

## **ORTEGA Y GASSET AS A PHILOSOPHER OF CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of culture as a way of life is a very topical issue in our world today. There is a need for a profound understanding of this concept to allow for proper treatment of people of other cultures different from ours and which also creates a peaceful condition in the world that permits development. Through the traditional methodology of analysis in philosophy laced with phenomenological sense, this discourse exposes the rich cultural philosophy of Gasset in which culture is revealed as a people`s response to their challenge of existence in order to make possible the satisfactory and comfortable life. In this exposure, ground is provided for the comprehension of culture in a manner that disseminates tolerance, hard work for development and indeed a better world.*

**Keywords:** Gasset, Culture, World, Tolerance, Development and Hard work.

### **Introduction**

The concept of culture that is in vogue in our world today can be very deceptive. It is the understanding that culture is a people`s way of living. This definition of culture is correct. However, the idea of culture is more than just being a people`s way of life. It is imperative to appreciate that the nature of human existence determined the nature of culture. Human existence is a task and a challenge because it does not on its own give the human person all he/she needs to live satisfactorily and comfortably. Culture therefore, is all inventions in place, material and immaterial by the human person to confront the challenges of existence in order to live satisfactorily and comfortably. It is this idea of culture as a response to life`s challenges that is comprehensive and give meaning to the definition of culture in vogue: a people`s way of living. In essence people have a particular way of living because they found that way to be better sustenance for them. This is the ideal explanation of the way that people live by. As this particular concept is not really so much in vogue, yet the rationality of the human person needs it, especially for the human person to understand himself/herself, and to ensure activities in the world are in the right direction, there is the need to popularize this concept of culture. Studying Gasset`s philosophy of culture provides an ample opportunity for a good understanding of this concept of culture.

### **Who is Ortega Y Gasset?**

Jose Ortega Y Gasset was born in Madrid on May 9, 1883. He was the son of Jose Ortega Munilla and Dolores Gasset. He was connected on both sides of his family to the most representative cultural and political circles in Spain at that time. His father who was a writer was a member of the Spanish Royal Academy in 1902.

In 1891, at the age of eight, Gasset was in a boarding school run by the Jesuits in Miran Flores del Palo, Malaga. He was here until 1897. He had his university studies in law and philosophy at the university of Deusto (1897-1898) also run by Jesuits. He also proceeded to the Universidad central de Madrid where he graduated with a bachelor's degree in philosophy (1902) and a doctorate (1904) with a thesis entitled "The terrors of the year 1000: Critique of a Legend." He criticized his Jesuit educators for the strife and negativisms of their teachings, their intolerance, and above all, their limited knowledge and intellectual incompetence. Gasset's experience at the university in Madrid was also disappointing. He described the teaching there as being of the utmost mediocrity. For Ortega therefore, justified or not, his overall views of the education he received was a negative one.<sup>1</sup>

Gasset felt himself to be part of the generation of 1898. This generation was faced with a special psychological state of Spanish society. With the treaty of Paris, Spain gave up its rights of sovereignty over Cuba which became a free nation, and ceded Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam to the United States of America. The loss of their colonies filled the Spanish people with bitterness, anguish and pessimism. Spanish intellectual activity began to focus on what was described as the "Spanish problem" that in fact covered a host of problems. These were analysed, and Spain's historical values mercilessly criticized; each author, whatever his area of activity, sought in his own way an explanation for the "problem of Spain" and the causes of the country's decline. In the words of Sanchez, this critical period laid the foundations for a scientific, artistic and philosophical movement that was to earn Spain the kind of reputation it had not enjoyed since the sixteenth century. In fact, it has been thought that Modern Spain began with the "generation of 98," which was innovative in so many ways, but above all had a new way of looking at Spanish society and intellectual topics.<sup>2</sup> Gasset shared in his generation's pain and bitterness at Spain's decline. He tried with that generation to understand the reasons for the current state of Spanish culture, education, politics and science.

