

# Philosophical Comprehension of Culture and Human Essence\*

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**Abstract**—The authors of the article consider the duality of a human being and his relationship with culture. Based on the historical and philosophical material, the authors come to the conclusion that man is a biological being by nature and a socio-spiritual, i.e. cultural, being by essence. At the same time, the emphasis is made on the importance of social interactions that beget an individual as homo sapiens. Culture, man, society are being formed in the process of spiritual comprehension, a transcendence of existence (M. Heidegger, M. Mamardashvili), resting on religious symbols, metaphysical concepts, and creativity in art. In this regard, the definition of man as a biosocial being seems to be insufficient, for he is a socio-cultural, spiritual entity. There is no one outside culture and society in the foundation of which is the symbol-making activity of consciousness (Ernst Cassirer and M. Mamardashvili).

**Keywords**—*spiritual cognition; culture; human nature; transcendence; social interactions; the origin of man; symbol-making activity*

*Human culture is not something given and taken for granted,*

*but it is a miracle that needs interpretation [1].*

*Ernst Cassirer*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Man, as a socio-spiritual being is a product of culture: he is creating it and he is being formed by it. In this context, society is defined as a part of the world, isolated from nature but still closely related to it. Only by distinguishing self from the other, from nature, man and society may embrace their specificity as it was profoundly expressed by N. Berdyaev: "Spirit is freedom, not nature" [2]. If biology, archeology, anthropology, paleontology and other sciences study the origin of man as a biological species, then philosophy seeks to comprehend his socio-spiritual origin. Metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, cultural studies, and other philosophical disciplines do exactly that.

The concept of culture can be considered in a variety of

scopes and possible implementations. But first, let's touch on etymology which will help to reveal the concept's meaning. As you may know, "culture" comes from Latin "cultivation" and was primarily used in the economic sphere, hence "cultivation" — bringing soil to a state where it could produce the best possible crops. Later the term was applied to culture — "cultivation of spirituality". The Russian philosopher Pavel Florensky provides one more view: he tried to derive the word's "culture" etymology from "cult", considering the latter as a matrix of culture from which all its species grow. Although the known etymology doesn't confirm this hypothesis, it is pretty much close to the truth since a primitive man's Weltanschauung was entirely religious.

Man is different from nature exactly by culture, by the production of material and immaterial goods. Culture is what nature isn't. In this regard, spiritual culture may be described as a certain sphere of activity that arose for the creation and distribution of spiritual values as a result of the social division of labor. The varying set of values, symbols, ideas, and meanings determines each culture. The function of values is to protect and preserve the integrity of a social group. Let's consider the relationships among culture, sociality, and human nature.

## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The three following Hominidae traits are used to biologically distinguish a human being: bipedal locomotion, more complex brains, and developed hands. According to Aristotle, "the hand is a tool of tools" [3], although similar takes had been made by the preceding philosophers, most probably, by Democritus. Later Hegel, before Charles Darwin and F. Engels, stressed the erect posture "serving as an expression of man" with hand being "the absolute tool". Hegel's thoughts on this subject are peculiar and profound:

"Man does not hold himself erect naturally but stands upright by the energy of his will... A hand is something peculiar to man alone; no animal has such a tool directed outward. The hand is a tool of tools and it can serve as an expression of an infinite manifestation of will" [4].

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However, many animals can also move on two limbs (a rooster, e.g., can even stand on one leg but it doesn't evolve into a human being). It is possible to find apes with a larger brain volume and with highly developed extremities. Therefore, it may be concluded that the biological prerequisites are important for the formation of culture and humans but they alone are insufficient. Moreover, all biological preconditions may be available with the lack of social interactions that creates man. So, the essence of social interaction is not what connects a person with the animal kingdom but what distinguishes. Let's highlight the essential cultural and social traits that form social interactions:

- Professional life, labor, use of tools, especially those artificially created;
- The use of language as a conscious way of communication and the development of writing;
- Thinking and reason;
- Consciousness and self-consciousness, Weltanschauung, and hence, purposeful activity.

So, a full set of the abovementioned qualities is at the heart of culture and social interactions. These qualities are not present in an individual from the moment of birth but are rather being acquired, i.e. are possible only on condition of interaction, communication. Social interactions represent a special integrity, formed as a result of joint life of people, their labor, usage of tools, especially artificial ones, presence of language, thinking, reason and consciousness; social interactions are the air we breathe but don't see, thanks to which we lead human and not animal life. The development of biological basis is their prerequisite, necessary but insufficient, and the essential features of social interactions being formed only as a result of the historical development of a community. Exactly within the framework of social interactions culture is being formed and man is being allocated. Hegel took into account natural biological factors and put spiritual ones forward. Spirit is realized to the greatest extent in man, society, state, and global history: "Man is made by thought... that he is the spirit" [5].

