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Ortega y Gasset's intellectual biography and creative outlook

José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) is one of the most outstanding 20th century Spanish thinkers and culturologists. He was an excellent philosopher of universal academic interests, a subtle essayist, and a famous cultural critic. Many interpreters and critics admire his talents, unique erudition, and profound insights; and he himself has been characterized as a world-acclaimed philosopher, a “grandee of Spanish culture,” whose life, creative activity, and a clear civic position of a humanist sets an example to many West European intellectuals, thinkers, artists, and even politicians.

Ortega was born 9 May 1883 in Madrid. He was the second of four children by José Ortega Munilla and Dolores Gasset Chincilla¹. The family in which little Ortega was growing up was marked by cultural and intellectual erudition. His father was an influential Spanish journalist, a writer and editor of the newspaper “El Imparcial.” The atmosphere in the family, where Ortega was being raised, undoubtedly exerted a big influence on the formation of Ortega's personality, his inclinations. Ortega's first educators and fosterers were the Jesuit priests. From September 1892 he was enrolled in the Jesuit Collegio in Málaga, where he studied under the tutelage of Father Gonzalo Colomer².

¹ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* // retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gasset>

² *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* // retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gasset>

After leaving school in 1898 Ortega entered Madrid university where he studied philosophy. In 1904 he successfully graduated from it and obtained a degree of doctor of philosophy. In 1906 Ortega left for Germany – the so-called “land of great philosophers” and continued studies of philosophy at the universities of Leipzig, Berlin and Marburg. This trip to Germany was a decisive moment in his life. Somewhat later Ortega declares Germany as his “spiritual homeland”³. While studying in Germany he became acquainted with the ideas of W. Dilthey, F. Paulsen, C. Stumpf, G. Simmel, H. Cohen, K. Friedler, A. Riehl, read the works of Plato, Aristotle, I. Kant, G. Hegel as well as the works of non-classical philosophers (A. Schopenhauer, F. Nietzsche) and cultural philosophers⁴. In Berlin Ortega would spend whole days in the library, sometimes even 10-12 hours a day. The years spent in Germany and its philosophical tradition made a big impact not only on Ortega’s spiritual and intellectual maturity, but also on the development of his views. When he was still living in Germany, he had his articles widely published not only in Spain, but also in Latin America, Argentina⁵.

In 1910 Ortega returned to Spain, Madrid where he was appointed as head of the department of Metaphysics. Until 1936 he was professor at Madrid university and took an active part in the country’s social, political, and cultural life. In 1937 when Spain faced the threat of Civil War, Ortega was made to emigrate. For a long time he traveled and lived in France, Argentina, Portugal where he lectured at universities⁶. When the Civil War ended in 1948, Ortega returned to his homeland and actively joined scientific and pedagogical activities again. At Madrid

³ Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Ikisokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos)[Metzler’s manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages)] (compiled by Bernd Lutz) Vilnius, 2008. p. 664.

⁴ A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija [Ortega y Gasset’s Philosophy of Culture and Art]* In „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius 1999. p. 520.

⁵ See more: A. Andrijauskas, *Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno profiliai (Rytai – Vakarai – Lietuva) [Outlines of Culture, Philosophy, and Art (East – West – Lithuania)]*, Vilnius 2004.

⁶ *Visuotinė Lietuvių enciklopedija XVII* (redakcinė kolegija: V. Razumas (pirmininkas), S. Vaitkevičius, A. Buračas ir kt.) Vilnius, 2010, p. 121.

university Ortega and his former student Julián Marías founded Institute of Humanities (*El Instituto de Humanidades*) where he delivered lectures. It was his merit that the institute drew many students and became “an important research center of problems of human personality”⁷. Due to his purposeful and influential activity Ortega is characterized as “an intellectual leader.” In his lectures, for the first time he familiarized Spanish university students with such thinkers as H. Driesch, A. Weissmann, J. Uexküll and the philosophical, economic and social thought of M. Scheler, G. Simmel, and W. Sombart⁸. Both in university lecture-halls and other public places Ortega's lectures drew the attention of the audience as well as stimulated active discussions. In his biography there is a fact that in a Madrid theatre hall Ortega delivers a course of lectures “*What is philosophy?*”⁹.

