

THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF HUMAN EXISTENCE: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON ORTEGA Y GASSET'S SHIPWRECK ANALOGY

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Abstract

This discourse acknowledges that the question of the meaning of human existence is real. Humans ask about the meaning of their existence. However, while the question of the meaning of human existence is real, this meaning is not some tangible reality waiting somewhere to be handed over to the human person. From the philosophy of Ortega Y Gasset on the nature of human life and the place of culture, an argument is made on what the meaning of human existence is. This write up thus submits that the meaning of existence can only be deduced from the realities around the human person, the natural and artificial environments that constitute the human condition, and on the basis of the meaning derived in this manner, a direction for human activities and engagements for purposeful existence is obtained.

Keywords: Human life, Meaning, Ortega Y Gasset, Society, environment, Peace and Progress

Introduction

The issue of the meaning of human existence is a fundamental one. This is because if the meaning of the life of the human person could be known, it will help to organize society in a manner that is capable of ensuring satisfaction and comfort for the human person. Also, the same meaning will make it possible for individuals to conduct themselves in a more meaningful and rational pattern. However despite the importance of the issue of the question of the meaning of human existence, this question is rarely asked not to talk of finding out what the possible answer to this question is.

Writing on this issue of the question of human life and making a proposal of the meaning on the basis of rationality stirs the focus of humans in today's world in a direction that promises reunion with who the human person is with the hope of co-ordination of human activities on the basis of rationality that engenders peace and progress in our world.

On the question of the meaning of Human Life

In the context of this discourse, it is pertinent to note that when we ask the question "what is the Meaning of Life", we are asking about the meaning of

everything around us that we can see including the human person who asks the question. In essence, we are asking for that purpose that we can reduce everything in reality including the human person to? As mentioned earlier, there is not an already made answer somewhere that we can go to and obtain for this purpose. A purpose and meaning can emerge through deduction or conclusion we infer from analysis of all realities around us. Ortega y Gasset's philosophy on the condition of human life and the place of culture in this condition of life provides an intellectual platform for an emergence of a rational answer to the question of meaning of human life.

Ortega Y Gasset's Philosophy on the Condition of human life and the Place of Culture

At the heart of his philosophy of the nature of human existence and the place of culture, Gasset holds that human life is a shipwreck and culture is the life boat or livejacket in the midst of this shipwreck.¹ By this analogy, Gasset acknowledges the reality of natural and artificial environments in human existence.

By the natural environment² we mean everything that came with nature in the world like the planets including the earth, trees, rivers, seas, animals, the human person, the topography to mention but a few. Indeed we are referring to all givens in the world that the human person met in nature. Those ones humans did not create but produced by Mother Nature.

The artificial environment³ on the other hand refers to all that the human person produced. All realities that did not come with Mother Nature: realities that are in humans' world by the creative acumen of human persons. Here we are referring to ideas and devices like ideologies, education, schools, cars, houses, customs and traditions and indeed the totality of all that is referred to as culture.

In Gasset's analogy of shipwreck and live boat/live jacket, it is pertinent for us to imagine the great struggle for survival that unfolds when a shipwreck occurs in the sea. Everybody cares for nothing but for survival, survival of one's life. We are also aware of the great succor that eventually comes when there is a liveboat or livejacket in the midst of this struggle for survival. The live boat /live jacket ensures what one is struggling for, that is, survival.

Gasset's description of human life in the perspective of shipwreck and live boat adequately captures the nature of human life and by the same token, captures the place of culture in human life. The analogy instructs us that human life does not offer all that the human person needs to live satisfactorily without intervention. The things that humans experience as the given in human life, are the things of the natural environment, found by humans in their environment, without any intervention on the part of the human person. These givens, it must be noted, cannot on their own ensure all that humans need to live satisfactory and comfortably.

¹ Ortega Y Gasset, *Man and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1958), 34-35

² Joachim Ileruke Ukutsemuya, "Introduction to Concepts Relevant to the Discussion of African Culture and Civilization" in *Courses in General Studies: An introduction*, ed. Joachim Ukutsemuya et al (Warri: St Paul Press, 2019), 357

³ Ibid

To guarantee satisfactory and comfortable living there is a need for the effort and intervention of the human person. The inability of the natural environment to do this for the human person without his/her effort constitutes the insecurity of human existence that Gasset uses shipwreck to depict.

While Gasset comprehensively captures the essence of the insecurity of human existence by the shipwreck and live boat/live jacket he features, he presents hope for the human person whose existence could be described as insecure. He describes culture as the liveboat. By this description, he opines that for human life to be satisfactory and comfortable from the insecurity arising from the shipwreck of it, the human person needs to be able to create, invent ideas and devices.

We therefore arrive at the conclusion, that with all the givens in the form of all natural realities that nature comes with in human existence, there is at the base of human existence, insecurity. Culture, the material (Physical) and immaterial (spiritual) inventions of the human person is an attempt by the human person to conquer the problems on his way to satisfactory and comfortable living with the aim to achieve security in existence. Culture⁴, an embodiment of all inventions of the human person to overcome obstacles to the good life, thus remains in the domain of artificial environment as explicated above.

