

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE TOOL

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649165278

The philosophy of the tool by Paul Carus

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Cover @ 2017

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PAUL CARUS

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BY
DR. PAUL CARUS

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A LECTURE DELIVERED ON TUESDAY, JULY 18, 1893, BEFORE THE
DEPARTMENT OF MANUAL AND ART EDUCATION OF
THE WORLD'S CONGRESS AUXILIARY

"MAN IS A TOOL-MAKING ANIMAL."—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

CHICAGO
THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING COMPANY

1893

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MAN, according to the Bible, is created in the image of God. By natural science he is classified as *homo sapiens*. Aristotle defines him as ζῷον πολιτικόν. Theologians say: the distinctive feature of man is religion. Students of ethics find that man alone can form ideals; man, accordingly, is a moral being. Philologists, like Noiré and Max Müller, say, man is a speaking animal, for "reason is speech," a truth which appeared quite obvious to the Greek mind which for "word" and "reason" employed the same term, λόγος. And our own great countryman, Benjamin Franklin, gave expression to the energetic spirit of American industry by saying: "Man is a tool-making animal."

Are these definitions contradictory, or do they agree? Are they, perhaps, corollaries of one and the same truth viewed under different aspects? And if they are, must we regard some of them as penetrating deeper into the mystery of the nature of man than others? Perhaps we shall find every one of them useful in its way when we endeavor to go to the bottom of the problem.

The biblical definition is rather broad and vague. It is adapted to suit men of very different views, and

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can be interpreted, in the light of various God-conceptions, in various ways. The difficulty is, it requires more explanation than it gives ; but let us not for that reason think the less of it. The naturalist simply labels the class and the family of man. Aristotle's definition applies to one very important but not an exclusive quality of human beings, for there are other social animals than man. No one calls ants or bees human beings, although they certainly lead a social life and possess institutions quite analogous to cities and states. The philosopher's definition is quite correct ; reason is the distinctive feature of man, and the philologist's explanation of reason as the product of language removes that mystery that might be attached to reason. Yet Franklin's description of man, although not made with any intention of theorising, is the most striking one of all ; for it suggests that man's reason developed *by the exercise of reason*. The organ was created by its function. *Applied* reason made of man a rational being. Work has been the great educator of mankind, and the employment of tools was the school through which man had to pass.

It is ordained that in the sweat of his face man shall eat his bread, and how often do we complain that this is the order of nature ! We are too apt to believe that work is a curse, when really it is a blessing. For in truth our civilisation of to-day is the product of work, and the human soul with its rationality, its ethics, its ideals, its grandeur, has become what it is only through

constant struggles, tribulations, anxieties, and by constantly toiling onward in the road of progress.

Toil is wholesome, it demands great efforts and rouses man's energy. Yet it is not the purpose of life, nor does it constitute the human of man. Toil is the common lot of all creatures ; toil tries their souls, and sifts from among them the strong for survival.

The human of man is his method of toiling ; it is his economy of rendering his work more effective, call it the rational method, call it the systematical or scientific method, call it the divine or God-imitating method, call it morality or whatever you please ; philosophers call it reason, but reason is most certainly a method of work ; aside from work it would be a mere Vanity Fair, and it manifests itself most obviously in the use of tools.

Anthropologists and ethnologists have devoted much study to the tool, and many of them have made it the chief object of their inquiries. Their labors are not wasted, for indeed, the use of tools forms, as it were, an anthropometer wherewith to measure the manhood of man and to determine the degree of human civilisation. Tell us what tools a nation uses and we shall be able to give a fair estimate of its intelligence, culture, and morality.

* * *

The English word *tool* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *tól*, which is a contracted form of *tawil*. The verb *tawian*, connected with the Gothic *taujan*, means

to prepare, to make, its root being the same as in the Greek *τυγχάνειν*, *τυχή*, etc., and the German *taugen*, *tüchtig*, etc.

The German word *Werkzeug* is of a much later origin, but that, too, expresses the same idea ; it is derived from *wirken*, to work ; it is the instrument for performing work.

What is a tool ? A tool is any implement employed for rendering work effective. Work fills the gap between the needs of the worker and his purposes ; it bridges the chasm between a desire and the thing or state of things desired ; and a tool facilitates the performance of work, it helps us to execute the motions necessary for reaching the end in view.

Thus, tools exist only where there is a purpose, and the use of tools is always a mechanical operation. On the one hand, the use of tools implies purpose-ensouled creatures, i. e., beings who feel their wants and make efforts to supply them ; and on the other hand, tools are possible only in a world in which there is action and reaction, in which push and pressure take place, and where push against push, pressure against pressure, produces what we call resistance, i. e., a world, the interrelations of which can be described in mechanical laws, or briefly, in a world whose constitution is mechanical.

Tools extend the sphere of our existence. Hammers, spades, axes, are prolongations of our hands ; the dairy, the bakery, the kitchen, are, as it were, appen-