Ortega had a strong sense of responsibility for the state of his country. He wished Spain overcame cultural decline and achieved the level of progressive European nations. Ortega's talents, his work and merits did not remain unnoticed. In 1914 he was elected a member of the academy of royal morality and political sciences. In 1949 Ortega became *Honoris Causa* of Madrid university, this title was also bestowed upon him by Glasgow university.

Due to his old age and health at the age of 70, Ortega refuses his position at Madrid university and dedicates himself to creative work. Just before his death in 1954 he was awarded J.W. Goethe's gold medal. Having long travelled across Europe and all the world, on October 18, 1955 Ortega died in his homeland, Madrid.

⁷ Andrijauskas, Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno profiliai (Rytai – Vakariai – Lietuva) [Outlines of Culture, Philosophy, and Art (East – West – Lithuania)], Vilnius, 2004, p. 348.

⁸ *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* // retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gasset>

⁹ See more: Руткевич, Культурология XX век. Энциклопедия, Т. 1. Москва, 1996.

Ortega's political, social, and educative activity

In his lifetime Ortega purposely and actively engaged in social, political, and educative activity as a politician, philosopher, literary, cultural, and art critic. "His two great passions were philosophy and politics"¹⁰. Ortega, especially in the first half of his life, contributed heavily to the revival of Spanish culture. "That is why he was recognized as a "great teacher and fosterer" of the culture of Spanish-speaking world."¹¹

This intellectual deeply perceived the scope and consequences of Spanish cultural crisis. Being aware of the reasons of this crisis, he sought to envisage and work out the proper ways to overcome it. Alongside M. de Unamuno, A. Ganivet, P. Baroja y Nessi and other famous intellectuals, Ortega advanced the slogan of spiritual revival of Spain which rested upon patriotism, self-esteem, traditional truths, values of love and faith. As a politician, Ortega sought a true, humane and responsible democracy, he was one of the members of the union of defenders of the Republic and opponents of Frankism. Entering politics he wrote many political articles, appealing to the intellectual elite. He criticized the society's indifference and polarization, spoke for national openness and spiritual community of Europe. "He believed that one of his missions was an attempt to overcome the cultural isolation of Spain, revive its historicity and acquaint more fully the Spanish nation with European, especially German, philosophy"¹². Ortega was well-aware that the country's true progress is possible only through one's spiritual development, a citizen should become an educated, noble and

¹⁰ Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Ikisokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos) [Metzler's manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages) (compiled by Bernd Lutz) Vilnius, 2008, p. 664.

¹¹ A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija [Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Culture and Art]* In „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė.“, Vilnius, 1999.

¹² Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Ikisokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos) [Metzler's manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages) (compiled by Bernd Lutz) Vilnius, 2008, p. 664.

responsible personality. However, later having become disappointed with politics, the philosopher abandoned it.

Ortega spent a great part of his life in Madrid devoting much attention to the educational and cultural reform. "He was surrounded by Spain's most distinguished philosopher's of the time G. Morente, J. Zubiri, L. Diez de Corral, J. Gaos and other intellectuals who all started searching not only for the theoretical, but also practical ways to revive Spain's culture"¹³. Ortega was convinced that in this sphere the role of universities was especially important. According to him, universities have to become spiritual centers of the society and culture. He took the initiative to reform Spanish educational system.

Joining social and cultural activities, Ortega devoted much attention to the press. One of Ortega's most notable achievements in this sphere might have been the foundation of the journal "*Revista de Occidente*" in 1923. This publication became one of the most famous journals in the sphere of culture and art even internationally. In his wish to acquaint the Spanish society with the achievements of West European culture, philosophy and art, in this journal Ortega also published Spanish translations of the works of such famous philosophers and intellectuals as O. Spengler, E. Husserl, M. Scheler, F. Brentan, M. Heidegger, B. Russell, G. Simmel, J. Huizinga, H. Heimsoeth, H. Driesch, E. Müller and the works of modernist writers F. Kafka, M. Bontemplelli, J. Cocteau.

