

The clash between the self and its circumstance: an existential-phenomenological analysis of a
foreigner's circumstance

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Abstract

By analyzing José Ortega y Gasset's work, "Meditations on Quixote," renowned phrase, "I am myself and my circumstance," along with existential-phenomenological concepts such as Idealism, intentionality, embodiment, the concept of "Being-in-the-world," and our engagement with things in the world, we can build a philosophical framework for understanding the relationship between the individual and the world. This framework, when applied to the experience of an individual in a foreign country, provides us with a dynamic understanding that transforms this theoretical framework into a practical lens for examining lived experience.

Key words: embodiment, facticity, idealism, identity, intentional, pure I

Introduction

Among philosophers, the concept of identity has held a very significant place in discussions. The essence of what we are and how we develop is one of the most profound questions surrounding human nature. Many philosophers have attempted to find an answer to this phenomenon. José Ortega y Gasset stands as one of these thinkers, who addresses this question in his "Meditations on Quixote." In this text, he explores the character of Miguel de Cervantes – Don Quixote – linking him to the contemporary Spanish citizen of the 20th century. In his book, Ortega y Gasset writes a phrase that has become well known in the world of philosophy: "I am myself and my circumstance." Through this declaration, Ortega y Gasset immerses himself in the discussion surrounding *facticity*; all the predetermined factors that one is born into – such as birthplace, ethnicity, historical epoch, parentage, among other. His contribution is centered on drawing out the intricacies inherent in the tension between idealism and reality.

The primary objective of this essay is twofold. Firstly, it aims to analyze the implications of Ortega y Gasset's renowned phrase for individuals and establish connections with idealist concepts. This exploration seeks to trace the trajectory of existence from the abstract to the particular. Secondly, it seeks to discuss being in existential and phenomenological terms, with the objective of depicting the experience of a foreigner in an unfamiliar country as an example that depicts the depth of the confluence of these concepts. The ultimate aim is to utilize this real-life example to illuminate the profound convergence of these conceptual domains, and to provide a practical lens for examining and individual's lived experience.

Me and Myself

When examining Ortega y Gasset's phrase, the first thing that catches our attention is the presence of the two 'I's.' The dual presence of the 'I's' indicates that being exists in a twofold sense: in an abstract manner, as the individual in the world, and existentially, as an identity held by the individual. This twofold aspect of being is rooted in the intricate dance between idealism and the tangible material world – that is, reality. The elegance of Ortega y Gasset is precisely in his framing of this tension in a single phrase.

To link the individual and their identity with reality, it is necessary to understand the dynamic interaction between the individual and the world. The uppercase 'I' signifies being as an autonomous individual, corresponding to the conceptualization of the abstract 'I,' which Immanuel Kant titles the transcendental ego, and which Johann G. Fichte later expounds in his work, the *Wissenschaftslehre* as the 'pure I.'¹ It is often linked with concepts of soul, consciousness, or energy. According to Fichte, the 'pure I' *self-postulates* from an immediate self-awareness, i.e., it is a phenomenon that we become aware of through our intuition. Through the course of our human development, we gradually grasp the innate existence of this 'pure I' as an inherent part of our being. We approximate encounters with the 'pure I' during moments of introspection, however, as Fichte suggests, fully accessing the 'pure I' is impossible. We may only form an idea of what the 'I' represents; experiencing it in its entirety lies beyond the bounds of human experience. When attempting to access the 'pure I,' when we close our eyes and

¹ Fichte, J. G. (1994). *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (D. Breazeale, Trans.). In J. G. Fichte *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings (1797-1800)*. Hackett Publishing Company. pp. 31

attempt to observe what lies at the core of our being, leads us to what Fichte terms "pure self-reverting action."² The 'pure I' is nothing more than a self-contained activity of reason. It thus, is always engaged in reasoning about experience in the present moment. Experience is thus, a rational process of ceaseless thinking and acting that transpires from moment to moment. The 'pure I' helps us understand how the individual engages with the world and helps us understand how they acquire their particularity.

