

Ortega Y Gasset: Technology Is the Essence of Man

We live in an age of rapid technological change. 20 years ago, someone would have laughed at you if you said you had a mini computer in your pocket. Today, Americans spend an [average of 11 hours](#) on their tech per day. Experts predict [around 40%](#) of the jobs done by humans will soon be the work of machines, and artificial intelligence continues to become [more lifelike](#). In the face of rapid technological advancement, we need to discuss the proper place of technology. How can we use technology well?

A Spanish philosopher, [Jose Ortega y Gasset](#), says something that turns this question on its head. Instead of pitting technology and man against each other, he makes a startling claim in his essay, [Thoughts on Technology](#) . Gasset says,

“Technology is the adaptation of (man’s) environment to the individual...to react upon his environment, not to resign himself to the world as it is- that is the essence of man”

For purposes of his argument, Gasset doesn’t restrict the definition of technology to just screens and computers. His definition of technology is much simpler. Making a fire is technology, hunting is technology, cars are technology, space heaters are technology. Any way humans change the environment for their wellbeing is, according to Gasset, technology.

Why does Gasset think this is the essence of man? Because it’s what makes us different from the other animals. He says,

“This much however is certain; the animal, when it cannot satisfy its vital needs-when there is neither fire nor cave for example-does nothing about it and lets itself die. Man, on the contrary; comes forward with a new type of activity,

he produces what he does not find in nature, whether because it does not exist at all or because it is not on hand when he needs it"

He also thinks technology is the essence of man because man is not born with all the things he needs to be himself. An animal, let's say a bear, is born with everything he needs to be a bear. A bear is born being a bear, will stay a bear, and nature provides everything it needs to be a bear. Gasset proposes that man's existence is different. He says

"(Man) is given an abstract possibility of existence, but not the reality of existence... Existence means the process of realizing, under given conditions, the aspiration we are."

This is a bold statement, but Gasset thinks that technology should serve this self-realization. His statement that it's the essence of man to self-realize might seem odd, but we chose self-improvement every day. We exercise to improve our physical fitness, attend schools to develop our mind, pick up helpful habits or hobbies, meditate, pray, create art, culture, even invent machines that can take us to space. If none of these activities, or things like them, were not part of a human's day-to-day, then it would be hard to think what they might be doing. These activities may not be the essence of man, but it seems safe to say they are expressive of man. Technology, then, can help us express our humanity.

Gasset may be wrong about what he thinks it is to be human. Other philosophers definitely disagree. But does his sentiment serve as a helpful litmus test for our own technology usage? Perhaps we could ask the question: is this smart phone helping me express my humanity? Do the technological advances in society at large help us to flourish, or to make us dependent?

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