Ortega's creative activity and style of thinking

Ortega's cultural heritage and academic interests encompassed many different spheres of humanistic studies – philosophy, culturology, politics, sociology, aesthetics, literature. The content of his works is very deep and the scope of problems is very wide – from the most important cultural problems to the difficulties of man's everyday life.

¹³ R. Skeivys, *Gyvenimo filosofas* in Ch. Ortega y Gasset, *Masių sukilimas [The Revolt of the Masses]*, Vilnius, 1993, p. 7.

The range of Ortega's thinking included existential, ethical, cultural, ontological, aesthetic, religious, political, social as well as anthropological and historical questions. He also stood out as a critic of music, art, and literature.

Analyzing the sources of Ortega's philosophy, many critics observe that Ortega's ideas and worldview were greatly influenced by existential and non-classical philosophers such as A. Schopenhauer, S. Kierkegaard and especially - F. Nietzsche, later M. Heidegger's strong influence can be also felt. He was also affected by N. Berdyaev's insights, though there are no direct references to this thinker's texts in his works¹⁴. Furthermore, his works obviously have phenomenological (E. Husserl) and hermeneutic ideas.

Ortega is often called a "philosopher of life." Inspired by F. Nietzsche, W. Dilthey and other eminent philosophers of life, he sought to overcome the dominant classical metaphysical philosophical tradition and to return philosophy to everyday problems of human existence and creative work. The starting point of his thinking become man and his life.

Ortega's style of philosophical thinking is very distinctive, original and unique, it is closer to a literary style. He did not seek to create a unified philosophical system. Rejecting the scientific systemic writing characteristic of classical philosophy, the Spanish philosopher often expounded his ideas in the form of the essay, there are many metaphorical and literary forms of expression in his works. In his works there prevails the author's personal position, the thinker's subjective, intellectual experience and insights are revealed. Realist historicism formulated by Ortega can be compared to that of B. Croce¹⁵. From the comparative point of view, they both were cultural revolutionaries and spiritual leaders – B. Croce in Italy and Ortega in Spain, they both were concerned about the cultural situation in their respective coun-

¹⁴ *Nuo Kierkegoro iki Kamiu*. A. Petraitytės pokalbiai su Lietuvos filosofais. (red. R. Rybelienė), Vilnius, 1997, p. 123.

¹⁵ See more: J. T. Graham. *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Life in Ortega y Gasset*. Missouri, 1994.

tries, sought to overcome the society's spiritual decline and preserve the continuity of cultural traditions and values.

It would not be an easy task to systematize all Ortega's cultural heritage, but in his different creative periods "he was oriented to both cultural philosophy and a philosophy of life as well as to philosophical anthropology and art philosophy"¹⁶. Some of his best works include *Meditations on Quixote* (1914), *Invertebrate Spain* (1922), *The Theme of Our Time* (1923), *Ideas on the Novel* (1924), *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925), *What is Philosophy?* (1929), *En Torno a Galileo* (1933), *History as a System* (1934), *Man and People* (1939), *The Origin of Philosophy* (1943), *The Idea of Principle in Leibnitz and the Evolution of Deductive Theory* (1948). Apart from the aforementioned works, there are numerous other works by Ortega, his essays and articles in newspapers and journals. Ortega's many other works were published already posthumously as collections of articles as well as notes of his lectures.

Undoubtedly, one of his most seminal and finest works is *The Revolt of the Masses*. At first it was published in the newspaper in the form of articles, and when in 1930 it came out as a separate book, it received international acclaim and made the thinker world renown. This work probably best represents this thinker's philosophy. In the work Ortega analyzes such threats of the modern world as mass culture, alienation, materialism, consumer psychology, the dominance of technology and leveling of cultural values. Proclaiming a crisis of Western culture, he develops the theory of the revolt of the masses. In this book, Ortega's many insights become prophetic and help recognize and evaluate the threats and future prospects of modern Western culture.

