

The Review of Politics 80 (2018), 137–150.

© University of Notre Dame

doi:10.1017/S003467051700095X

The Forgotten Philosopher: A Review Essay on Richard McKeon

William Selinger

Richard McKeon: *On Knowing—The Natural Sciences*, ed. David Owen and Zahava McKeon. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Pp. 480.)

Richard McKeon: *On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, ed. David Owen and Joanna Olson. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 420.)

In her well-known piece on Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt wrote that “posthumous fame... seems to be the lot of the unclassifiable ones.” It is achieved by “those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.”¹ If she is right, then there may be some hope that Richard McKeon will one day have his moment. For McKeon (who was, in fact, a friend of Arendt) is eminently unclassifiable. Born in 1900, he studied philosophy both with the great French medievalist Étienne Gilson and with John Dewey. He was a twentieth-century American pragmatist who sought to revolutionize philosophy so that it could deal with the novel challenges of a technological age. Yet he was also a brilliant scholar of classical and medieval thought, who wrote such articles as “Poetry and Philosophy in the Twelfth Century,” “Rhetoric in the Middle Ages,” and “The Hellenistic and Roman Foundations of the Tradition of Aristotle in the West.”

McKeon also wrote on literature and literary criticism, on the history of physics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and on Plato, Averroes, Avicenna, John Stuart Mill, and the Indian philosopher Ashoka. He wrote on international politics and human rights, served with the first American delegation to the United Nations, and was involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet despite these diverse areas of interest, McKeon was very far from being an eclectic or meandering

William Selinger is Lecturer on Social Studies at the Committee on Degrees in Social Studies at Harvard University, William James Hall, Third Floor, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138 (selinger@fas.harvard.edu).

I am grateful to Greg Conti, Sungho Kimlee, and Samuel Moyn for their comments on this essay.

¹Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 155.

thinker. Indeed, there are very few thinkers more disciplined and systematic than McKeon. Across these various themes, he continually returns to the same commonplaces. All his writings seem to link together as pieces of a larger, if difficult to discern, system.

McKeon exercised a fair degree of influence during his lifetime, above all through teaching and university administration. After receiving his PhD in philosophy from Columbia, he was made a professor there in 1925. In 1935, McKeon moved to the University of Chicago. Almost immediately upon arriving he became dean of the Humanities, a position he held until 1947. McKeon thus played a profound role in shaping the general education program of the University of Chicago during this period, the period of the famous "Hutchins College." McKeon was, indeed, "the chief founder of the undergraduate college's 'core curriculum,'" which has survived in a variety of forms to the present day.² McKeon's students over the next four decades would include Susan Sontag, Richard Rorty, Wayne Booth, Eugene Garver, and Paul Rabinow. Yet his influence never seems to have durably penetrated beyond the students and colleagues he had while at Chicago.

Because it is now more than three decades since his death, the living memory of McKeon has dwindled. On the other hand, McKeon's thought can now be more easily accessed than ever before. Two volumes of his essays have been published by University of Chicago Press, with another volume on the way.³ In addition, two courses that McKeon taught at Chicago during the 1960s have been transcribed and published—the impetus for this review essay. Thanks to these two courses, a wide array of readers may be able to understand why those who knew McKeon at Chicago found him so captivating.⁴

There are, to be sure, many obstacles standing in the way of a "McKeon revival." As I noted at the beginning of this essay, he simply does not fit

²Alan Gewirth, "Richard Peter McKeon (1900–1985)," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 58, no. 5 (1985): 751–52. Quoted in the foreword to *On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, xiv. For this aspect of McKeon's life and thought see Donald Levine, *Powers of the Mind: The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