However, while others of the generation expressed their unhappiness evoking past glories, Gasset called for hope, and action and dedication to change the present painful situation of his country, looking not to the past but to the future.<sup>3</sup>

### **Gasset as a Philosopher of Culture**

It suffices to say that a person who philosophizes about a people's way of living (that is, culture) qualifies as a philosopher of culture.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of philosophy of culture having necessary connection with "living" can be seen running through the issues in philosophy of culture: what human living entails<sup>5</sup>; universal or objective culture and relative or particular culture;<sup>6</sup> the rationality of traditional way of living in relation to contemporary challenges;<sup>7</sup> the desire to understand the intellectual foundation of culture;<sup>8</sup> the need to know that although there is a result of culture, but there is still the idea of transmission of culture whereby there is necessarily the need to discuss the fact of creation of culture by ancestors and therefore the need to review culture by inheritors to adapt it to present needs or challenges,<sup>9</sup> to mention just a few issues in philosophy of culture.

Philosophizing on the living of the Africans (that is, African Culture) and the challenge of human sustenance, Kwame Appiah says that Africa must accept her cultural inheritance. That it is too late to think of African traditional life unaffected by colonialism. For him, our present lot is African life affected by colonialism. He holds that if we are to overcome our problem in Africa, it is for us to critically examine all that we have inherited. Any aspect of our culture that is a clog on the wheel of progress must be jettisoned. While any that promises to serve human life should be retained. Appiah therefore advocates a philosophical appraisal of culture.<sup>10</sup>

Kwasi Wiredu, on philosophy of culture, holds that it is a function, indeed a duty, of philosophy in any society to examine the intellectual foundations of its culture. He thinks that for any such examination to be of any real use it should take the form of reasoned criticism, and where possible, reconstruction. He holds that no other way to philosophical progress is known than through criticism and adaptation. On account of this point, Wiredu is of the view that those who seem to think that the criticism of the African traditional philosophy by an African is something akin to betrayal are actually more conservative than those among our elders who are real thinkers as distinct from mere repositories of traditional ideas. This is because these elders are in the thinking of Wiredu are not afraid to criticize, reject, modify or add to traditional philosophical ideas.<sup>11</sup>

Paulin Hountondji, philosophizing on African living, urges that we must not be afraid to appraise our culture when they are no longer serving our needs. He

asks that we remember that culture was created by human beings (our ancestors) to solve their problem of human existence. That through transmission this culture has come to be inherited by us their descendants. For Hountondji therefore, the very idea of how culture came to be should instruct us to be courageous in reviewing culture to serve our needs. According to him:

We need to realize that what happened yesterday can still happen today, and try to be creative, here and now, as our ancestors were in their time. In this way, we shall no longer close up our tradition into the past, as if it were something dead, external and/or superior to us. We shall deal with it, theoretically and practically, as a living heritage, which calls upon our free, rational, critical evaluation.<sup>12</sup>

Has Ortega Y Gasset any philosophizing on culture in which case he could be considered a philosopher of culture? In answer to this question, it is important to note that Ortega Y Gasset's philosophy is essentially about human living.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in relation to the pre - existing definition of man in the sense of soul - body, Gasset holds that the soul and the body are instruments through which the human person lives. In this way he declines defining the human person in terms of body and soul. For him, the human person is primarily his life and not body or soul. In his words,

What is human is not man's body, nor even his soul, but his life. The body is a thing, the soul is also a thing; man is not a thing, but a drama - his life. Man has to live with the body and soul, which have fallen to him by chance. The one and the other - the body and soul - are the apparatus nearest to him with which he has to live, that is to say, with which he must exist in his surroundings.<sup>14</sup>

The human person, who has been defined in the sense of his life, cannot go on existing without some sense of direction his life must go. In essence, in order to exist in the environment into which he has fallen, he must make the effort to maintain himself within it - he has always to be doing something. And the first thing he has to do is to decide what he is going to do.<sup>15</sup> But in order to decide this, he must first frame a general interpretation of his surroundings, must formulate for himself a system of convictions about his environment; this he needs as a map so that he can move about among things and act on them.

