

Julián Marías, Vocation in Philosophy

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (November 2022)



Julián Marías at home in Madrid, 1977 (César Lucas)

Julián Marías Aguilera, was born on June 17, 1914, in Valladolid, Spain. The prolific Spanish philosopher died on December 15, 2005. Marías authored over sixty books and hundreds of essays.

Marías is the best-known disciple of José Ortega y Gasset. Both were associated with the School of Madrid philosophical movement, as this group of thinkers subsequently came to be known. Both superb essayists. The two thinkers assert that clarity of mind and the ability to communicate one's findings should be the superlative prerogative of thinkers. Intellectual clarity is a matter of pride for them. Ortega argues that clarity is the greatest courtesy a thinker can

offer readers. While Marías is as technically proficient as any other competent philosopher, he had the great advantage of not being an academic philosopher. Marías does not riddle his books and essays with hairsplitting and impenetrable jargon. He also does not embrace ideological and fashionable theories. Instead, Marías is every bit the consummate thinker. The first impression one gets from his work is the freedom of thought that he exercises. Much like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for instance, the impact of his thought will be vindicated with the passage of time.

Marías never abandoned the fundamental themes of philosophy: perennial philosophy. He addresses questions of death and immortality as readily as he does concerns on the nature of time and eternity, philosophical vocation and vital essence, and primal freedom and democracy. He managed this by writing insightful and rational essays that, as embarrassing as this should sound to academic philosophers, retained the ability to make sense. Marías was a proponent of common sense.

Marías does not obfuscate matters that can be addressed by using unpretentious language and intellectual honesty. On the order of the latter, much can be said about Marías' use of conscience as a major tool in the arsenal of philosophers. To his credit, he does not allow himself the self-indulgent arrogance that is the staple of writers who place reason at the service of ideology.

When Marías writes about moral questions, he does so from the realization that little of value can be accomplished when conscience is not taken seriously. Thus, he avoids using the many clichés that today inform our misguided notions of 'ethics.' Marías understood that ethics without conscience is a futile academic exercise.

Marías does not allow theoretical and ideological concerns to cloud his better judgment. During the 1930s and '40s, Marías witnessed the vulgarity and murder created by dishonest

intellectual currents. His refusal to become entranced by a bevy of criminal intellectual movements during those vile decades of the twentieth century caused him a great deal of strife and suffering.

Philosophy is a Way of Life

For Marías, philosophy remains a mode of life. When many twentieth century thinkers abandoned the possibility for autonomy that intellectual honesty can render its practitioners, Marías embraced philosophy as a vocation. He makes vocation a central component of reflection, for Marías views reason as a tool that must be placed in the service of life. For him, philosophy is neither a sport nor chic intellectual fashion. He has written a great deal about the proliferation of literary prizes and those who solicit them. According to Marías, intellectuals and writers who seek awards are particularly shameful, given the intrinsic rewards that these vocations offer.

Because Marías is a sincere and loyal exponent of his teacher and friend, Ortega y Gasset, some critics consider his work to be an offshoot of Ortega's. This is a sign those critics have not read his work. While he owes much to Ortega as a thinker, Marías was influenced by the ancient Greeks and Catholic philosophy. Marías' thought is that of a Catholic philosopher, while Ortega's work essentially lacks a Christian vein. Marías fuses the best currents of orthodox Catholic thought with existential themes. His thought is akin to Étienne Gilson, Louis Lavelle, and René Le Senne. This is why metaphysical anthropology plays a central role in his work.

Autonomous persons possess an essential being. Man responds to his being in light of interaction with the world. Metaphysical anthropology stresses man's being, not his biological component, as positivistic thought asserts. In this respect,

Marías' thought can also be compared with Gabriel Marcel's, given his concern with fidelity and having to remake one's faith on a daily basis. For Marcel, this takes the form of Catholic existentialism.

Marías can be considered a personalist. Metaphysical anthropology is Marías' best manner of explicating his vision for man. While anthropology tackles the nature of man, it normally does so from a cultural, societal, and historical perspective, rarely does it attempt to prove man's essence as man engages with the world. Marías' concern is with man's essence, not what happens to this entity as he deals with the exigencies brought on by the world. For this reason, Marías' main concern is metaphysical/existential in scope. Man is other than the world, according to the Spanish thinker. This makes man a transcendence-seeking being who can come to know his own freedom and limitations.

Some of Julián Marías' Books

Among his most distinguished books, we find his seminal *History of Philosophy*, a work that was published in 1941 and is still in print, including in English. This book displays the author's profound understanding of etymology in philosophy. Marías isolates the importance of the philosophical lexicon to its Greek, Latin, French and German roots. He attempts to understand philosophy not so much in its historical importance, but how thought captures the essence of the human condition. According to Marías, philosophy is a discipline that confronts and organizes raw reality. This is what is at stake in the philosophical enterprise, not the language used to communicate this underlying reality. This is what Marías refers to as philosophy as biographical.