³*Selected Writings of Richard McKeon*, vol. 1, *Philosophy, Science, and Culture*, ed. William Swenson and Zahava McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, *Culture, Education, and the Arts*, ed. William Swenson and Zahava McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁴McKeon's students have produced a small though valuable literature on him. See George Kimball Plochman, *Richard McKeon: A Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and the essays in *Pluralism in Theory and Practice: Richard McKeon and American Philosophy*, ed. Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000). See as well Zahava McKeon, general introduction to *Selected Writings*, 1:1–21; and George Swenson, foreword to *Selected Writings*, 2:ix–xxiv.

into any of the conventional divisions of intellectual life. Although he was a professor of philosophy, his work would probably not pass for philosophy in most universities today. On top of that, McKeon was an extremely difficult writer. His essays are frustratingly dense and abstruse. When they are not that, he has an unfortunate tendency to come across as naive and simplistic. Finally, it would be much easier to make sense of McKeon if he had brought his system of thought together in one or more books, rather than leaving it strewn over more than one hundred and fifty academic articles.

Yet McKeon is eminently worth recovering, above all because of the extraordinary ambition of his project. One is tempted to say that if he accomplished only a quarter of what he set out to achieve, that would make him easily among the most important thinkers of the twentieth century. What was McKeon trying to achieve? If there is a phrase which captures his project, it would be something like *the reorganization of knowledge*. McKeon believed that the twentieth century had witnessed an unprecedented explosion of data and information of all kinds—along with ever-increasing communication between the different cultures of the world. He thought that the role of philosophy was to help make sense of this growing mass of data and communication. Philosophy should be the source of principles and arts that would integrate and categorize all the various facts, arguments, and problems of twentieth-century science and culture, while at the same time guiding further discovery. In other words, philosophy must again become an architectonic science, as it had been for Aristotle and Kant.

The reason for asking philosophy to perform this role was not, however, that the inquiries hitherto undertaken in various fields of intellectual endeavor were false or meaningless. This had broadly been Kant's and Aristotle's contentions about the state of knowledge prior to themselves, but McKeon was a self-conscious pluralist. He thought that real issues were being pursued in a variety of fields and according to a variety of methods. The problem, rather, was one of communication. Because there was no larger reflective structure for relating the various fields and methods of intellectual endeavor, whenever the truths from one field or method seemed to conflict with the truths of another, the possibilities for dialogue were meager. In McKeon's own words:

The bridge which philosophy must build to the future should provide a transition from questions which are treated by controversial opposition—and which therefore use arguments of ideological refutation... of moral imputation... and of empirical falsification... —to questions which are treated by defining issues to which alternative answers are hypotheses to elucidate facts and values of cooperative programs of inquiry and common policies of action.⁵

⁵Richard McKeon, "The Flight from Certainty and the Quest for Precision," in *Selected Writings*, 1:241.

McKeon believed that a similar style of unthinking opposition was prevalent in popular political culture, as well as in the academy.⁶ However, it is important to be clear that he had no interest in using philosophy to establish a new intellectual or political consensus. To the contrary, he wrote that “ideological agreement on one philosophy by all mankind is neither possible nor, if it were possible, desirable. It would probably put us into a kind of intellectual sleep in which we need do no further thinking.”⁷ Disagreement and controversy were inevitable, even welcome. But it should at least be possible for individuals engaged in controversy to understand what exactly they disagreed about, and whether there were not also possibilities for cooperation and common inquiry. By creating a new architectonic structure of knowledge, philosophy could help to enable that.

This was not a function that philosophy had ever performed before. Nevertheless, throughout history, it had repeatedly played a pivotal role in reorganizing the arts and sciences so that they could more adequately deal with the problems of their time. McKeon’s wide-ranging historical writings are centrally devoted to this theme, tracing philosophy’s role in structuring and organizing knowledge from the pre-Socratics to the twentieth century. His aim in relating this history seems to be twofold: first, to come up with exemplary models of how philosophy had performed this function in the past, from which we could learn (if not directly imitate) today; and, second, to *relativize* our own way of thinking about the organization and interrelations of knowledge, so we might come to realize that a radically different approach might be possible in our own time.

