

A New and Advanced Definition on Man

Lwan Po*

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to present the most complete, the most advance, and the most practical definition of man. For centuries, man has grappled with the riddle of what it means to be a man. There are many definitions of man such as “man as a rational being”, “man as an emotional being”, “man as a social and political being”, and so on. The above definitions of man show that man can be defined from the various points of view. To be all inclusive definition of man, the proposed definition must be more fulfilling lives by understanding and applying the closely related principles. The contribution of this paper is that Ernst Cassirer’s definition is one that fulfills necessary requirement for definition of “man as a symbolizing being”.

Keywords: (1) *Man as a Rational Being* (2) *Man as an Emotional Being* (3) *Man as a Symbolizing Being*

Introduction

For centuries man has grappled with the riddle of what it means to be a person. Although philosophers throughout the ages tried to answer the questions of who is man and what is the meaning of life, the answers for these questions are not universally agree to. There are many answers to the problem of the nature of human being from the point of view of being a mere biological organism and physical-chemical machine to the point of view of being a divine entity. It is intuitively clear that the nature of human being seems resemble other beings and at the same time, that seems quite distinct and is different from other beings. So, throughout history man has made a continuous search to find out what makes him whole.

The first step in the search for identity is to answer the question, How do you see yourself? What a man sees himself (as in the mirror largely determines his actions during the day.) A man is the number one determining factor in discovering who he is. Each individual must understand that he is responsible for his own pain, misery, unhappiness, or for his own joy. Man has the power to become whatever he wants to be; to feel as much love or anger or joy as we want to feel. Another subsequent factor in determining our identity is the image, name, or label given to us by society. In other words, what we believe other people think of us.

Most people participate in many groups of friends, school, family, jobs, clubs, churches and more each contributing to our identity. A person needs to understand that they are responsible for their own choices but they cannot discount the fact that there will always be a group that is essential to understand their identity. There is a far more important area than how a man sees himself or how the society sees him; this area is where he has the most control over his own identity. The area in which he has most control over his own identity is in the area of what he is actually doing. In other words, a man is the number one determining factor in discovering who he is. Since individuals are free to choose their own path, they must accept the responsibility of following their commitment wherever it leads. We have the freedom to choose and we become what we choose to do.

The questions Who is man? and What is the meaning of life? may be answered and the answer that man gets may be given by a philosophy or a religion. In philosophy, there are various answers given by different philosophers. According to Aristotle, human beings are set apart from other terrestrial creatures by their rationality. Other animals, according to this tradition, are capable of sensation and appetite, but they are not capable of thought, this kind

* Assistant Lecturer, Department of Philosophy, Yadanabon University

of activity is distinct characteristic of the rational part of the soul. Human beings, by contrast, are rational animals, and an understanding of our minds must begin from recognition of this distinctiveness.

This definition of man as rational animal is common in [scholastic philosophy](#) and came out as the most popular and significant definition of man. Its influence can be seen in Modern philosopher, Kant's philosophy and Contemporary philosopher, Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer philosophy. Although this definition of man as rational animal is powerful, there are so many definitions of man such as man as social animal, man as political animal, and man as emotional animal etc. Each definition has necessary and sufficient ground to stand up and face the definition of man as rational. Thus, Cassirer came forward a new definition for man. It becomes a new and advanced definition for man. According to Cassirer, man is a symbolizing animal.

1. The Basic Ground of the Definition: Man as Symbolizing Animal

The first basic ground of the definition, man as symbolization, is the philosophy of Socrates. The ancient Greek Philosophers, of which Socrates was central, marked a fundamental turning point in the evolution of humanity and our ideas about our existence in the universe. One of the most prominent maxims of Socrates is "Know Thyself". For Socrates, the most important knowledge for man is "Self-knowledge". From ancient Greek to recent time, most of the philosophers accept this maxim.

The second basic ground of the definition, man as symbolizing animal, is the philosophies of Aristotle and Kant. Aristotle gives the most popular and significant definition, man as a rational animal. In the [Nicomachean Ethics](#), Aristotle states that the human being has a rational principle, on top of the nutritive life shared with plants, and the instinctual life shared with other animals, i.e. the ability to carry out rationally formulated projects. This definition of man as a rational animal was common in [scholastic philosophy](#).

Aristotle's emphasis on good reasoning combined with his belief in the scientific method forms the backdrop for most of his work. Aristotle distinguishes sense perception from reason, which unifies and interprets the sense perceptions and is the source of all knowledge.