Another of Marías' exemplary works is his book on Ortega, *José Ortega y Gasset: Circumstances and Vocation*. This book plays a

central role in explicating the intricacies and importance of Ortega's thought. Marías is the most prolific and competent exponent of Ortega's thought. He locates Ortega's place in the history of philosophy, especially in the philosophy of life, dating back to the Nineteenth century.

Marías' *Philosophy as Dramatic Theory* is a collection of essays, where he tries to make sense of spirit in human existence. This is perhaps his most original work. Some of the most interesting essays in this volume include, "Philosophy and Literary Genres," "Atheism and Contemporary Philosophy," "Meditatio Mortis: The Theme of our Time," and "Energy and Reality in the World." Marías brings a commendable freshness and scope to these eternal themes.

Other books include, *The Historical Method of the Generations*, a work that demonstrates the intellectual prowess and depth of his thought. Marías analyzes man's history and culture from the perspective of his theory of the generations. This work brings to light the respective duties and responsibilities inherent in the study of human generations.

Also important in Marías' collected work is *The Idea of Metaphysics and The Social Structure: Theory and Method*. In one of his last works entitled, *Treatise on Conviviality: Concord Without Agreement*, Marías points out how truth is received today. He writes: "If we look closely, we find that the evils of our time originate in a process of 'depersonalization' that has taken root. The world is replete with things, due in part to a fabulous creation of riches from the time of World War II – curiously, the creation of riches gets a 'bad press' – the consequences of this being that many cannot help but to think about things and have even come to view themselves as things."

Marías' most insightful and poignant expression as a thinker is found in *Metaphysical Anthropology: The Empirical Structure of Human Life* (1971). While many historians of philosophy only

know him as a disciple of Ortega y Gasset, Marías successfully developed his thought in metaphysical anthropology. This line of thinking explains man not as appearance (phainomena), as biology and materialism describe man, but rather as an internality that can know itself through self-reflection: “My collected work employs the idea of ‘the empirical structure’ of human existence. This reached its apotheosis in my book *Metaphysical Anthropology* (1970). My writing dating back to the last thirty years are an exploration of the diverse dimensions of that structure and they have permitted me to come to understand many questions.”



Marías views man as an individual being who exists in a realm that is not only objective and external, but also an objectifying condition that man finds necessary to transcend. Reality presents itself as resistance, a venerable obstacle to man. The work of the philosopher consists of seeking and defining the essences that rule over human existence. He adds: “Empirical structure exists between the notion of ‘personal life’ and every concrete and individual life. This is the only way that we can come to realize the form of personal life which we know directly, that is, man.”

According to the Spanish thinker, man is not a collective and abstract concept. Man is essentially a solitary being who is coerced by the passage of time into creating life- projects. Life, Marías suggests, must be justified. This is an existential conception of human existence. Life is biographical in make-up. This means that man can come to know

himself only from his interiority. Experience alone teaches us very little, unless we are ready to assimilate its lazy perceptions. Life is proactive.

In *Metaphysical Anthropology*, we discover that man—always as an individual—becomes lost in the social realm. Man organizes his existence in a social manner, but this is not the defining condition of man. Human life, biologically speaking, is not synonymous with the private and subjective entity that we embrace as “I.” Marías argues, much as other existentialists, that human existence is not given to us ready-made. On the contrary, human life is a process that seeks to know itself. This is an example of the fluidity of life as resistance.

For this reason, Marías explains that life is equivalent to a search for truth. This is an active condition that does not wait for truth to declare itself. This activity, in its plenitude, is the work of the thinker.

Marías refers to philosophical vocation as ‘responsible vision.’ This is a responsible vision because thinkers should not invent relative realities as part of their personal projects, rather respond to reality proper.

Philosophical reflection, when this is sincere, can be defined as a humbling and cathartic undertaking. The desire to make reality the starting point of reality makes thinkers humble. Philosophical vocation is a humble undertaking. When we are crisis-free, man seems to grow in existential stature. In other words, when life is ‘what I think it ought to be’ we do not become preoccupied with existential categories of reality.

Marías considers that truth—he uses the Greek word *Alētheia*—is such that it always hides, as aptly described by Heraclitus. Whoever launches his energy into uncovering truth does so from a form of courage that may or may not know in advance the dangers that lie ahead.

Philosophy is a paradoxical activity. Yet this paradox is only

the case for people who reflect. Philosophy attempts to answer questions that are intuitive – often not fully demonstrable. If we believe that the patent aspects of reality can be embraced naively, we find it useless to philosophize. It is only when we make progress from the patent to the latent that we encounter the value of philosophy as an existential activity. Philosophical vocation is existential inquietude.

However, existential inquietude does not mean a heavy-handed assault on reality and the security that we can enjoy in our personal lives. This is a misguided impression that some existentialists promote.

Marías' existential project is that of a personalist. Being is one thing, while concrete human existence is another. Serving as mediator between Being (essence) and existence, man discovers himself as life.

Human consciousness does not confront itself as 'humanity.' Instead, human reality does not fulfill the condition for man to merely exist as biological life, rather, as a self-reflective modality that breaks away from the rest of nature. This is the case for practical reasons. Marías writes: "The first significance of the expression 'life' appears when everyone of us talks of his life, that is, when this is merely a question of my life."