On that second front, McKeon emphasizes that the modern division of thought into discrete subject matters dates only to the Renaissance. During the medieval era, thought had been organized by arts rather than subjects. The dominant schema distinguished the three arts of words (grammar, logic, rhetoric), or trivium, and the four arts of things (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy), or quadrivium. That changed during the Renaissance, with the shift to organization by subject. Since then, much of the philosophy of the modern era has been devoted to placing the different subject matters on a sound and clear footing. Prior to Kant, the effort had primarily been one of applying the new methods of natural science—“the universal mathematics of Descartes and the universal mechanics of Newton”—to elucidate the distinct principles of psychology, government, and ethics in addition to those of nature.⁸ During the nineteenth century, philosophical speculation turned to the epistemological foundations of different fields, leading to “the massive

⁶For a discussion see Richard McKeon, “Philosophy and History in the Development of Human Rights,” *Selected Writings*, 1:454–67.

⁷McKeon, *On Knowing—The Natural Sciences*, 8.

⁸Richard McKeon, “The Organization of Sciences and the Relations of Cultures,” in *Selected Writings*, 2:147.

formulations" of the similarities and differences between "*Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*," and the debates between idealism and empiricism.⁹

McKeon was convinced that by the middle of the twentieth century, all these efforts had largely been exhausted. Nobody continued to possess the nineteenth-century conviction that a methodology adequate to unlocking the laws of nature or the meaning of culture/history in their distinct totalities could be developed, or that such a methodology could be grounded in the nature of thought or logic or history. Yet despite this loss of conviction, we continued to broadly divide knowledge in a nineteenth-century manner, and to argue over methodologies as if we thought there was a single one that yielded Truth at the expense of all the others. Meanwhile, the attention of philosophy had turned in an entirely new direction. Both in the Anglo-American tradition and on the Continent, "language and action" had become dominant areas of focus. "Concern with facts and concreteness has turned the attention of philosophers from the nature of things and the forms of thought to language and action, from being and understanding to phenomena and experience."¹⁰

Despite his association at the University of Chicago with traditionalists like Mortimer Adler, McKeon had no interest in effecting a return to metaphysics or theology (he also did not rule out such a return as potentially occurring at some future point). His own philosophy was focused fundamentally on language and action. He was convinced that without giving up that focus, it was possible for philosophy to again serve an architectonic function, and establish communication and clarity between divergent cultural and intellectual positions.

According to McKeon, the exemplary figure who had achieved something like this in the past was Cicero. Aristotle had revolutionized Greek thought by differentiating the "peculiar subject matter, method, and principle" of "each science."¹¹ He distinguished those, in turn, from the "two universal arts" of rhetoric and dialectic. Rhetoric and dialectic had no particular subject matter; rather they were arts for effectively dealing with "the opinions of men."¹² Cicero's great innovation was to eliminate the distinction between the universal arts and particular methods, folding them all into the "single method of a unified art or science."¹³ The structure of that universal method of reasoning was provided by *rhetoric*—in particular by legal rhetoric. Cicero distinguished "four rhetorical issues of controversy." There is the question of fact: whether something exists or has occurred. There is the question of

⁹Richard McKeon, "Fact and Value in the Philosophy of Culture," in *Selected Writings*, 1:429.

¹⁰McKeon, "Flight from Certainty," 233.

¹¹Richard McKeon, "Discourse, Demonstration, Verification, and Justification," in *Selected Writings*, 2:159.

¹²*Ibid.*, 160.