With regards to the general system or convictions he needs as a map, Gasset observes that the human person always comes into the world in the midst of already formulated system of beliefs. He comes into a set of fixed surrounding. He comes into an environment with an already made culture. And this is why he says that:

that society into which we have fallen by the process of being alive, already has its own interpretation of life, its repertory of ideas, of ruling convictions about the universe. So that what we can call "the thought of our time" enters to form part of our surroundings; it envelops us, it penetrates into us, it carries us.<sup>16</sup>

Gasset perceives culture as the security that man invents in the face of life that is an insecurity. It is the interpretation that man gives to his life, the series of more or less satisfactory solutions, which he invents in order to handle the problems and needs of his life. These include the material order of things as well as the so-called spiritual.<sup>17</sup> When those solutions are created for genuine needs, they too are genuine solutions; they are concepts, evaluations, enthusiasms, styles of thought, of art, of law, which really emanate from the deep heart of man as he actually was in those moments of that culture. But the creation of a repertory of cultural principle and norms, Gasset believes, brings with it an essential, and strictly speaking, an irremediable, inconvenience. For the very reason that an effective solution has been created, for the very reason that "here it is", subsequent generations do not have to create it, but to inherit it and develop it. Well, then; Gasset thinks, the inheritance which frees one from the effort of creation has the disadvantage of being an invitation to inertia.<sup>18</sup> He who receives an idea from his forebears tends to save himself the effort of rethinking it and recreating it within himself. This recreation consists in nothing more than repeating the task of him who created the idea; that is, in adopting it only in view of the undeniable evidence with which it was imposed on him. He who creates an idea does not have the impression that it is any thought of his; but rather he seems to see reality itself in immediate contact with himself. There, then, are man and reality, both naked, one confronting the other with neither screen nor intermediary between them.<sup>19</sup>

In the light of the above therefore, with the man who did not create idea, we have a situation where the man who is already heir to a cultural system accustoms himself, progressively, generation after generation, to having no contact with basic problems, to feeling none of the needs which make up his life; and on the other hand, to using mental processes - concepts, evaluations, enthusiasm - for which he has no evidence because they were not born out of the depth of his own genuine self. He works and lives on top of a stratum of culture which came to him from the outside, on a system of alien opinions come to him from other personalities,<sup>20</sup> from what is in the air, in the "period", in the "spirit of the times," in short, from a collective, conventional, irresponsible "I" which does not know why it thinks what it thinks, nor why it wants what it wants. According to Gasset there, arises a state in which the culture which in its origin, in its own moment of genuineness was simple, becomes complicated.

This complicating of the inherited culture thickens the screen between each man's self and the things that surround him. Bit by bit his life becomes less and less his own and more the collective life. His individual, effective and always primitive "I" is replaced by the "I" which is "people", by the conventional, complicated, cultivated "I".<sup>21</sup> The so-called cultivated man always appears in periods of very advanced culture, which are already made up of pure topics and phrases. As a consequence of the above, Gasset has come to hold the position that culture, the purest product of the live and the genuine, since it comes out of the fact that man feels with an awful anguish and a burning enthusiasm the relentless needs of which his life is made up,<sup>22</sup> ends by becoming a falsification of that life.

Man's genuine self is swallowed up by his cultured, conventional, social self.<sup>23</sup> With the awareness of the possibility of the falsification of life by culture, Gasset expresses that he wonders that there has not been proper emphasis of the complexity of culture *per se*, as one of the principal causes of the crisis suffered at the end of the Middle Ages. And for him since nobody has taken account of it, no one has known what to make of the clearest and most continuous desire that was evident throughout the two centuries from the beginning of the fifteenth to the time of Descartes himself: the desire for simplification.<sup>24</sup>

With regards to complication of culture, that is falsification of life by culture, Gasset, advocates that man must rise against that culture, to shake himself free of it, to rid himself of it, to retreat from it, so that he may once more face the universe in the live flesh and return to living in very truth. For Gasset, this was the reason for those periods of a "return to nature", that is to say, to what is natural in man, in contrast to what is cultivated or cultured in him. For example, he expresses, the Renaissance; Rousseau and romanticism, and our entire time as instances of that period.<sup>25</sup>