Metaphysical anthropology is related to vocation because it does not originate in the idea of man as homo faber—man as creator—or from culture and society as collectivism, rather, as concrete flesh and bones, individual and differentiated.

Julián Marías, the Thinker

Marías is a gifted thinker. His essays disseminate complex concepts in a manner that is never pedantic. This is a rare gift. The ability to write without pretension and jargon, he

learned from Ortega, for whom writing philosophically in newspapers was a great opportunity to enlighten a broad readership. Ortega and Marías viewed the newspaper as a vehicle to transcend the role of mere reporting. Marías wrote on culture, art, moral concerns, literature, etc., with the same flair and respect for clarity he exercised in his books.

Marías was a public intellectual. He fulfilled that capacity with a dignity that does not seek celebrity or solicits the cult of personality. This is a temptation that sincere self-reflection avoids. While newspaper commentaries limit the depth of the themes that a writer can develop, it does not limit the scope of themes that can be covered. The frequency in which commentaries appear allows for the creation of a body of work. Marías wrote about serious topics while engaging a wider audience. He explored the intellectual and cultural possibilities that newspaper writing can offer.

Not being an academic, Marías kept himself motivated by the pursuit of truth, in the only manner that free thinkers can exercise thought: sincerely.

Also central to Marías' work is the humanistic component of his thought. Marías was cognizant of the damage done to philosophy and culture by fashionable, radical ideological movements. Avoiding attention-seeking, he created a body of work that underscores the importance of man's sense of worth and the gravitas that promotes the pursuit of the good life.

Marías, Public Intellectual

As a writer for magazines like *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*, Marías was able to develop an effective manner of communicating philosophically with the general public.

The flexibility that Marías was forced to develop in order to communicate with an audience of non-specialists in philosophy

allowed him to comment on topics without intimidating or alienating his readers. For instance, his two volumes of essays on cinema, *El cine de Julián Marías* are comprised of essays that he wrote for *ABC* and *Blanco y Negro*.

I imagine that some readers are surprised to hear that the author of *Filosofía actual y existencialismo en España* and *El oficio del pensamiento* could be interested in the Marx Brothers. Marías offers a philosophical perspective on cinema that does not suffer from theoretical inebriation. His essays on cinema do not go out of their way to 'deconstruct' or dismantle the motives of a given director. He writes about cinema the same way he writes about other topics: from a vocation to write about what he loves. He explicates and augments the themes that writers and movie directors set out to accomplish. Marías offers his measured analysis to readers who may be interested in a philosopher's take on cinema. Consider what he writes about *Duck Soup*: "Duck Soup is different from other Marx Brothers films in two or three counts; it is less verbal and more visual, that is, something is always happening, and the hilarious action is never interrupted; the 'no stopping' is more literal than ever; it has a curious reiteration element, which I will comment on, is more intentional than in their other films."

Marías practiced philosophical vocation in the most appropriate way possible: he embodied it as a way of life. The grand aspect of this vocation is knowing how to exercise reason as life-affirming. The absence of genuine vocation creates a carapace that some may call philosophy, but when measured against lived, vital philosophy proper, becomes exposed as a stale academic enterprise.

Marías understood that philosophical vocation does not become sidetracked by fame or intellectual fashion. He was concerned with the banality he perceived issuing forth in large quantities, especially since the second half of the twentieth century, from writers who sought fame and fortune. He explains

in "Profundidad": "The consequence of all of this, of the inequality and lack of richness of the present is the absence of 'profundity.' There is an evident diminution of reality of the European Union. The greatness that has been Europe for many centuries has now evaporated."

Marías explains inauthenticity: "The temptation of many writers is to think about prizes as the fountain of inspiration, even though they know that after receiving them they quickly become forgotten. This is a way of coming into fame at the cost of losing loyal readers. It is unsolvable the damage that all of this is doing to culture, to what we refer to exaggeratedly, as 'creators.' The common factor that explains this series of apparently heterodox phenomenon is the resistance of attempting to be what one is, that is, authenticity."

Vocation cannot be separated from lived vitality. Self-reflection discovers the self. Marías argues that we understand human reality in proportion to our ability for self-knowledge. This act of self-understanding does not need to be technical. He adds: "Still of greater concern is the perturbation occasioned by the lack of respect of 'vocation' itself, perhaps this has to do with the disappearance of vital authenticity. This creates a hole in reality, which is filled by the nonexistent. In the words of the moribund Quevedo, 'what is nothing other than a vocabulary and a figure.'"

Marías' essays are a defensive assault against the war that postmodernity has declared on human reality. He tells us this in his essay entitled "Reality and its masks": "We are witnessing a process that can be called an 'offensive' against reality. I believe that this will intensify in the near future. It is not easy to destroy what is real and even risking it involves many efforts; but this is within reach of those who want to occult, disfigure and supplant it with other things. In conclusion, to occlude it."

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy at Barry University, Miami Shores, Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay, Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*](#), [*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy*](#) and [*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [*Philosophy Today*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998).

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