¹³Richard McKeon, "The Hellenistic and Roman Foundations of the Tradition of Aristotle in the West," in *Selected Writings*, 1:310–11.

definition: what some thing or event is. There is the question of kind or characterization. Finally, there is the issue of “who is the proper judge to decide” these questions in a given instance.¹⁴ For Cicero, the difference between philosophy and rhetoric was not fundamentally one of method and subject—as it had been for Aristotle—but rather that “rhetoric is concerned with definite questions, philosophy with unlimited ones.”¹⁵

Over the millennium and a half following Cicero’s death, McKeon argued, the categories of legal rhetoric that he had distinguished would repeatedly be used to structure and organize knowledge. Not only were the four “rhetorical issues of controversy” to be found in any subject matter, they could also be “used to constitute or produce a... subject matter.”¹⁶ By arguing for the existence and particular nature of a set of facts, and for a particular community of judges capable of adjudicating them, one could bring into existence a new field. This could be seen, according to McKeon, in “the great architectonic achievement of the Romans... the Roman Law.”¹⁷ But McKeon believed that the reflective application of rhetorical questions had been instrumental throughout European history in constituting new subjects of inquiry. “Medieval rhetoricians and philosophers had used the schemata of Ciceronian rhetoric” in their efforts “to build a unified religion and tradition.”¹⁸ Cicero was “the source and inspiration of the medieval liberal arts.”¹⁹ However, this schema would no less be deployed by “Renaissance rhetoricians and philosophers,” who innovated upon Cicero to delineate the fields of study of the modern world, and by inventors of modern scientific methods such as Bacon, Leibniz, and Vico—who equally made use of and developed the Ciceronian art of rhetoric.²⁰

This was, broadly, the tradition that McKeon viewed himself as continuing. He claimed that “rhetoric has replaced metaphysics as an architectonic art in the past, when the organization and application of the arts and sciences was based, not on supposed natures of things or perceived forms of thought, but on recognitions of the consequences of what men say and do.”²¹ McKeon was convinced that this must again be the case in the twentieth century.

With his background in legal rhetoric, Cicero had made the determination of facts the first issue for the rhetorician. Particular verbal commonplaces were derived from the kinds of facts of a given case—to defend someone accused of murder required different general terms than to prosecute

¹⁴Ibid., 315–16.

¹⁵Ibid., 325.

¹⁶Richard McKeon, “The Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age: Architectonic Productive Arts,” in *Selected Writings*, 2:201.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 202.

¹⁹Richard McKeon, “Creativity and the Commonplace,” in *Selected Writings*, 2:45.

²⁰Ibid., 45–47; and McKeon, “Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age,” 202.

²¹McKeon, “Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age,” 209.

someone for fraud. McKeon, in a sense, turned Cicero upside down. What came first in his schema of rhetoric was not the verification of facts but rather the *selection of terms*. "There are an infinite number of terms... potentially related to any question," McKeon argued. Selecting among them "gives you the basic way in which you orient yourself to problems."²²

Not only are there an indefinite number of terms that can be used in any argument, terms themselves are inherently ambiguous. Commonplaces such as "tolerance," "responsibility," "the state," "matter," "Socrates," "Athens," all take on an indefinite number of possible meanings. With respect to the commonplace "freedom," for instance, McKeon noted that "philosophers would generally agree on the ambiguous definition of freedom as 'the ability to act without external restraint.'" However, "the key terms here—*ability*, *act*, and particularly *external*—are all ambiguous. Acts, for instance, can be viewed as something internal rather than external. ... Anything that one writer holds to be an external impediment can be translated without much subtlety by another into something internal."²³ Rhetoric, for McKeon, is an art made necessary by the indefinite terms and indefinite ambiguities of discourse. It is the art of doing things with discourse, of using general commonplaces to achieve particular purposes.

