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Technology from Ortega y Gasset's Perspective: Means to Realize Human Being's Nature[*]

TUBA NUR UMUT
Ankara University

Abstract: As the most influential Spanish philosopher of the twentieth century José Ortega y Gasset wrote on a large variety of topics including technology and he is considered as one of the first philosophers who addressed the question of technology. In this study, after giving brief information on the main approaches in the philosophy of technology and on Ortega's place among these approaches, I will present Ortega's consideration of the problem of technology within his general philosophy and show how Ortega discusses the relation between men and technology, how he describes the characteristics of both previous technologies and modern technology and to which problems/dangers he draws attention related to modern technology. So this study aims to emphasize his contribution to the contemporary debate over technology in the light of his relevant writings.

Keywords: Ortega y Gasset, philosophy of technology, technique, Man the Technician, Meditation on Technics.

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[*] This study is partially based on the paper titled "On José Ortega y Gasset's Approach to Technology" presented (not published) at *1st International Scientific Researches Congress Humanity and Social Sciences* in 2016, Madrid.

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TUBA NUR UMUT ✉
Ankara University, Faculty of Theology, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Bahriye Üçok Caddesi, Yenimahalle, Ankara, 06500, TR [tndonmez@ankara.edu.tr]

Introduction

Philosophy has concerned with not only theoretical problems but also practical problems relevant to life. Even if the concerns for practical problems can be traced to ancient times, actual debates regarding practical questions generally remained as a secondary concern throughout the history of philosophy. The situation has changed with realizing the significant influence of practical issues on the human being. Especially during the last century developments in techno-science gave rise to challenging issues and these issues day by day become progressively more complicated.

As human beings of the 21st century, we live inside the *technosphere* that surrounds us. Within this technological context every day, explicitly or implicitly, weighty decisions are being made about technology and so about our lives. As everyone would agree, in our time, technology has opened new possibilities for actions and made it possible to attempt almost everything. This pervasive technology has associated ethical, social, and environmental consequences. Because technology comes to include nearly every sphere of human life and shapes the mode of our existence, human being relationship to technology is not simple but complicated. It is not possible to understand human being and existence with ignoring this forefront phenomenon in this age. As a result of this, it is absolutely essential that we need to deepen our philosophical understanding and to develop new perspectives on technology.

Within this context, it could be helpful for us to look back and to take into account the contributions that were made earlier. With recognizing the need for philosophical reflection on technology, it has questioned during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century by philosophers. Jose Ortega Y Gasset (1883–1955) is one such thinker who may be said to have implied current developments and prob-

lems.[1] It is important to note for our purpose that the most influential Spanish philosopher of the twentieth century Ortega is considered as one of the first philosophers who addressed the question of technology. He contributed to the contemporary debate over technology in a number of works but especially in his course of 1933 notes appeared later in the book entitled *Meditación de la técnica* (Man the Technician) in 1939, in which he made technology an explicit theme for critical reflection. The other works are his well-known book *La rebelión de las masas* (The Revolt of the Masses) in 1929 and a later text based on a talk delivered in Darmstadt in 1951 called *Der Mythus des Menschen hinter der Technik* (The Myth of Humanity Outside Technology).[2]

Encountering some unintended effects of technology in his time, Ortega was aware of that we need to understand the nature of technology and place the problems posed by technology in philosophy. With this awareness, *Man the Technician* begins with his noteworthy prediction: "One of the themes to be discussed in the coming years is that of the advantages, the threat and the limitation of technology."[3]

The Place of Ortega's Approach in the Field

Before handling his approach to technology I want to point out his stance in the field of the philosophy of technology. In order to address the field in a more systematic way philosophers have been classified the approaches. According to Carl Mitcham's distinction who distinguishes between humanities philosophy of technology and engineering philosophy of technology, Ortega is in the first category whose point of departure is the social sciences and the humanities rather than from the practice of techno-

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[1] Patrick Dust, "Freedom, Power, and Culture in Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Technology," *Research in Philosophy and Technology* 11 (1991), 120.

[2] Vicente Bellver Capella, "Ortega y Gasset, Jose," *Encyclopedia of Science, Technology, and Ethics,* ed. Carl Mitcham (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2005), III 1373; Dust, "Freedom, Power, and Culture in Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Technology," 120.