The connection between the individual and the world becomes of particular significance for the secondary 'I.' The uppercase 'I' presented by Ortega y Gasset stands as the self-reverting "motor" that instigates the interaction between the individual and the world that gives rise to the lowercase 'I.' The lowercase 'I' is the immediate self that we feel ourselves to be in each moment of our daily life, our identity. This reciprocal relationship, between the self and the world, is what we term as experience, and that which gives birth to our experiential journey that shapes our particular identity over time. For Ortega y Gasset, this reciprocal relationship creates the individual's circumstance.

The Embodied Circumstance of Being

For Ortega y Gasset, understanding the interaction between the individual and the world is crucial for understanding ourselves. This interaction involves the tension between the 'pure I' and the material world, stemming the reciprocal relationship with one's circumstance. Circumstance encompasses all the social, cultural, historical, and environmental factors that contribute to our distinctiveness and shape our identity. This dynamic reciprocity maintains

² Fichte, J. G. (1994). *An Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* (D. Breazeale, Trans.). In *J. G. Fichte Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and other writings (1797-1800)*. Hackett Publishing Company. fpp. 100

identity as something perpetually open and undefined, in such a way that identity continues to develop until death. This implies that the individual is inextricably intertwined with their environment, deeply rooted within it.

This rooting of the individual in their environment is primarily mediated through *embodiment*. As illustrated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the *embodiment* of consciousness signifies that our primary avenue for comprehending the world is through the body itself.³ The human body functions as the conduit between the 'pure I' and its environment, and through it, our actions in the world unfold that create our circumstance. The embodiment of consciousness also aligns with the notion of a temporal horizon. As mentioned above, our identity evolves over time, implying the existence of a relationship between the self and time.

Our conscious body is always in a here and now, in its circumstance, experiencing and acting. Our embodied engagement in the world is precisely what Heidegger sets forth as the essence of "Being-in-the-world" (Dasein), the necessity to accomplish tasks.⁴ The engagement between an individual and their future, that is, our concern for the future, gives rise to the need to undertake tasks that strive to bring the individual closer from a current present, to a desired future.⁵ At every moment, we find ourselves engaged in tasks, from the mundane, like eating, to the more complex, such as writing an essay. We seize upon a possibility through action to approximate a desired future outcome. In this sense, the engagement between individuals and the world becomes something inherently meaningful.

³ Merleau-Ponty, M. (2005). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge.

⁴ Wheeler, M. (2011, October 12). *Martin Heidegger*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>

⁵ Ibid.

Meaning is an essential part of our engagement with the world. Edmund Husserl suggests objects do not only exist as lifeless matter; for him, things are *intentional*, i.e., consciousness actively directs itself towards objects, instilling them with meaning and significance.⁶ In our everyday experience, things don't exist as self-contained entities severed from the individual; they exist "for me." Consciousness is always "consciousness of," it is always directed at some object either through perception, imagination, or emotion.⁷ This implies things appear within the canvas of experience and enter the interplay of reason that imparts meaning onto everything. Even something seemingly insignificant, like the walls of a building can hold an abundance of significance.

Suppose you are entering the building on your first day at a company you've always dreamt of working for; every object that crosses your field of vision will reflect meaning within this context. Suddenly, the walls radiate excitement. In fact, every inanimate thing seems to reflect your anticipation. Shiny elevator doors and expansive windows that offer a downtown vista captivate your senses; each step and glance spark a thrill.

Additionally, the consciousness, through its *intentional* nature, has the capacity of actualizing possibility. Because things exist "for me," I can actualize a myriad of the possibilities inherent to an object.⁸ Let's consider a bicycle, I can ride it, rest upon it, ride it slow or speed off, I can even hang it on my wall and as a form of décor. Thus, in every moment of our engagement

⁶ Beyer, C. (2022, October 17). *Edmund Husserl*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Husserl, E. (1983). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (F. Kersten, Trans.). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

with the world, we find ourselves assigning meaning to everything around us, and using this meaning as a bridge for actualizing the possibilities we encounter in the world.