### III. NATURE AND HUMAN ESSENCE

Immanuel Kant, one of the predecessors of modern cultural studies and philosophical anthropology, believed that man belongs to two worlds at once: to the speculative (noumenal) world by his spiritual and moral existence, and to the empirical (phenomenal) world by his physical existence [6]. Indeed, everyone can discover that a person, while remaining an integral being, is internally differentiated, consisting of soul (consciousness) and body. Let's not argue about their nature but let's note that due to the presence of what we have called "soul" an individual cannot be completely reduced to a biological species. Despite the fact that a person doesn't exist without a body, it doesn't represent human essence. It is a mere substrate, with human essence confined in the soul, or, to put it in a contemporary way, in consciousness and self-consciousness.

In this regard the origin of man is also dual: it is possible to consider both the origin of the body and the origin of the soul. Although these processes are closely interrelated, they are not identical because they are not equal. It's necessary to suggest the following description of this relation: man is a biological being by nature, and socio-spiritual, i.e. cultural, in essence. Exactly cultural factors define a human being. Biology is important just as the formation of a person's material basis. But no matter how well that basis is developed, it is unable to produce an individual in the full meaning of the word. Our point is confirmed by a simple fact that if a child at the very early age is excluded from the social environment, it will never become a full-fledged person, learn how to articulate speech and numeracy, despite the impressive brains volume and developed hands. A human being is characterized by a values-based attitude to reality, while an animal does not separate itself from nature. People transform reality in accordance with their constantly developing needs, create the desired material and spiritual benefits and values, and create a kind of "second nature" — culture.

Thus, the definition of a human as just a biosocial being seems insufficient. If people are talking about a person in the proper sense, i.e. they strive to stress his distinctive features, his essence, then it would be more correct to define a human as a socio-spiritual or socio-cultural being.

Cultures, spiritual sphere in society and soul make human, distinguish him from the animal world, and society from the herd. If spirituality and morality don't develop, the solely technological progress can only lead mankind to downfall since it won't be able to reasonably, wisely, and morally use its potential, destroying itself in a thermonuclear war or in a global ecological catastrophe.

Aristotle defined man as a political, i.e. social, being, and K. Marx saw the human essence in social interactions, based and depending on economics. In the 20th century, there emerge a number of peculiar directions of philosophy considering the issue of the human essence. Ernst Cassirer argued that a human being is a "symbol-making animal". According to the philosopher, language, myth, religion, art, history and even science are the "symbolic forms", invented by man, explaining him the world and creating culture. Therefore, the human essence is spiritual but that spirit isn't coming from some external forces but is rather the result of the consciousness' symbol-making activities. The whole culture is a system of symbols; man generates spiritual phenomena — symbols, and they generate man.

The philosophy of existentialism denies the human essence as something static and predetermined (A. Camus, J-P. Sartre). The essence opposes existence, as a result of which a person can create himself, he doesn't exist as a given, as an object. Man is a project, a desire to be an individual, and if there's no such, then there's nobody. In other words, man creates himself in his own image and after his own likeness. The 20th-century psychoanalyst Erich Fromm called a man an eccentric creature. According to Karl Jaspers, "Man cannot be deduced from anything else" for he "cannot

be understood as someone "evolved" from animals". Man "is presented to himself by transcendence" [7].

In the 20th century, philosophical anthropology emerged, scrutinizing an individual as an incomplete creature constantly creating itself through the world of culture (Max Scheler, Arnold Gehlen, etc.). Also, a new science of cultural anthropology came into living, studying the cultural basis of human nature. In recent decades, a general theory of culture (culture studies) was formed, which includes theoretical aspects of cultural anthropology. Philosophy, being the apex of culture, seeks to reveal the essence of culture.

#### IV. SPIRITUAL CULTURE AND HUMAN ESSENCE

Going deeper into the concept of culture, it's needed to note that its broad interpretation says little about the spiritual activity of an individual. Therefore, there's a more narrow and specific meaning of culture, coinciding with the modern use of the term. In this case, culture is considered just as a spiritual culture, i.e. the sphere of creation of ideas, ideals, symbols, meanings, and values — all that refers to nonbiological and non-economic forms of human activity's management.

Let us put into the spotlight this concept of culture and point out its constituent elements. They are philosophy, religion, art, morality, and science. However, the place of these types of spiritual activity in culture is not equally weighted. On the periphery of culture there is scientific knowledge, for it doesn't realize the actual spiritual needs of a person but his material needs: "...the reliance only on the scientific knowledge will never make a person more humane as humanity is born from the eternal search for the meaning of life, unfathomable by a purely scientific thinking. Spirituality and morals do not depend on the degree of mastering the results of scientific research and studies" [8]. But science is still a part of the spiritual culture as scientific activity can be dominated by the cognitive interest which is entirely the phenomenon of spirit. Growing to the degree of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, science morphs into philosophy. As it turns out, knowledge for the sake of knowledge, just as art for the sake of art, may bring a person the greatest spiritual benefit, meaning, and satisfaction.

