pluralism is used to undermine the traditional aims of philosophy and its pretensions to preside over culture. On the contrary, it can only be achieved if philosophers resolve to retain and enhance their dominant position by taking pluralism seriously.

McKeon was insightful enough to see that ours is an age that needs an archetectonic rhetorical art, or a universalized rhetoric, or a rhetoric of inquiry. To some extent, moreover, the age has got what he thought it needed. The revolt against computationist neopositivism, the first stirrings of which are enshrined in Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, has swelled in recent decades into a mighty chorus of "social constructionist," largely rhetorical, analyses of science. In philosophy itself, heretics such as Rorty have reacted—some would say overreacted—to the scientistic, positivized versions of pragmatism that triumphed in the fifties by asserting, in the name of pragmatism itself, much that McKeon would recognize as a Protagorean archic profile. When Rorty (who was once McKeon's student) proclaims himself a pragmatist, he does not intend to return to Dewey's old biocentric naturalism, redolent as it still is with naive faith in the power of science. Rather, he means to say that the only warrant for the claims people make is the fact that they have persuaded other people to accept these claims.

On the whole, however, the growing, fractious family of universal rhetorics that have now arisen are not much like McKeon's. In spite of Backman's attempt to view McKeon's work through the eyes of contemporary rhetorics, those rhetorics are likely to display his project as preserving the very "logocentric" assumptions about discourse that universal rhetorics have succeeded lately in calling into question. They will show, for example, that McKeon is still committed to the primacy of identity over difference, and, at least tacitly, to as mysterious and as numinous a source of "onto-theological" sameness as, say, Martin Heidegger. In consequence, those who have been sensitized to the dangers of intellectualizing communicative problems, and who have in consequence recognized the ideological power of what Kenneth Burke called "terministic screens" to hide the most salient considerations rather than to uncover them, are not likely to be impressed by the analytical machinery McKeon invents or the uses to which he puts it—nor will those who have insisted on the situatedness of all discourse, or its
role as an instrument in social negotiations, or its tenacious connections
to class, race, and gender. For it can be argued that \textit{theoria} facilitates the
suppression of diversity no less when it tries to absorb plurality into a
grand multicolored vision than when it tries to repress it in favor of one
transcendent, realist framework.

Rhetorical analysis of the sort cultivated by contemporary rhetori­
cians of inquiry can even be deployed to support my contention that
McKeon's project is tilted away from its considerable potential as an
instrument of rhetorical and invention and oriented instead toward
philosophical preoccupations. For an explicitly rhetorical critique of
McKeon's own discursive practices will identify the workings of \textit{pathos}
and \textit{ethos} in his performances as speaker and writer and will not restrict
itself to the \textit{logos} that philosophers, including McKeon himself, have al­
ways wanted audiences to regard as uniquely relevant to the judgment
of their arguments.

We may begin by noting that theoretically oriented speakers, espe­
cially philosophers, generally have a bias against narrative history. Ever
since Plato, they have thought of mathematics, and of mathematical
physics, as the most epistemologically high-grade form of discourse and
of history and personal narrative as the least. In McKeon's various at­
tempts at first-person narrative, the same bias, even if it is denied in the­
ory, is hard to overlook in stylistic practice. What purports to be a
"spiritual autobiography," for example, is little more than a maddening
attempt to keep deferring the subject.\textsuperscript{42} We never learn much about
McKeon himself. For the most part what we get is a lot of reflexive
throat clearing about the nature of narrative and various ways to write
an autobiography.\textsuperscript{43} What passes for a story is mostly confined to a
memorandum about McKeon's policies as dean. One can almost feel a
palpable fear that revealing the contingent events that have shaped one's
life or conditioned one's ideas might deflate the authoritative voice in
which the philosopher wants to impart abiding, noncontingent truths to
others. Such is the \textit{ethos} of McKeon as speaker and writer. McKeon's
Great Conversation literally collapses time, the unique, narratively con­
stituted identities of the participants, and the burdens of concrete per­
suasion into an eternal present. The same triumphs over the different as
fully as in Gilson's \textit{philosophia perennis}.