Gasset observes that in the event of complication of culture, man aspires to save himself in simplicity – a universal return to nudity, a general call to rid oneself of, to retire from, to deny, all richness, complexity and abundance.<sup>26</sup> Explaining further the concepts of complication and simplification of culture, Gasset holds that when our present life – that is, the life of the first or the fifteenth century, modern culture and that immediately preceding it – appeared as hatefully complicated, the desire of simplicity pushed man automatically into dreaming of the life of the past, archaic, early, and primitive: the life which existed before these complication arose. Hence a desire to return to the pristine, hence a nostalgia for the primitive life as a "return to"; and hence a turning away from complicated culture to simple culture, and even from all culture to what came before, to naked nature.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that although, Gasset holds that simplification is the alternative in the face of complication of culture, it is not all forms of simplification that is advocated by Gasset. In this regard, Gasset, begins by defining what extremism is as a form of life. That it is that way of life in which one tries to live only on one extreme of the vital area with a subject, in a dimension, or with a theme which is purely peripheral. That is to say, denying all the rest, man goes from the center of life to one of its extremes. Gasset condemns extremism as a form of life.<sup>28</sup> He condemns it because it involves magnifying one aspect of life to the exclusion of the rest. Gasset condemns Christianity as an extreme form of life because he considers religion as an aspect of life. While condemning extremism as simplification, he favours the simplification that entails forming a conviction based on the evidence that one can provide for it from one's environment. In essence, he advocates the simplification that involves one providing evidence from his own environment for his beliefs and convictions. On this he says "I must come to an agreement with myself in order to see which one of them it is that convinces me, which one is my real opinion. An opinion which I have formed for myself in this manner and which I base on my own evidence is truly mine."<sup>29</sup> It is this life that is based on evidence that one can provide from his environment for his convictions that Gasset recommends when he says:

It is this metanoia – to be converted or, as I prefer to say to go back to yourself, withdraw within yourself, seek your true self-that I would urge on men today particularly on the young. (There are too many probabilities that the generation now reading me may let themselves be led violently astray as were the earlier generations of this and other countries, by the empty wind of form of extremism, that is to say, by something which is substantially false).<sup>30</sup>

In Gasset's thinking only the above model of simplification which has been called various names<sup>31</sup> like: vital reason, historical reason, ratio vitalism, sciences of the spirit, the moral or cultural sciences, is capable of recording success where faith and the natural sciences have failed.<sup>32</sup> This is because in Gasset's understanding, there was a time that man's existence was nourished by revelation as in the medieval era. But later, man lost faith in revelation and had faith in science, physical reason (natural science). Later too the faith in science, physical reason was also lost. This is what he explains when he says that the only thing man believed in was physical science, but when this received the urgent call to propound its truth on the most human problems, it did not know what to say. Consequently, as Gasset believes, Western man received the impression of losing his footing, of finding himself without support, and has

known a panic terror and believed himself to be sinking, making ship wreck in the void.<sup>33</sup>

In Gasset's words: "the collapse of physical reason leaves the way clear for vital, historical reason."<sup>34</sup> Continuing Gasset holds that the prodigious achievement of natural science in the direction of the knowledge of things contrasts brutally with the collapse of this same natural science when faced with strictly human element (i.e., the meaning of the human person).<sup>35</sup> The human element escapes physico-mathematical reason as water runs from a sieve. Gasset expresses that our faith in reason has entered upon a phase of lamentable decadence. Man, he holds cannot wait any longer. He demands that science illumine for him the problems of humanity. It is Gasset's position that the more patent became the resistance of the human phenomenon to physical science, the more prominent became another form of science opposed to this: against the natural sciences, in effect there arose and developed the so-called sciences of the spirit, the moral or cultural sciences.<sup>36</sup>

In Gasset's "revolt of the masses", we see a vital need of the cultural sciences as Gasset emphasizes the need of the minority to be specialist in "culture" and to direct the masses towards fulfilling their destinies and if possible, cease to be masses.

In his thinking, it is the absence of the cultured directive class, (i.e, the minority group)<sup>37</sup>, at least understood within his context resulting in lack of authentic appreciation of the civilized world, inherited by the primitive contemporary inhabitant (man), that constitute the crisis of Europe and the world generally today: In Gasset's words:

The meaning is that the type of man dominant today is a primitive one, a *Naturmensch* rising up in the midst of a civilized world. The world is a civilized one, its inhabitant is not: he does not see the civilization of the world around him, but he uses it as if it were a natural force.<sup>38</sup>

From the foregoing on the philosophy of Gasset, especially his analysis of the origin of culture, its complication and human's desire for simplification in the event of complication of culture, Gasset no doubt is not only a philosopher of culture but also a philosopher that has put the essential nature of culture under the control of philosophy. This is because the essential nature of culture has been laid bare in his philosophy.

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