The human soul shares the nutritive element with plants, and the appetitive element with animals, but also has a rational element which is distinctively our own. According to Aristotle, man will enjoy the most intrinsically worthwhile way of life in virtue of some divine element in him. Thus Aristotle says:

"If then reason is divine in comparison with the rest of man's nature, the life which accords with reason will be divine in comparison with human life in general. Nor is it right to follow the advice of people who say that the thoughts of men should not be too high for humanity or the thoughts of humanity too high for morality; for a man, as far as in him lies, should seek immortality and to all that is in his power to live in accordance with the highest part of his nature."¹

Aristotle firmly believed that Reason is the source of the first principles of knowledge. Reason is opposed to the sense in so far as sensations are restricted and individual, and thought is free and universal. Also, while the senses deal with the concrete and material aspect of phenomena, reason deals with the abstract and ideal aspects.

After Aristotle, this definition of man as a rational animal was common in [scholastic philosophy](#). Like Aristotle, Modern Philosopher, Immanuel Kant, interested in man's power of reason and believed that because of the power of reason, man takes place on the top of the universe. Kant claimed that:

"Man could again stand up and face the universe, confident in his power to understand it and control it to his destiny."²

Moreover, the view of Uexkull, biologist and philosopher, can be said that the third basic ground of the definition, man as symbolizing animal. Concerned with the view of Uexkull, Cassirer's definition of man is come out. According to Uexkull, the organism possesses the receptor system and the effector system. Without the cooperation and equilibrium of these two systems the organism could not survive. The receptor system by which a biological species receives outward stimuli and the effector system by which it reacts to them are in all cases closely interwoven. They are links in one and the same chain.

In the Contemporary Philosophies, Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, in his work *An Essay on Man* (1944), altered Aristotle definition to label man as a symbolic animal. This definition has been influential in the field of philosophical anthropology.

2. Man as Symbolizing Animal

Ernst Cassirer came forward a new definition of man. According to him, instead of defining man as a rational animal, it should be defined man as a symbolizing animal. According to Cassirer, this world forms obviously no exception to those biological rules which govern the life of all the other organisms but in the human world, there is a new characteristic which appears to be the distinctive mark of human life. The functional circle of man is not only quantitatively enlarged; it has also undergone qualitative change. Man has discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, all animal species are to be found but in man, there is a third link, namely, *the symbolic system*.

According to Cassirer, this new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As like to animals, man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives in a new dimension of reality. There is an unmistakable difference between organic reactions and human responses. In the first case a direct and immediate answer is given to an outward stimulus; in the second case the answer is delayed. It is interrupted and retarded by a slow and complicated process of thought. At first sight such a delay may appear to be a very questionable gain. Many philosophers have warned man against this pretended progress.

According to Cassirer, man cannot escape from his own achievement. But, he can adopt the conditions of his own life. No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a *symbolic universe*. Language, myth, art and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All the human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face.

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's *symbolic activity* advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the introspection of this artificial medium. His situation is the same in the theoretical as in the practical sphere. Even here man does not live in a world of hard facts, or according to his immediate needs and desires, he lives rather in the midst of imagine emotions, in the hope and fear, in illusions and disillusion in his fantasies and in dreams.

According to Cassirer, from the above point of view, it may be derived correctly and enlarged the classical definition of man as rational animal. This definition of man has not lost its force. Rationality is indeed an inherent feature of all human activities. Even Mythology itself is not simply a crude mass of superstitions or gross delusions. It is not merely chaotic,

for it possesses a systematic or conceptual form. But on the other hand, it would be impossible to characterize the structure of myth as rational.

Language has often been identified with reason or with very source of reason. But it is easy to see that this definition fails to cover the whole field. It offers us a part for the whole. For side by side with conceptual language, there is an emotional language; side by side with logical or scientific language there is a language of poetic imagination. Primarily language does not express thoughts or ideas, but feelings and affections. And even a religion “within the limits of pure reason” is no more than a mere abstraction. It conveys only the ideal shape, only the shadow, of what a genuine and concrete religious life is. In this way, Cassirer reaches his correct definition and he enlarges the definition of man is as follow:

“Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man’s cultural life in all their richness and variety. But all these forms are symbolic forms. Hence instead of defining man as a rational animal, we should define him as a symbolizing being. By so doing we can designate his specific difference and we can understand the new way open to man – the way to civilization.”³

According to Susanne Langer, this basic need, which certainly is obvious only in man, is the need of symbolization. The symbol-making function is one of man's primary activities, like eating, looking, or moving about. It is the fundamental process of his mind, and goes on all the time. Sometimes we are aware of it, sometimes we merely find its results, and realize that certain experiences have passed through our brains and have been digested there.