Over the course of any given argument, these ambiguous commonplaces will inevitably be defined and specified in a certain manner. It is through this process, McKeon argued, that *facts* are produced and tested. A statement of fact is, at its most basic level, a statement in which two ambiguous terms are joined together. "World War One began in 1914" and "humans are primates" are both statements of fact in this sense. So is the statement "rhetoric is an art" or "diversity is valuable" or "republics alone have liberty." All these statements are capable of being further tested, confirmed, and qualified through discourse. It is through that process that they become "facts." For McKeon, "a fact is something that has been made, something which is not fixed but, rather is the product of an interpretation."²⁴

McKeon believed that the way Cicero delineated the role of facts and words in rhetoric—though supremely important in previous eras, and still useful in many contexts—had led to a "dichotomy between words and things" that was overall highly deleterious in the twentieth century. As I noted earlier, given what philosophy and science both actually were in the twentieth century, McKeon was convinced that it was impossible to ground any particular science or method as truly dealing with "the things" of nature—whereas other sciences and methods merely dealt with "words." This distinction had thus become nothing more than a polemical device. Partisans of every different method or field could plausibly claim—and did claim—that their

²²McKeon, *On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, 4–5.

²³*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴McKeon, *On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, 5.

opponents were ignoring certain obvious empirical realities, or failing to use properly empirical methods. Or, conversely, they accused their opponents of being so focused on facts that they had lost sight of timeless literary and philosophical values. “The old dichotomy between eloquence and nature,” McKeon wrote, “reappeared as a distinction between values and facts, and between the humanities and other sciences.”²⁵ By reconstructing a new art of rhetoric in which the invention and use of words was coterminous with the discovery of facts and things, McKeon sought a way beyond these polemics and dichotomies. In all inquiry, he contended, the “invention of words and symbols contributes to the discovery of things, and... things are delimited in the definition of words.”²⁶ This was no less true in the “sciences” than it was in the “humanities.”

What would a structure of reorganized knowledge look like that began from this new rhetorical presumption, rather than from the distinctions laid down by Cicero? That was McKeon’s central question. Put another way, across all the various fields of intellectual inquiry, how should we make sense of and distinguish the things we are discussing and arguing over? How should we make sense of the various ways in which we engage in discussion and argument? McKeon’s answer to these questions is startlingly ambitious. He believed that it was possible to delineate four *modes of argument*, through which individuals engage in discussion, controversy, and discovery across all fields. He also believed that it was possible to identify four underlying *issues of controversy*, that could make sense of what all argument and discussion was about. By putting these universal modes of argument into relation with the universal issues of controversy, McKeon sought to create a framework that made sense of all the controversies which take place in all fields of study.

The four different modes of argument that McKeon identified were as follows:

- It is possible to argue *reductively* and explain certain facts and terms by virtue of other facts or terms which are more elemental.
- It is possible to *assimilate* facts and terms to a larger intelligible whole of which they are an approximation.
- It is possible to *relativize* facts and terms, showing how they are dependent upon the perspectives of different observers, and keeping these different perspectives and their respective consequences straight.
- It is possible to *disciplinize* facts or terms, by showing how they belong to distinct bodies of knowledge, with distinct methods and logics, and which correspond to the different natures of things in the world.²⁷

²⁵McKeon, “Uses of Rhetoric in a Technological Age,” 203.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 207.

²⁷I should note that these four particular terms are mine, rather than McKeon’s, but I believe they capture what McKeon is saying better than his four, which are *construction, assimilation, discrimination, and resolution* (*On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, 10).

In ancient Greece, McKeon argued, each of these modes of argument had been comprehensively pursued by a different thinker or school. Plato attempted to solve all problems through assimilation; Democritus tried to do the same through reductive arguments; the Sophists sought to tackle all questions through relativizing them; Aristotle set up a framework of distinct subjects and distinct logical methods for treating all questions. According to McKeon, these four modes of argument would go on to be formalized and systematized in the four liberal arts of *dialectic*, *grammar*, *rhetoric*, and *logic*, which made up the classical and medieval curriculum. Those arts, though less frequently discussed in the modern world, have survived through the ages and continue to structure the various methods of study applied today.

