

Kenneth Burke's Definition of Man

“Definition of Man”, sometimes now referred to as Definition of Human, originated from a summary essay of [Kenneth Burke](#) (1897–1993) included in his 1966 work, *Language as Symbolic Action*. Burke's work in communication spanned many fields and focused primarily on rhetoric. Perhaps best known for his theory of “Dramatism,” he describes life as not just reflecting or being like a drama, but rather, life is drama.¹ As Shakespeare penned, “All life is a stage.”

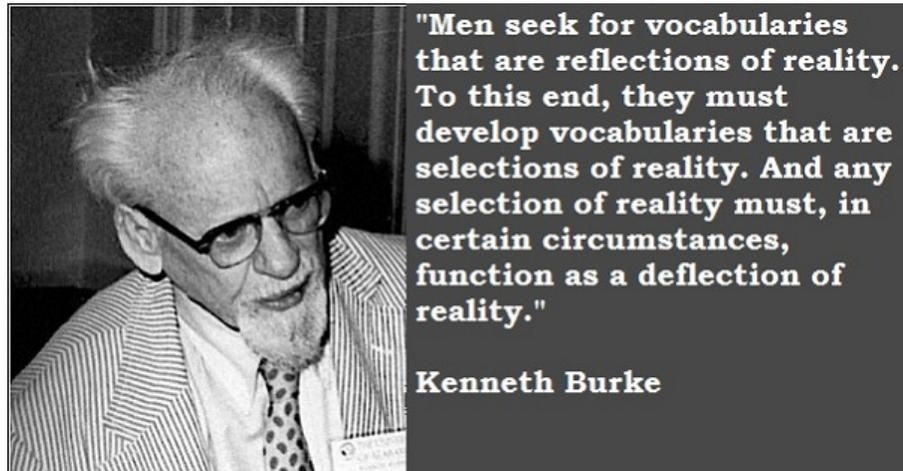
Burke's definition of man states:

"Man is the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal, inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative), separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making, goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of order), and rotten with perfection".²

Essentially, Burke's definition maintains that humans are distinct from other creatures by the virtue of their use of symbols to communicate, their use of the negative in their communication system, their separation from nature by their own techniques and tools, their existence in ascending and descending social structures, and their insatiable desire to become far better than they are.

Symbol User:

Burke believed symbol use was the most important thing that defined humans. Their reality is created symbolically, they trade symbols more than they do anything else, and all human action is infused with symbols.

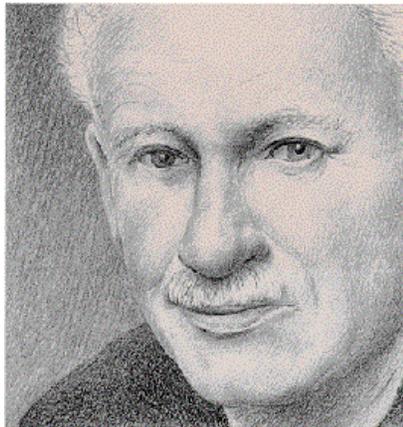


¹ Miller, K. *Communication theories: Perspective, processes and contexts* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2005), p. 96

² Burke, K. (1966). *Language as symbolic action*. Berkley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 16

Inventor of the Negative:

Burke struggled with using the word “inventor,” since he felt that language invented man. He pointed out that negatives do not exist in nature, they are purely a characteristic of symbol systems, which he already determined belonged uniquely to the human animal. He insisted morality was a particularly human notion and is created by the idea of the negative; guilt only exists when we do things we should NOT do or Not do things we should do.³

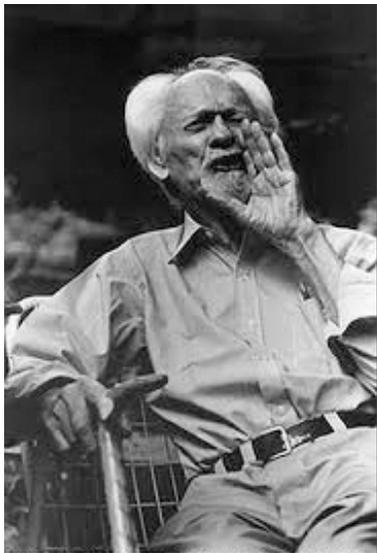


"Our purpose is simply to ask how theological principles can be shown to have usable secular analogues that throw light upon the nature of language."

Kenneth Burke

Separated from His Natural Condition by Instruments:

Tools and technology have removed humans from nature. Burke saw technology as deceptive and destructive. His writing was fraught with technological anxiety, and



Photograph by Robert Taylor Brewer.

How could a choice be called free when its consequences are unknown at the time of our choosing?

**KENNETH BURKE,
*Towards a Better Life***

his negative attitude toward technology developed over many decades. His last book, *The Technological Bluff*, warned the reader of the technologies that had the power to destroy the human race. He essentially saw the unknown consequences of technology more dangerous than the problems the technology solved. His lifestyle illustrated his anti-technological mode of behavior; he lived on a rustic farm without running water or electricity well into the 1960s.

³ Burke, *Language as symbolic action*. p.9-13

Goaded by the Spirit of Hierarchy:



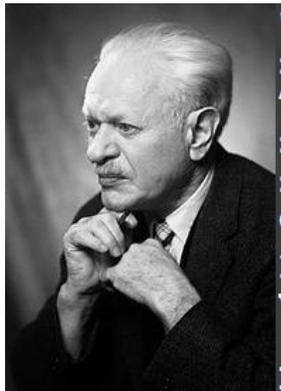
"For no continuity of social act is possible without a corresponding social status and the many different kinds of act required in an industrial state, with its high degree of specialization, make for corresponding classification of status."

Kenneth Burke

Humans are drawn to order and status. Class rivalry, is inherent in human nature. Specialization, divisions of labor, the nobility and the peasantry are all examples of this idea, which creates the notion of “the other.” Like Marx, Burke saw this as the source of human conflict and war.

Rotten with Perfection:

This last part of Burke's definition speaks to the motives that are distinct to humans. Motive is a central part of Burke's “Dramatistic Perspective.” Motion and action are different things. Water moves because of physics, but what moves us is motive. His books the *Rhetoric of Motives* and the *Grammar of Motives* are concerned with rhetorically ascertaining the motives behind human action. Motive is not present



"Creation implies authority in the sense of originator. The possibility of a 'Fall' is implied in a Covenant insofar as the idea of a Covenant implies the possibility of its being violated."

Kenneth Burke

in nature. He points out that a rock and a tree are perfectly acceptable as being what they are, but humans strive to be better.

Humans' struggle for perfection may enable them to reach commendable goals and progress, but Burke also sees this goal of perfection to be rife

with danger. A particularly poignant example he uses is the perfection strived for by the Nazis. In his book, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, he explains that such dichotomies of perfection give credence to man's belief in God and Devil and Heaven and Hell.

Kenneth Burke's definition only differs from Aristotle's, “Man is the rational animal;” Mark Twain's “Man is the moral animal;” and anthropology's, “Humans are the tool-using animal;” in that Burke includes all three in his definition, and ironically, in the hierarchical order of importance he perceives them.⁴

⁴ Adapted from “Definition of Man,” *Wikipedia*, sources verified, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Definition_of_man, accessed 8/11/2013.