Susanne Langer discusses briefly the idea of “feeling”, defining it at its most basic level to be “everything that can be felt”. Langer then turns her focus to “form” and recognizes that while it has the ability to be interpreted many ways, she uses the world in a “wider sense”. This “wider sense” to Langer is “structure”, “articulation” and in the most basic sense, “the way the whole is put together”. With this term well defined, Langer then connects it to her idea of “expressive form”, where in form is a “symbol” used to understand greater ideas in a “deeply intuitive process”.

Langer then goes on to build upon this concept in her argument regarding emotion. She believes their experience of emotion which is itself too great to be directly put into words; therefore, one must use a series of symbols to create an almost alternative language in order to communicate emotions. One tool she notes that is most often used in this linguistic process is the use of metaphors. She recognizes that while metaphors cannot be considered their own language, they do “function as a symbol” when a concept is new or seemingly incomprehensible. She remarks that such a use of vocabulary is an “extension of language”, and such a concept can similarly be translated into works of art.

Conclusion

The above three basic grounds of the definition such as Socrates’ maxim of “Know Thyself”, Aristotle and Kant’s definition “Man as Rational Animal” and Uexkull’s view on “The Receptor System and the Effector System of the Organism” contributes towards Ernst Cassirer definition, man as symbolizing animal, Contemporary philosopher, Ernst Cassirer pays remark on self-knowledge as:

“that self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be general acknowledged. In all the conflicts between the philosophical schools this objective remained invariable and unshaken: it proved to be the Archimedean point, the fixed and unmovable center, of all thought.”⁴

A self-knowledge of a man may be the knowledge of self-introspection or it may be the knowledge that is constituted from his related spheres. A man may be nothing more than

a creature of unquestioning natural instincts, a man may be aware of himself as distinct from other men, a man may be aware of something above himself, namely, society and to be aware of that society is a whole of which he is a part.

Rationality, according to Aristotle, is an essential property of humankind; it is what distinguishes man from beast. Like Aristotle, Modern Philosopher, Immanuel Kant, interested in man's power of reason and believed that because of the power of reason, man takes place on the top of the universe. According to this, they define man as rational animal. Neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer altered Aristotle's definition to label man as a symbolizing animal.

And also, Cassirer defines man as a cultural being. According to Cassirer, Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature but his work, it is this work, it is the system of humanity. Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A "philosophy of man" would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole. Language, art, myth, religion are no isolated, random creations.

Synonymously, Schiller transforms Kant's account of aesthetic experience into an anthropological insight into human nature, conceiving beauty as "our second creatress" which offers us the "possibility of becoming human beings". According to Schiller, aesthetical disposition must be considered as the highest of all gifts, as the gift of humanity. This capacity for humanity, before every definite determination in which he may be placed. But as a matter of fact, he loses it with every determined condition, into which he may come, and if he is to pass over to an opposite condition, humanity must be in every case restored to him by the aesthetic life.

From the above definitions of man, man can be defined from the points of view of culture, art and symbol. Therefore it can be derived that man can begin to lead more fulfilling lives by understanding and applying the closely related principles. Man must begin to see himself as being of his own self and not just a product of society. After man realizes that he is his own self he must realize he is what he does. Therefore Ernst Cassirer came forward a new and advance definition of man; man is symbolizing animal. This definition becomes more complete and practical definition of man. Furthermore, it can be said that it is the definition which is all inclusive definition of man.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our heartfelt Rector Dr. Maung Maung Naing and Pro-Rectors Dr. Si Si Khin, Dr. Tint Moe Thuzar, Yadanabon University for their interest and encouragement on the research work. We particularly want to thank Dr. Nu Nu Lwin, Professor, Department of Philosophy, Yadanabon University for her guidance, suggestions and advice to affectively present our research.

References

- Bali, Dev Raj, "*Introduction to Philosophy*", New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 1997.
- Borchert, Donald. M "*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*", 2nd edition, New York: Macmillan publishing com, 2006.
- Cassirer, Ernst, "*An Essay on Man*", New York, Double Day in com, Inc, 1953.
- D, Ross, "*Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics*", New York, Oxford University Press inc, 2009.
- Durant, Will, "*The Story of Philosophy*", New York, Washington Square Press, Inc, 1966.
- Frost, S.E. "*Basic Teaching of the Great Philosophers*", New York, Barnes and Noble Inc, 1955.
- Kearny, Richard and David Rasmussen, "*Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism: An Anthropology*", Oxford Blackwell publishers Ltd. 2001.
- Kearny, Anthony, "*A New History of Western Philosophy*". Oxford, Oxford University Press. 2012.
- Langer, S. "*Problems of Art*", New York Scribner, 1957.
- Shand, John, "*Philosophy and Philosophers*", London, ULC press limited University College London. 1993.
- Thilly, Frank "*A History of Philosophy*", Allahabad, Central book, 1965.