In the course of making use of these four modes of argument, individuals become involved in controversy *about* one or more of the following issues:

- There are controversies over the proper *selection of terms*, which arise when individuals make use of different vocabularies. In the ancient world, these were categorized as the controversies of *demonstrative rhetoric*.
- There are controversies over the *interpretation of facts*, which arise when individuals set about testing and proving facts differently, and come to conflicting statements of fact. In the ancient world, these were categorized as the controversies of *judicial rhetoric*.
- There are controversies over *methods of inquiry*, which arise when individuals set about organizing larger sequences of terms and facts differently, leading to conflicting recommendations and consequences. In the ancient world, these were categorized as the controversies of *deliberative rhetoric*.
- There are controversies over *principles*, which arise when individuals set about organizing and grounding their inquiries and arguments in different manners. In the ancient world, these were categorized as the controversies of *dialectic*.

As well as being the sites of all controversy, however, these issues also served as the stimulus of all discovery. Here it is important to recall McKeon's novel rhetorical orientation. I noted earlier that for him, the selection of terms is primary in every argument and inquiry. "There are an infinite number of terms... potentially related to any question," and those terms are themselves indefinite. Establishing a particular *interpretation*, a particular *method*, and a particular *principle* constitutes the process by which one's terms are specified and defined over the course of a given argument.

An interpretation consists of the way one goes about proving statements of fact. As I noted earlier, for McKeon, factual statements are statements with two commonplaces in them, whether that be "World War One began in 1914," or "humans are primates," or "rhetoric is an art." A method consists of the way one goes about creating sequences that involve three or more

ambiguous commonplaces, thus making more extensive statements about sequence, causation, and consequence. Finally, the principle of an argument joins the entire set of n-commonplaces in an argument into a coherent whole. The principle of this essay (to pick an immediate example) would be “the reorganization of knowledge.”

It is at this point that we get to the most crucial and difficult step of McKeon’s whole philosophical system. According to McKeon, it is through applying the four modes of argument that ambiguous terms are defined and specified—leading to testable facts, logical sequences, and meaningful principles. Yet in defining terms through one particular mode of argument, you will inevitably contradict each of the other modes of argument. The process of discovery thus inevitably leads to controversy, for other individuals will end up defining the same terms differently. With respect to any of the four issues of controversy—selection, interpretation, method, principle—a contradiction arises when two different modes of argument are applied. Within any given field, controversies and disagreements come about as the four modes of argument are differently applied with respect to these four issues.

Let us consider a specific example of this. Let us take the ambiguous term “politics,” and see how, in the course of defining it, the controversies indicated by McKeon will inevitably arise. One of the most important statements about “politics” of the last half century is provided by Claude Lefort, who made an influential distinction between “politics” and “the political.”²⁸ Politics, for Lefort, is the world of elections, politicians, institutions, and historical events. However, Lefort plausibly argues that one cannot understand what politics is in the modern era without positing, and elucidating, a transformation that is beyond any single event or decision or institution—and is more than the sum total of them. He defines “the political” as the horizon at which this transformation occurs.

McKeon would no doubt claim that Lefort was seeking to define politics—which we empirically experience on a daily basis—through *assimilating* it to a larger whole that is beyond any particular empirical experience. Fundamentally, Lefort’s mode of argument is no different from what Plato was doing in assimilating our experience to the ideas, or what Freud was doing in assimilating our experience to the unconscious. According to McKeon, there is nothing necessarily mystical or unscientific about this approach. The claim being made is not that experience ought not to be carefully examined—indeed, Lefort was more than capable of carefully examining texts, institutions, and historical events—but rather that we ultimately cannot account for and define the full character of that experience without

²⁸See Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

viewing it as an approximation to larger conditions which transcend our experience.²⁹

If Lefort made use of assimilation to define the distinction between “politics” and “the political,” then Carl Schmitt proposed a more reductionist approach. He claimed that normal politics—again meaning the world of elections, politicians, institutions, and events—is only intelligible if one takes seriously the elemental forces which underlie normal politics, and which become most evident during moments of war and emergency, or at the founding of new states and constitutions.³⁰ Schmitt plausibly argued that one cannot make sense of the paradoxes of modern constitutional thought, or the failures of the doctrine commonly known as liberalism, without positing that the ever-present possibility of force and conflict structures regular constitutional politics as well.