[3] José Ortega y Gasset, "Man the Technician," *History as a System and Other Essays toward a Philosophy of History* (New York: Norton, 1961), 87.

logy.[4] According to the classifications which regard to the historical process, Ortega is considered among the first generation philosophers (or classical humanities philosophers of technology). Differently from the contemporary philosophies of technology which have an empirical character in general, much of the first generation European philosophers' reaction to technology was negative because of witnessing two world wars, total city destruction by firebombing, the Manhattan Project to produce the atomic bomb, etc. Especially after World War II, among some philosophers the negative evaluation of technology would become more stringent. But Ortega's position differs from the first generation philosophers in this respect. He took a less negative view relevant to modern technology comparing the other philosophers who handled the technology in the European tradition like Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Jacques Ellul (1912–1994).[5]

Indeed, Ortega both pointing out the risks of modern technology and acknowledges the positive aspect of technology, its intimate engagement with what it means to be human. With these kinds of considerations, Ortega couldn't be considered as dystopian. But as Dust mentioned, this not means that Ortega is a naive technocrat who idealizes the power that technology or he cannot be said to be a naive optimist. Because Ortega is aware of the problematic character of modern technology and more than some people today who enthusiastically celebrate the achievements of technology, he recognized the dangers of this temptation.[6]

The last distinction that I want to mention is the classification based on the approaches of philosophical schools to technology. Though there are differences in the way that the philosop-

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[4]   Carl Mitcham, *Thinking Through Technology: The Path between Engineering and Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 17, 62-63.

[5]   See Don Ihde, *Philosophy of Technology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 32-35.

[6]   Capella, "Ortega y Gasset, Jose," III 1375; Dust, "Freedom, Power, and Culture in Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Technology," 127.

hers consider the problem, the philosophical attitude of a school and the main issues that they have acquired have shaped their perspectives towards technology. Phenomenological tradition, Critical Theory, Existentialism, Pragmatism, Feminism are among these schools that make philosophical evaluations about technology. Even if in some categorizations Ortega considered an existentialist because of his emphasis on existentialist themes and considerations on human nature, as Mitcham mentioned he eschews the term "existentialism" in favor of "ratio-vitalism".[7] Ratio-vitalism is the name Ortega himself gave to his philosophy in his article "Neither Vitalism nor Rationalism". Ratio-vitalism indicates an idea of reason which is not opposed to life. He acknowledges both human rationality and the irrational dimensions of existence.[8]

Technology from Ortega's Ratio-vitalist Perspective

Since Ortega's philosophy of technology rests on his view of the human being as a being who makes himself, to show his approach to the technology within his general philosophy I need to start with his vision of "man" and "being" and how he understands the relation between man and technology. According to him, technics is necessarily involved with "what is to be human" and he understands technology as an activity grounded in human nature and the principal means for realizing this nature.[9] For him, "man without technology is not man".[10]

In his first book *Meditations on Quixote* he declares his understanding of what is to be human with this well-known state-

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[7] See Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology*, 46.

[8] See. Jose Ferrater Mora and Josep M. Terricabras, *Three Spanish Philosophers: Unamuno, Ortega, Ferrater Mora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 157-160.

[9] Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey, "Technology as a Philosophical Problem," *Philosophy and Technology: Readings in the philosophical problems of technology,* ed. Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey (New York: The Free Press, 1983) 20.

[10] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 96.

ment: "I am myself plus my circumstances."[11] It means we could not consist of ourselves in isolation from our circumstances. This expression also claims that our life is the point of departure for any philosophical understanding. So we may say that his understanding of technology is based on the idea of man as entailing a relationship with ever-changing circumstances as well. But in these circumstances, man is not passive, but an active one.[12]

The first part of his *Meditations on Technics* develops this thesis in detail. For him, in this world human finds himself surrounded by both facilities and difficulties. Because he finds difficulties and is challenged, man's existence is not a passive being in the world. Differently from a stone which need not fight for being what it is, man has to be himself and make his own existence at every single moment in these circumstances with an effort towards it. He must earn his life not only economically but also metaphysically.[13] In contrast to other creations man has to act in order to be and so life is not just contemplation, theory, thinking, etc. but action. Briefly, for Ortega, human life is production. To live is to find means and ways to realize our existence. So we can see why man begins where technology begins.[14]

According to Ortega, human beings differ from all other beings by inventing and carrying out the second set of actions (for instance he lights a fire, he designs the automobile). These kinds of actions presuppose and include the invention of a procedure which guarantees, within certain limits, that we can obtain at our pleasure and convenience the things we need but do not find in nature. These actions which modify and reform nature and constitute technology are exclusively human. After this introduction, he gives his definition of technology: The improvement brought about on nature by man for the satisfaction of his neces-

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[11] He also adds that this expression which appears in his first book sums up his philosophical thought. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote,* trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin (New York: Norton, 1961), 13.

[12] Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology,* 46.