In his critique of classical rationalism, Ortega sought to overcome the cult of reason creating a unique conception of ratiovitalism. One of the most significant propositions prevailing in his creative works is "*I exist and my surrounding world*" reflect perspectivism and an existential attitude to life as a creative activity, at the same time they

¹⁶ A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija [Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Culture and Art]* In "Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė," Vilnius, 1999, p. 521.

reinforce a subjective and individual position of man's life and cognition. Culture and art are the dominant themes of Ortega's philosophy. The interpretations of the development of culture and art presented in his seminal book *The Dehumanization of Art*, had a profound influence upon a wide circle of 20th c. West European thinkers, art theorists, and artists: J. Derrida, M. McLuhan, E. Gombrich, H. Marcuse, R. Alberti, S. Dali, R. Barthes, A. Artaud, F. G. Lorca, L. Buñuel, C. J. Cera and others¹⁷.

In defining Ortega's role in Spanish culture, it should be noted that the influence of Ortega's philosophy was strong and many-sided; his ideas were a bond that joined Spanish philosophy with Europe. Moreover, "his language style influenced Spanish literature and journalism"¹⁸. Having spread from Spain to other countries, Ortega's ideas exerted a big influence upon the development of all West European culture as well as upon Spanish-speaking Latin American intellectuals and artists. His works translated into many languages and university courses that analyze this thinker's philosophy show that Ortega's culturological ideas and analyzed problems remain significant and relevant to our modern world.

Reference:

- A. Andrijauskas. Kultūros, filosofijos ir meno profiliai (Rytai – Vakarai – Lietuva) [Outlines of Culture, Philosophy, and Art (East – West – Lithuania)], Vilnius, 2004.
- A. Andrijauskas. *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija [Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Culture and Art]* In „Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė“, Vilnius, 1999.

¹⁷ See more: A. Andrijauskas, *Ortegos y Gasseto kultūros ir meno filosofija [Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Culture and Art]* In "Mūsų laikų tema ir kitos esė," Vilnius, 1999, p. 539.

¹⁸ Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Iksokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos [Metzler's manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages)] (compiled by Bernd Lutz), Vilnius, 2008, p. 665.

- J. T. Graham. *A Pragmatist Philosophy of Life in Ortega y Gasset*. Missouri, 1994.
- Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Ikisokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos)* [Metzler's manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages)] (compiled by Bernd Lutz) Vilnius, 2008.
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- А. М. Руткевич, *Культурология XX век. Энциклопедия*, Т. 1. Москва, 1996.

Ortega y Gasset's intellectual biography and creative outlook

Summary

The article presents the biography of José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) is one of the most outstanding 20th century Spanish thinkers and culturologists. He was an excellent philosopher of universal academic interests, a subtle essayist, and a famous cultural critic. Many interpreters and critics admire his talents, unique erudition, and profound insights; and he himself has been characterized as a world-acclaimed philosopher, a “grandee of Spanish culture,” whose life, creative activity, and a clear civic position of a humanist sets an example to many West European intellectuals, thinkers, artists, and even politicians. The Authoress also presents his role in culture. According to her it should be noted that the influence of Ortega's philosophy was strong and many-sided; his ideas were a bond that joined Spanish philosophy with Europe. Moreover, “his language style influenced Spanish literature and journalism”¹⁹. Having spread from Spain to other countries, Ortega's ideas

¹⁹ Metzlerio filosofijos žinynas (nuo Ikisokratikų iki Naujųjų laikų filosofijos) [Metzler's manual of philosophy (from the preSocratics to the philosophy of the New Ages)] (compiled by Bernd Lutz), Vilnius, 2008, p. 665.

exerted a big influence upon the development of all West European culture as well as upon Spanish-speaking Latin American intellectuals and artists. His works translated into many languages and university courses that analyze this thinker's philosophy show that Ortega's culturological ideas and analyzed problems remain significant and relevant to our modern world.

Key words: José Ortega y Gasset, culturology, culture, Spanish philosophy