For McKeon, a third approach to defining “politics” would neither assimilate it to a larger intelligible whole, nor explain it in light of more elemental forces. Rather this approach would seek to define politics through being clear about the kind of thing it is, as distinguished from other kinds of things, as well as about the particular sort of knowledge associated with it. Hannah Arendt’s political theory made use of this mode of argument. And it is worth noting that in contrast to Schmitt and Lefort, the phrase “the political” was not an important term in her vocabulary. “Politics” for Arendt is a form of “action”; action is distinguished from “work” and “labor” because each of these activities has a distinctive end, a distinctive process, and its own distinctive problems and dilemmas in the modern era.³¹

A final approach would be one in which “politics” is defined relative to the various perspectives from which it is viewed. In this mode of argument, “everything you say, do or imagine you know must be viewed from the point of view, the perspective, of the observer.”³² Quentin Skinner makes use of this approach. The term “the political” is largely absent from his vocabulary, as it is from Arendt’s, but he also does not generally view politics as a particular kind of human activity to be clearly distinguished from other kinds. For Skinner, “politics” is a *word* that has been constantly redefined throughout history; its meaning has continuously varied depending upon who is defining it, the contingent problems they are dealing with, and the

²⁹For Lefort as a social scientist and analyst of contemporary politics, see the essays in Lefort, *Le temps présent: Écrits 1945–2005* (Paris: Belin, 2007).

³⁰Schmitt’s classic writings include *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos, 2003); and *Constitutional Theory*, trans. Jeffrey Seitzer (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

³¹See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³²McKeon, *On Knowing—The Social Sciences*, 46.

kind of actions they are seeking to legitimate.³³ “Politics” is something different in the twenty-first century from what it was in the sixteenth century, and one’s aim should be to keep clear what its different meanings have been at different moments, rather than to arrive at a single true meaning. According to McKeon, there is nothing fundamentally dangerous or relativistic about this mode of argument. So long as one effectively discriminates among the various perspectives one is dealing with, and is sufficiently conscious about one’s own perspective and its limitations, it is possible to make arguments about any subject that are just as reliable and meaningful as those arrived at through the three other approaches.

McKeon would claim that the argumentative moves I have just outlined are the sources of invention, leading each of these figures to the arguments and discoveries concerning “politics” for which they are now justly famous. However, they are equally the sources of controversy. For any particular fact of politics—whether it be a text, or an event, or an institution—will be viewed and defined radically differently according to each of these four approaches.

McKeon was convinced that his system for organizing knowledge—which he constructed, as we have seen, by modernizing the ancient and medieval liberal arts and the ancient fields of rhetoric—could enable the debates in any field to become intelligible. It would also enable the different fields that have existed throughout time themselves to become intelligible, for subject matters do not exist prior to controversy, but rather are created through them. In particular, McKeon argued that through his system, what initially appear as contradictory approaches to discussing a given problem or topic come to be revealed as “different hypotheses” for understanding common issues. He believed that a commitment to pluralism was the natural result of this, for there was no way, a priori, that any one of the four modes of argument could rule out the others. Each was capable of creating testable hypotheses, of grounding its inquiries in solid principles, and of explaining the facts and values of human experience.