In this essay, I have tried to illuminate McKeon's work by situating
it in the historical context out of which it came. In this respect I mean
to agree with Nietzsche, who thought of philosophies as involuntary
confessions extracted from their authors, and with Dewey, who recog­
nized that, just as there is no difference between the nature of something
and its mode of coming-to-be, so there is no difference between the
meaning of a proposition and the circumstances of its production and
reception. Such a rhetoric can find productive uses for McKeon's analy­
be respectable only if it gets a principle which is a paradox. And this is still going on in science. Physics can afford paradoxes. The less exact sciences cannot.

65. "Philosophical Problems in World Order" (1968a), par. 4:

Physics and technology have provided a model in the twentieth century for the discovery and treatment of issues of world order. It is a model, in the first place, for response to the need to abandon the fixed contrarieties of earlier theory. Physical theory has embraced paradoxes and made them principles. This has meant the abandonment of the absolutes of past theory—the Newtonian absolutes, of space, time, motion, and force—but it has also meant the preservation of the basic relations established by the Newtonian physics in a more diversified context of fact and formula. It is a model, in the second place, for use of the horns of a paradox to form alternative hypotheses which lead in their interplay to further progress. For decades the quantum physicists who base their theory on the conviction that the principle of indeterminacy is an irreducible fact of nature and those who base their theory on the conviction that the establishment of a general field equation will remove indeterminacy have each made contributions to quantum mechanics, have assimilated the knowledge acquired under opposed theories, and have moved on together to new problems.


69. "Facts, Values, and Actions" (1972b), last par., also SWt, p. 446.

70. "Fact and Value in the Philosophy of Culture" (1969c), pars. 6–7, also SWt, p. 432; see also "The Future of Metaphysics" (1970b), sec. 3, par. 6.

71. An exception was Philosophy 393, Esthetics and Criticism, taught in the Spring Quarter 1950, which made use of "The Philosophic Bases of Art and Criticism" (1943), also CC, p. 463. The course was not, in my judgment, one of his more successful.

72. The original design for the course is presented in "Suggestions Concerning Organization and Contents of Course Observation, Integration, and Interpretation: Or the Organization, Factual Bases, and Theoretical Formulations of the Arts and Sciences," University of Chicago College, 1943, mimeographed. The course is also described in "Spiritual Autobiography" (1953g), sec. 2, pars. 11–13, also FHOE, pp. 21–24. McKeon also designed a component for the history integration course in the college that examined the treatment of space and time in philosophy, art, and science. See "Illustrations of the Second Variety of Historical Evolution and Integration Described in the Report of the History Review Committee," Appendix A to "Report of the Review Committee for History to the Faculty of the College," March, 1948, mimeographed.

73. The Humanities sequence is sketched in "Spiritual Autobiography" (1953g), sec. 2, par. 9–10, also FHOE, pp. 20–21.

74. "Latin Literature and Roman Culture in Modern Education" (1977).

75. For the new liberal arts, see "The Liberating Arts and the Humanizing Arts in Education" (1964a) and the subsequent articles listed in Note 31. The new arts were used to design the curriculum at the New School College during the 1960s under the leadership of Dean Allen Austill.

Between Pragmatism and Realism


2. Quoted in Richards, Darwin and the Emergence, p. 427.


8. Nor was Dewey much of a cultural pluralist, as his debates in the thirties with Horace Kallen and Alain Locke about this issue reveal. The issue is treated well in Robert Westbrook, John Dewey and American Democracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).


11. Adams and Montague, Contemporary American Philosophy, 2: 433. Frederick Woodbridge is known today among Plato scholars as a pioneer of the so-called “dramatistic” interpretation of Plato’s Dialogues, which asserts that no philosophical doctrines can be extracted from Plato’s play-like dialogues. The view goes back to Friedrich Schliermacher, and was probably picked up by Woodbridge by way of his education in Germany during the silver age of German idealism. In my view, Woodbridge was insufficiently dogmatic about Plato precisely because he was overly dogmatic about Aristotle.


15. “A Philosopher Meditates on Discovery” (1952d), in REID, p. 207.

16. Ibid., p. 204.

17. Ibid., p. 205.

18. Ibid., p. 198.


25. The “stuff” out of which arguments are made in the classical Greek world are thing-like, Plato’s Forms and Parmenides’s Being no less than Democritus’s atoms. Thus, we need not mention selection further in our thought experiment about Greekarchic profiles. It took an epistemological turn after Aristotle to make thoughts or ideas into the elements of arguments. That sort of turn happens again in modern philosophy, as in Locke’s “new way of ideas.” Epistemological turns are often succeeded by linguistic turns, in which terms not only constitute the elements on which mental computation is performed but elicit acts or performances by acting as cues rather than referring to concepts. The rhetorical turn of our own time, which McKeon was among the first to recognize and develop, depends on this major fact about twentieth-century thought, the consequences of which are still unfolding.