[13] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 110-111.

[14] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 116-117.

sities. The necessities are imposed on man by nature; man answers by imposing changes on nature. For Ortega, it is the token of human being to react upon his environment, not to resign himself to the world as it is. Therefore, technology is man's reaction upon nature or circumstances. It leads to the constitution of a new nature, a super nature interposed between man and original nature. Technology is a reform of nature in the sense of abolishing necessities by guaranteeing their satisfaction under all circumstances and to meet all human requirements.[15]

Ortega also emphasizes that technology is not men's effort to satisfy his natural necessities. This basically means that technology is important for us not because it can satisfy our basic biological needs (because for this aim our animal instincts would have been enough). But, it is so important by satisfying other needs that make our life truly human. Because human beings do not wish merely to "be in the world", but they wish "well-being" in it. And the desire to live is inseparable from their desire to live well.[16] Even Ortega claims that man, technology and well-being are synonymous.[17] Similarly, at the beginning of his presentation "The Myth of Humanity outside Technology," he also mentioned human being as a technical being. The intelligence of human being gives rise to an insatisfaction and due to this, he wants to desire to create new world, and thus to technics. So, technology is a general term for man's self-creative actions.[18]

After identifying the relationship between man and technology, Ortega describes the changing nature of this activity. For him, technology proceeds through two distinct stages. First, there is an inventive wish or creative desire that defines a program or attitude toward the world which man wants to realize according to his necessities, his idea of human life or his profile of well-being. The second is the material realization of that program

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[15]   Gasset, "Man the Technician," 94-95.
[16]   Gasset, "Man the Technician," 95-98.
[17]   Gasset, "Man the Technician," 100.
[18]   Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology*, 47.

with certain technics. Once a man has decided what he wants to become (what he wants to make himself, whether this is a bodhisattva, gentlemen, or hidalgo) he needs certain technical requirements for the realization of this project. Normally, these requirements will differ according to the project to be realized. So, there are as many different kinds of technology as there are human projects. Therefore, we may say that for him, technology is a function of the variable program of man.[19]

As a result of this view Ortega opposes to and warns against an injudicious tendency of his time to believe that there is not any technology exists except the present Americo-European technology, and that all others are only awkward stammerings, rudimentary attempts. He sees Americo-European technology as one human project among all others. But he wants to comprehend why modern technology has appeared to us with some semblance of truth and par excellence. [20]

The Character of Modern Technology

Even though technology has been important throughout history, our time differs from other ages as the age of technology. In our time, as Ortega emphasizes the relation between man and technology had been raised to extraordinarily high power.[21] In order to understand the specific character of modern technology and to see how it could play quite a different role from previous ages, he develops a history of technology by defining the various stages in the evolution of technology. For him, the best criterion to delimit these periods is again the relation between man and technology. Delimiting is based on examination of humanity's changing consciousness of its own making and doing. He argues that there have been three such stages.[22]

According to his classification, there are three main periods

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[19] Mitcham and Mackey, "Technology as a Philosophical Problem," 20; Gasset, "Man the Technician," 101-102.
[20] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 137-138.
[21] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 138-139.
[22] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 139-141.

in the historical development of technology: The technology of chance, the technology of the craftsman and the technology of the technician.[23] In the first period what he calls "technology of chance", human beings were not aware of their technology and could not distinguished technology from their natural acts. These acts appeared to them as part of their natural life. At this stage, technology did not reveal its characteristic aspect, that of the invention. And man did not consider himself as *homo faber*.[24] The second period, "technology of artisan" is the technology of Greek, Rome and Middle Ages. In this period the repertory of technical acts had developed relatively. Technical acts had increased both in number and complexity. Certain technics like blacksmithing, masonry were passed from the previous to the next generation by a special class called artisans. At this second stage, it was recognized that technical acts are not natural and these skills peculiar to man. But human beings still did not realize their capacity for invention because the technical advances were considered not "inventions" but variations within a craft tradition. The other reason is the invention in this period had produced only tools, not machines. So there was no systematic study called technology that we refer today.[25] The last period in which he lives, "the technology of the technician". Since technology becomes mechanical production, the modern period is radically different from previous ones. Unlike crafts, in which the tools work as a complement of man, the machine reveals that technology is a function independent of the natural man which reaches beyond the limits of him. Comparing to the previous periods, in this period we also see the dissociation of the artisan into the worker and the technician. Because human beings recognize that technology is a source of practically unlimited human activity, they achieve a new situation in history. Until now they have been conscious of all their deficiencies and limitations.

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[23] See, Gasset, "Man the Technician," 139-146.
[24] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 142-145.
[25] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 145-148.

