

Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of History

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ABSTRACT

According to Ortega, human history comes about as the discovery of differentiated, self-aware life that encounters itself in a reservoir of possibilities. Properly speaking, history does not exist until man, who is a metaphysical/existential entity, becomes aware of responsibility in choice-making. For this reason, human history signifies more than just historical events. Instead, history is the outward manifestation of the trajectory of personal life, either as *ensimismamiento* or *alteración*. In *Toward a Philosophy of History*, Ortega explains history as a vital process that originates in the exuberance of free will. In Ortega's thought, history is the domain of metaphysical/existential beings, and not the culmination of a "blind" process. Ortega's philosophy of history locates history-making in the choices of individuals through vital reason. This is what he ultimately means by historical reason. Abstraction, he suggests, revolts against life.

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§1. Science and History

 ORTEGA BEGINS TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY by reflecting on science and not history. This indirect approach to his subject matter is in keeping with the essayistic, exploratory nature of his writing. It is also a fine example of the ancient idea of philosophy of life, or what can be referred to as Ortega's heuristic manner of philosophizing. The scientific method, Ortega goes on to compliment science, is ruled by its quest for exactness and certitude in its predictions. These are admirable qualities, he assures the reader. Then the intellectually resolute Spanish philosopher reminds the reader that science concentrates on secondary questions, for science contributes little to existential concerns, thus "leaving intact the ultimate and decisive questions."¹

Ortega's thought is concerned with metaphysical first principles, and science does not seek first principles. Ortega argues that, even though physics attempts to explain the causes of events, this does not entail the uncovering of first principles. However, in Ortega's work the question of first principles in science and philosophy is not intended as a criticism of science. The reason that he embarks on that kind of thinking is because he is interested in how metaphysical and existential concerns inform his philosophy of vital reason.

Unquestionably, many of the debates that have surfaced in the history of philosophy originate in and are motivated, in great part, by human temperament. A philosopher's outlook on the world and, more broadly speaking, the universe, cannot easily be divorced from temperament. Perhaps a more significant question to ask is, what temperament in human beings is best suited to uncover first principles? The answer to this question would effectively shift the focus away from science and philosophy as forms of human understanding and concentrate on the nature of man. For Ortega, this concern merits reflection on philosophical anthropology.

One certainty that man can take from philosophical anthropology is that man seeks answers to metaphysical/existential questions. Metaphysical/existential questions are the foundation of the perennial philosophy, which predates science. However, metaphysical/existential questions are not entertained as a luxury. Instead, they originate in man's pressing need to decipher the mass of experiences that man must interpret and unify. Because many human experiences are seemingly contradictory, seeking coherence enables man to live well in the world —to have a good life.

Man is not a disembodied mind, a robotic machine that merely attempts to ground human existence in an algorithmic form of epistemology. The aforementioned distinction

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1941), 13.

between modes of human temperament is a latent vindication of questions that inform the history of philosophy. Such questions will simply not go away regardless of the assurance offered by epistemological logic. Philosophical anthropology concerns thinkers who contribute to philosophy of history. One reason for this is that human history is a broader, more holistic field of study than other specialized forms of thinking. The philosopher of history must utilize a spectrum of skills that allow him to sweep through philosophical anthropology, while other disciplines remain encapsulated in specialization. Ortega is correct that philosophers of history must be existentially alert.

Of course, at the center of man's resolve to understand human history lies the being who makes history, man. The practice of genuine philosophical reflection serves vital life, and avoids abstraction, hair-splitting and pedantry. While human history engulfs all disciplines, Ortega eschews the value of specialized scientific knowledge for its failure to contribute to man's existential questions.