Morality, following the science, is also on the periphery of spiritual activity, for it is its product. Morality is something that "precipitates out" as a result of spiritual knowledge, carried out in the spiritual forms of self-cognition — religion, philosophy, and art. Thus, we have encountered an even more specific meaning of a person's spiritual activity, forming the culture itself. Meanwhile, philosophy, religion, and art are not equal. But we may set the difference among them not on the basis of their values, as they're invaluable for culture, but from the standpoint on the difference in the methods of spiritual activity. Thus, e.g., only philosophy and religion may be attributed to systematic forms of spiritual cognition, because they are built upon theoretical provisions expressed in a conceptual form, while art is not theoretical in its nature and is divided into separate types with specific means of creativity.

However, spiritual knowledge cannot be identified with the following spheres of its implementation – philosophy, religion, and art. The spiritual phenomenon in them may also be alienated and externalized. The actual spiritual activity in philosophy is philosophizing, faith in religion, creation of artifacts and the expression of spiritual ideas in art.

In culture, spiritual knowledge is defined by special "symbolic constructions", e.g., a symbol of self-denying love or pure faith, etc. Mamardashvili emphasizes that "faith is impossible as a real psychological state of any human being. Just as unselfish love is impossible. And yet we live in a dimension, permeated with these symbols, producing in us human traits". Philosophy, like religion, refers to such "symbolic constructions", special "forms" [9].

Examples of cultural activity are imprinted in the mankind's spiritual history, yet everyone, in order to become cultural and spiritual, must discover them inside and for himself by introducing self, first of all, to philosophy, spiritual tradition, and art. An individual is called to enrich himself with a variety of spiritual knowledge, and only then it is possible to avoid both religious fanaticism and militant atheism, which are equally hostile to culture and spirituality as they use violence.

The paramount life problem for a person is himself. Cognition of nature, society, other people — all these are tools of self-cognition and self-realization of an individual who is incomparably richer than his time, the era in which he lives — he can carry the wealth of the entire world culture. A person himself may be ignorant of the endless wealth and bliss inside.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Man is a part of nature and at the same time is a product of culture, inextricably linked with society. The biological and social origins are fused together. As a biological being, a person belongs to the higher mammals, which is evidenced by anatomy, physiology, and instincts; yielding to animals in the development of individual organs, humans surpass them in potential. Human biological properties are not rigidly determined which makes it possible to adapt to different living conditions. Biology in human doesn't exist in a pure form, it is culturally and socially determined. The social influence is noticeable even in genetics, e.g., in acceleration.

Human position in the world is such that he finds himself in the act of self-consciousness as a being that contains contradictions within and moves in them. Their essence lies in the fact that a person is crucified in a way between two worlds; empirical and ideal, sensual and speculative, he is both spiritual and material being. This human position reflects religion in its fundamental dogmas and philosophy in its concepts mainly through the symbol of the fall from grace and through the category of being and essence.

Philosophy as metaphysics appears in the form of "creativity laboratory of a human being" [10]. Because of it, a person is able to "fall" out into a different, meaningful, moral regime of existence. Mamardashvili defines this

process, which people can exercise only in own effort, as "actual genesis". He tends to expose this process through moral categories highlighting conscience which is elusive and indeterminate but is a condition for the existence of morality. According to him, "nature doesn't give birth to people", they are artificial creatures. Therefore, for a person to occur as a cultural entity, it's necessary to have a crucible (constituting device) in which he could be smelt. In this sense, an individual is "an artificial being, which gives birth to him by the process known as history and culture". Condensed, the process is carried out and comprehended by metaphysics, religious or philosophical, using for this purpose certain symbols and ideas about "higher objects" [11] and "other worlds" (F. Dostoyevsky).

M. Mamardashvili wrote, "Nothing human may exist by itself; it must be constantly renewed. Human effort cannot exist without a metaphysical element in a human being. In this sense, a metaphysical element, or metaphysics, is physical, that is, constitutive in relation to man and culture. He is one or another depending on metaphysics" [12]. According to Heidegger, a human is a metaphysical being. However, the contemporary Western culture has lost faith in the transcendent, as stated Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Philosophy, anthropology and cultural studies, stemming from it, study the spiritual, social human "origin". Biology and other sciences cannot ask the correct questions as human essence, just as a culture, are ultimately the product of the transcendence of existence (M. Mamardashvili, M. Heidegger). It is impossible to derive morality from naturalistic ideas because the former is the product of the spirit's work and not the result of the struggle of the species and natural evolution.

[12] *Ibid.*, P. 19.

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