But now they are secretly frightened by their own omnipotence.[26]

Ortega exemplifies the advance of the modern technology with mentioning some new technologies of his time like cinematograph, illustrated journals, newspapers and he adds: "Human understanding has never had greater power of dissociation than at present fabulous potentiality."[27] He draws attention to the fact that thanks to the perfection of technology today more people live well in the world. For him, technical achievements have increased extremely and material life would be impossible without them. If technology had a temporary failure, millions of people would perish.[28]

Dangers of Current Technological Phase

In addition to mentioning the achievements, Ortega also warns against certain dangers emerging as a part of the current technological phase. From his writings, I specify some dangers that he mentions.

The first, as for me the most substantial, is that the exclusive faith in technology makes human life empty. Because technology, by itself, could not give meaning and could not fill our lives. "Just because of its promise of unlimited possibilities, technology is an empty form, like the most formalistic logic, and is unable to determine the content of life. That is why our time, being the most intensely technical, is also the emptiest in all human history."[29] For Ortega, we live at a time when human finds in himself miraculously capacity for creation, but he does not know what to create. Human is the lord of all things, but he is not lord of himself. The world with more means, more knowledge, and more technique than ever, it turns out that the worst of worlds that have been. There is a strange combination of power and a sense of

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[26] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 148-152.
[27] José Ortega y Gasset, "The Increase of Life," *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: New American Library, 1950), 27.
[28] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 152.
[29] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 151.

insecurity in the soul of modern man.[30] And consequently, human life is not only a struggle with nature but also the struggle of man with his soul. After these comments, he asks the critical question: "What has Euramerica contributed to the techniques of the soul?" He also suggests in the conclusion of his essay that perhaps the west should turn its attention to the technologies of the east in where will be found the techniques appropriate to the soul.[31]

As to second danger, Ortega thinks that we have become too comfortable within our technological cocoon. Due to this, we are in danger of becoming denaturalized. Our capacity for choosing a personal life-project gets more limited. We are losing our roots in nature even before we have secured our place within the sphere of technology. We may forget that human life is a form of production.[32]

The third danger which he sees among the majority people of his time (he calls as the mass-man) is the temptation to lose interest in the science, technology, moral conditions and values under which they are produced. Because as soon as human opens his eyes to the life he finds himself in a technological environment, he will tend to believe that all these things are there without any effort. According to him, the mass-man believes that the civilization into which he was born and which he makes use of, is as spontaneous and self-producing as nature. The principles on which the civilized world is based, do not exist for the average man of today. And the direction of society has been taken over by this type of man who is interested in motor-cars, and a few other things but not interested in the basic cultural values. And just as he concerns there is a decrease in interest in pure sciences. The strange thing is that: this is happening when the industry is reaching its highest stage of development. The world is a civi-

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[30] Gasset, "The Increase of Life," 28.
[31] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 161.
[32] Larry Hickman, *Technology as a Human Affair* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990) 246.

lized one, but its inhabitant is not. People are unaware of the artificial character of civilization.[33]

Finally, for Ortega modern technology has a potential danger because the capacity to construct a world is inseparable of the capacity to destroy it and nowadays technology has already reached this possibility.[34]

Conclusion

Ortega's reflections on technology show that he carries out a suggestive and critical analysis of modern technology. He understands technology as a constituent feature of human beings which enables them to construct their lives and open new possibilities, especially in our age. For me, Ortega's considerations are still important today and can contribute to discussions on contemporary science, technology, and ethics. Especially his emphasis on "meaning, and final aims", still appreciable in the considerations concerning technology. As he states, we should not forget that "technology is, strictly speaking, not the beginning of things. It will succeed in realizing the human project. But it does not draw up that project; the final aims it has to pursue come from elsewhere. The vital program is pretechnical."[35]

We still live in a technological age and from Ortega's time to now we can see that the debates over technology and its effects have become increasingly varied and have faced new problems. In order to meet the challenges of our technological age we need to increase our awareness to deal effectively with the problems and we need to focus on our vital program considering the meaning and value. Because the question of "what guides our lives" is pretechnical. Our future depends critically on our ability to do this.

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[33] See Gasset, "Primitive and the Technical," *The Revolt of The Masses*, 55-56; Gasset, "Man the Technician," 153; Gasset, "Primitivism and History," *The Revolt of The Masses*, 62.

[34] Antonio Diéguez Lucena, "Thinking about Technology, but in Ortega's or in Heidegger's Style?," *Argumentos de Razón Técnica* 12 (2009), 103.

[35] Gasset, "Man the Technician," 119.

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