Insights from Gasset's Philosophy on the question of the meaning of Human existence

From Gasset's philosophy we then have the natural and artificial environments. The Natural and artificial environments, both have a direction in human life. In essence there is a direction for all that Mother Nature gives which constitutes the natural environment and there is a direction for all inventions, ideas and devices that constitutes the artificial environment which culture encapsulates and that was invented by the human person.

It is to be noted therefore that all that Mother Nature offers are fundamentals that aid the life of the human person; they are not basics that seek to destroy the life of the human person. The givens of Mother Nature are in essence crucial in the sustenance and protection of the life of the human person. The actions of the human person on the givens through the instrumentality of culture make it possible for the human person to experience more satisfaction and comfort in human existence.⁵

Stating it clearly, it will be revealed on a deeper study that the direction of the ideas and devices that the human person invents in form of culture to intervene in nature, is with the intention of guaranteeing life, indeed more life. For instance, the invention of car, air conditioner, light, nutritious foods, education, ideologies of organization of society to mention but a

⁴ Gasset, Man and Crisis, 127-128

⁵ Ortega Y Gasset, Mission of the University, Trans. Howard Lee Nostrand (New Brunswick (U.S.A): Transaction Publishers 1992), 62-63; Genesis. 1:26-29

few are with the hope of ensuring more life that they are produced and invented. Even when the human person produces what is evil, arguably, it is because he wrongly perceives good in it - this perhaps is one of the effects of the imperfection of the human person, although he/she is perfectible.

From the direction of realities, natural and artificial provided for us from the philosophy of Gasset, we can conclude that the meaning of human existence is to search for, find and enjoy security.

In the direction of the meaning of human life that this discourse is concerned with, we may ask, *what does security entail as we conclude that the meaning of life is to search for, find and enjoy security?* It simply means that the meaning of life is to find satisfaction, comfort and happiness in the face of nature / our environment that is in need of refinement and intervention by the human person in order for it to sustain him/her in existence. However, this satisfaction, comfort and happiness it must be noted must be in harmony with the fundamental nature of life, a shipwreck and our preoccupation in life which is the working of the sustenance/security that we humans bring into the situation of insecurity of our lives.

Equally important at this juncture, is that the human person must appreciate that as they struggle to have satisfaction, comfort and happiness in the midst of the insecurity of existence, there are other humans too who likewise have the right to

satisfaction, comfort and happiness of life. This awareness must be taken into consideration as people go in search of their satisfaction, comfort and happiness, in other words, their security.⁶

Conclusion

As we have come to the conclusion that the meaning of human existence as can be inferred from the philosophy of Gasset is to search for, find and enjoy security, our society is to be renewed through this. The resulting situation by this renewal will only be a more purposeful human society that serves all humans in satisfaction and comfort of existence.⁷

At the moment in the human community, we wake up to a lot of activities. Interesting enough, the ideal guiding principles behind all of these activities are hardly perceived to the extent that to a curious mind there could be wonder if there is really any guiding principle other than selfish motives of humans. It is no wonder in such a situation that there is variety of conflicts among humans with tales of woes of death, misery, deprivations and indeed dislodgement of justice from the core life of human activities in our society.

The situation of injustice in the human community needs to be met by the meaning of human existence that emerges in this discourse. Without being distracted and confused by the goings in our society, we need to know that human existence is fundamentally a shipwreck requiring the intelligent intervention of humans in

⁶ David Stewart and Gene H. Blocker, "Justice as Fairness, A Reading: John Rawls, A Theory of Justice" in *Fundamentals of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 48

⁷ Alloy S. Ihuah et al., "Preface" in *Philosophy and National Security, Interrogations in a Distressed Nation* (Makurdi: Eagle Prints Nigeria, 2021) P. iii

order to have the satisfactory and comfortable existence for all, in place of the conflict, misery, dissatisfaction and discomfort that is currently attendant. In essence, our society from its foundation needs renewal based on the understanding of human life as a shipwreck and our actions/activities through ideas, policies and all technological devices as the live boat/ live jacket that we bring into the shipwrecked nature of life, to ensure the good life. In this way all societal structures, policies and devices should be able to demonstrate to our rationality how they provide sustenance for humans and our society in satisfaction and comfort before being adopted, otherwise they are to be jettisoned by our society.

The inability for the current structures, policies and devices in our human community to honestly demonstrate how they truly provide live jacket/sustenance in satisfaction and comfort in daily living for the human person is the reason for the conflicts, dissatisfaction and discomfort we witness among humans in the human family today.

Recommendations

1. Our Culture, that is, all that we are currently living by as a people should be reviewed
2. The guiding principle for the renewing of all we are living by should be to see them as potential insecurity as shipwreck is, and on the basis of how they demonstrate better sustenance of society and

humans, they are to be adopted as the culture for the future. Otherwise, they are to be jettisoned.

3. A culture adopted by the society and a people on the basis of how it proves to rationality better sustenance of society and humans is the only culture that can ensure satisfactory and comfortable living for the human family

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