29. “A Philosopher Meditates on Discovery” (1952d) in REID, p. 207.


31. In his creative appropriation of McKeon’s work, Watson proposes an entirely new approach, in which selection is replaced by a fold-fold scheme of perspectives: diaphantic or revelatory, disciplinary, objectivist, and personal. These categories make a better fit with the personae who speak in the Greek dialectic I have sketched. Plato is diaphantic, Aristotle disciplinary, Democritus objectivistic, and Protagoras personal. But they take McKeon’s work in a direction much more oriented toward the preoccupations of a perennial philosophical than McKeon’s and away from the use of McKeon’s rubrics as commonplaces for invention and judgment of concrete issues.

32. This means, I suspect, that McKeon’s own archie profile is: reflexive principles, agonistic methods, essentialist ontology. By contrast, Dewey (by McKeon’s own account) has: actional principles, problemat­ic method, and essentialist ontology. The greater sensitivity to discursive plurality that is picked up by McKeon’s use of the agonistic method of
debate is blunted by his claim that each speaker can get to the one essence of things in his own way and that the entire system is as reflexively self-stabilizing as Aristotle’s *causa sui* (in the “way of things”) or Descartes’ *cogito* (in the “new way of ideas”). Dewey’s essentialist interpretation is the point of intersection with McKeon. But his use of creative or actional beginning points rather than of reflexive first principles embodies the turn to *praxis over theoria*, in terms of which I have interpreted the pragmatist-realist debate.

33. “A Philosopher Meditates on Discovery” (1952d), in REID, p. 203.
34. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from REID, pp. vii-xi.
35. See “Creativity and the Commonplace” (1973) in REID, pp. 25–36.
37. If McKeon had taken the turn that Backman claims he did, his project would probably have come closer to that of lifelong friend and fellow graduate student in philosophy at Columbia, Kenneth Burke, whose conceptual relativism is indeed self-consciously rhetorical and whose politics are, as my argument predicts, more left-wing than McKeon’s. Burke made different, but no less interesting things out of the same intellectual and cultural materials that McKeon was working with. It should be noted that Burke has always been regarded by the members of McKeon’s Committee for the Analysis of Ideas and Study of Methods at Chicago as an insightful, worthy discourse partner. So indeed he is.
39. Ibid., p. 203. My own view is that a close reading of Cicero’s philosophical dialogues, such as *On Duties* and *On the Nature of the Gods*, will fail to turn up much to support McKeon’s interpretation.
41. See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*.
42. “Spiritual Autobiography” (1953g).
43. For example: “Yet the reasons for writing about the circumstances which influenced one’s thoughts and about the processes and events in which they are involved can be only that the significance of thoughts, which is broader than the occurrences of one man’s life, can be grasped concretely only in the particularities of expression and implication which are parts of biography rather than of metaphysics and logic.” “Spiritual Autobiography” (1953g).
44. My thanks to Eugene Garver for soliciting this paper and to Merrill Rodin and Michael Calvin McGee, among others, for critically reading it. No implication follows that they agree with what I have said.

I want especially to acknowledge Walter Watson for the most productive discussions of McKeon I have ever had and for his insightful dissent from the direction this essay takes. It pains me greatly to have disagreed with him on various points. I know, however, that Walter honors his friends for their attempts to honor the truth, and that he can be counted on to ascribe as many disagreements as possible to merely conventional elements. In this spirit, I dedicate this essay to Walter Watson.

**Theory and Practice Revisited**

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Conference on Pluralism and Objectivity in Contemporary Culture: Departures from the Philosophy of Richard McKeon, The University of Chicago, March 13–14, 1992. For assistance in its revision I am indebted to Craig Calhoun and Doug Mitchell.
3. Those unfamiliar with the work of either will probably find these figures opaque, and some may find them uncongenial. To begin to represent the power and significance of these schemata would take a small book for each. I can only hope that they may whet the appetites of some readers and not alienate others.
9. 1952b.