A Foreigner's Circumstance

Circumstance is often marked by repetition; we tend to fall into routines that reduce the spontaneity in our lives. However, this is not the case for an individual in a foreign country. In an unknown country, different social and cultural norms, historical contexts, and environments keep the individual profoundly engaged in a state of constant interpretation with respect to their surroundings. This experience shakes them out of their routine slumber, injecting spontaneity into every aspect of their experience. When faced with the myriad of divergences between their known circumstance and all the new unknown factors of being in a foreign country, the individual confronts the limits of their identity that stem from the unknowns.

The introspection, born from the encounter between identity and its limit, is precisely what Ortega y Gasset invites us to explore in his meditations. This confrontation forces the foreigner to analyze and compare the differences between their familiarity and the new unknowns. The foreigner's tasks revolve around discovery. They may find themselves dissecting vocabulary, understanding new mannerisms, and exploring new object and spaces as part of a learning process that expands their circumstance and enables them to act appropriately in the unfamiliar space.

My own experience in Cuenca is thoroughly characterized by these fundamental aspects of human existence. As I walk through Cuenca, I find myself deciphering traffic signs, interpreting pedestrian cues, admiring the architecture, and noticing anything that contrasts with

my familiar routine. With every turn of a corner, a new block of an unfamiliar neighborhood unfolds before me, bringing with it countless possibilities that I can realize through my actions. While my present remains tethered to my future, the foreign context, with its unknowns, shrouds this tether in a more radical sense of spontaneity. The loss of routine and familiarity significantly increases the extent of exploration and discovery. The reciprocal relationship between myself and the world continues to expand my perspective, but in a foreign country, this expansion occurs even more profoundly.

Through these experiences, my identity and my circumstance expand. The spaces of an unknown Cuenca that I had only imagined have now become unforgettable places etched into my memory. I now carry with me images of its landscape, its beautiful mountains and river, the long streets lined with colorful buildings, its lush green parks, the awe-inspiring cathedral, and the historic old town. Similarly, the individuals who were once mere abstract characters in my imagination are now friends whom miss as I embark on my journey back to Texas. All these examples stem from my existence as an embodied individual embedded in my circumstance, enabling me to explore and know the spaces and people of Cuenca.

Conclusion

The philosophical framework of individuality and circumstance, as exemplified by Jose Ortega y Gasset's renowned statement, "I am myself and my circumstance," along with concepts found in existential-phenomenology, offer a valuable lens through which to examine the intricacies of human existence. We've examined the twofold nature of being, where the 'pure I' gives rise to identity and catalyzes the interactions between the individual and the world.

Our comprehension of individual's engagement with the world is further enriched by the Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied consciousness, in which the body functions as the conduit between the self and the world. This aligns with Heidegger's 'Being-in-the-world' and the profound significance of our engagement with realizing tasks and our pursuit of meaningful outcomes.

These concepts help us comprehend the individual's experience in a foreign country through a new perspective. Specifically, how new social norms, cultural contexts, and environments awaken them from the slumber of routine. And how the foreigner's introspection, born from the confrontation of identity with its limits, mirrors Ortega y Gasset's invitation to explore our own lives.

My personal experience in Cuenca demonstrates how these philosophical theories allows us to grasp the depth of these concepts with respect to real life. It enables us to examine the complexities of identity; how our identities expand, and circumstances transform when we are immersed in the unknown.

In essence, Ortega y Gasset's insights, in concert with the concepts of Fichte, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Husserl, illuminate the profound intricacies of our circumstances. These ideas, aid us in understanding that the individual is inextricably linked to the world, and that our identities are perpetually open, evolving as we engage with the unfolding events of our lives.