At the same time, McKeon denied that this pluralism would become a vulgar relativism, in which all claims were equally valid and no truth could be discerned about anything. For if all four approaches were in principle equally valid, when it came to the various particular problems that emerge in human experience at any given time, some approaches would be practiced more effectively than others. The discoveries which were made through their application, however, would inevitably lead to new problems and to the invention of new fields for which they were not as appropriate. New approaches would then be pursued. McKeon did not believe that this led to intellectual progress in the sense that “truth being finite, you gradually

³³See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

answer a given number of problems and approach a point at which all problems are answered," for "the situation that men are engaged in, both in their theories and in their practices, is infinitely rich."³⁴ However, we do not go nowhere, either: the problems we are engaged with today, and the fields of inquiry which now exist, are the result of previous problems being resolved, and new problems thus arising.

In my discussion of Lefort, Schmitt, Arendt, and Skinner, I considered only the four different modes of argument as they are applied to one of the issues in McKeon's broad system—the issue of interpretation. But a similar analysis could be extended to each of the other three issues as well. According to McKeon, the mode of argument that an author uses for his or her interpretation does not foreclose the mode of argument that they will use in defining their method or principle. There are thus four distinct levels at which controversy and discovery take place in human discourse. McKeon sought to capture this visually in a four-by-four matrix of argumentative possibilities:

Principle	Method	Interpretation	Selection	
Comprehensive	Dialectical	Ontological	Terms of Thought	Assimilation
Reflexive	Problematic	Essentialist	Types of Terms	Disciplinization
Actional	Operational	Existentialist	Terms of Language and Actions	Relativizing
Simple	Logistic	Entitative	Terms of Things	Reduction

To understand McKeon's full matrix, the best place to turn is to the two courses that have recently been published by University of Chicago Press. They constitute the first two parts of a yearlong sequence of courses that McKeon taught at the University of Chicago throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The third part (to be published in the future) was on the humanities. This yearlong sequence served as the introduction for students in the interdisciplinary major "Ideas and Methods." McKeon had founded that major following the Second World War, as a response to the partial dismantling of Chicago's older core curriculum. In the course devoted to the natural sciences (which was delivered in the fall of 1963) McKeon begins by identifying "space," "time," "motion," and "cause" as four crucial commonplaces in the history of physics. The course examines Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's

³⁴McKeon, *On Knowing—the Natural Sciences*, 8.

Physics, followed by the scientific writings of Galileo, Newton, and Maxwell—in previous years, McKeon had ended with Einstein. McKeon discusses the “method,” “interpretation,” and “principle” used by each of these authors as they construct systems to explain and interpret “space,” “time,” “motion,” and “cause.” In the course on the Social Sciences, delivered in winter of 1965, the three terms McKeon identifies are “freedom,” “power,” and “history.” The figures he examines are Hobbes, Spinoza, Machiavelli, Mill, and Kant. Both volumes include an extensive scholarly apparatus that helps explain McKeon’s thought. The work of the editors in creating these two volumes out of half-century-old notes and tapes and rendering McKeon’s ideas generally accessible is genuinely beyond praise.

These courses make clear the degree to which McKeon had already worked out his system of thought by the early 1960s. Indeed, it is startling how many of McKeon’s underlying assumptions have since become commonplaces—that “facts are constructed”; that we are living in a “post-foundationalist” age; that “rhetoric is everywhere.” Yet it is also striking how different McKeon’s response to the broad situation depicted by these commonplaces is from the other responses to which we have become accustomed. He did not go about trying to construct a new ultimate foundation for politics or ethics—whether through a return to the hierarchies of the past or through the discovery of a foundation that is postmetaphysical. Nor did he come to the conclusion that, without foundations, discourse and inquiry are fundamentally empty and contingent, or can best be viewed as struggles of power. McKeon would be the first to deny that either of these two more familiar responses can be refuted a priori. Today, however, it is difficult to avoid the sense that both are increasingly exhausted. They are obviously still capable of generating endless controversies. But are those controversies still at all fruitful? Do they generate any further invention and discovery? Can they genuinely address the increasingly apparent cultural and political challenges of the twenty-first century? If they cannot, then the thought of Richard McKeon constitutes a powerful alternative which it is well worth recovering and reconsidering.