Ortega acknowledges that what I refer to as "algorithmic thinking" has a place in science and mathematics. Yet philosophers should remain cautious and skeptical about the effectiveness of this method in attempting to solve all classes of human problems. Postmodern man has embraced false security concerning metaphysical questions that science, if not scientism, have tried to eradicate. Ortega explains:

We cannot breathe confined to a realm of secondary and intermediate themes. We need a comprehensive perspective, foreground and background, not a maimed scenery, a horizon stripped of the lure of infinite distances. Without the aid of the cardinal points we are liable to lose our bearings.²

§2. The Idea of Life in History

Ortega's philosophy of history revolves around the idea of life. He rebuffs those who believe that life ought to be geared toward utilitarian goals, much as is the case in animal life. The differences that Ortega cites between life as adaptation —what he considers to be the great mistake of utilitarianism— and vital existence is that the latter is the "unforeseeable appetite itself."³

Human life is creative not merely biological. Life as creative act finds itself engaged in two forms of effort: one that is for sheer delight and another that is compulsory. The compulsory type concerns itself with sensual existence. That is, with life as concern for its own physical well-being. This signals an instinctual form of effort. The effort that delights itself, in what

² Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Ortega calls having-to-do (*quehacer*), belongs to the realm of existential categories. This, then, is a fundamental difference between science, and life as the search for first principles. The search for first principles, Ortega observes, is necessitated by man's capacity for self-reflection: "What I want to say is that in every vital process the first impulse is given by an energy of supremely free and exuberant character, in individual life as well as in history."⁴

In *History as a System* Ortega argues that theoretical abstraction always goes against concrete human existence. This is the downfall of revolutions:

In revolutions the abstract tries to rebel against the concrete; failure is therefore of the very substance of revolutions. Human affairs, unlike problems of astronomy or chemistry are not abstract. They are historical and therefore in the highest degree concrete.⁵

Ortega's philosophy of history locates history-making in the choices of individuals. This is what he ultimately means by historical reason. Abstraction, he suggests, revolts against life. This is also why he argues that the discoveries made by physics, biology and chemistry never capture the pulse of vital existence. In this regard, Ortega's thought offers a reaction to pure reason, especially in light of his return from Marburg, Germany as a young man. However, this is only one aspect of his philosophy of history, for Ortega understands history as being the arena where human choices are manifest.

Hence, by way of a thesis, I will suggest that human history comes about as the discovery of differentiated, self-aware life that encounters itself in a reservoir of possibilities. Properly speaking, history does not exist until man, who is a metaphysical/existential entity, becomes aware of responsibility in choice making. This is not just about history, but also concerns the trajectory of personal life. Ortega expands on his metaphysics of alertness in *Meditations on Hunting*. He explains this process as such: "What I want to say is that in every vital process the first impulse is given by an energy of supremely free and exuberant character, in individual life as well as in history."⁶

The first chapter of *Toward a Philosophy of History* is entitled "The Sporting Origin of the State." There, Ortega offers the reader a speculative look at man's primeval discovery of vital-life possibilities. Truth be told, when dealing with the subject of pre-history, the best that we can do today is speculate. Yet conjecture through reverse extrapolation can be a fruitful way of reflecting on human history. Reversal of this mathematical formula for predicting aspects of the future can be useful, as long as our subject matter is not history, but man. Ortega's philosophical anthropology is rooted in the idea that man is a metaphysical/existential being

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ José Ortega y Gasset, *History as a System*. (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960), 78.

⁶ Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 19.

who is extra-natural. We do not possess evidence that this aspect of human nature has ever changed. The proof of the latter is found in man's response to his environment through a creative act that seeks to perpetuate life through knowledge and culture. Ortega takes man's dealings with the world around him, including other people, as a sign of vigor, not utility: "Again we see that in the beginning there is vigor and not utility."⁷

Undoubtedly, for Ortega, philosophy of history is the outward manifestation of vital reason. For this reason, history, he contends, cannot be understood in units of time that exhibit a collective classification. Because vital reason is essentially the existential act that recognizes subjectivity in the human person, history is in effect the history of a person's relative success in cultivating self-awareness of subjectivity. This is why Ortega can assert that history is a manifestation of historical reason.

One instructive way to appropriate Ortega's philosophy of history is to compare his idea of man in historical epochs with René Girard's idea of mimesis.⁸ For Girard, philosophical anthropology is the supreme mode of human reflection that best answers questions of man's action, motivation, and meaning and purpose. Girard considers mimesis the fundamental factor that explains how people behave as individuals. Because people imitate each other, Girard contends that people look to others as objects worthy of imitation. Imitation can be positive, especially when the object of imitation is uplifting. However, as relatable to Ortega's idea of historical reason, more often than not, imitation works as a factor in solidifying mass man's *alteración*, if not the values of mass man. When applied to Ortega's idea that vital reason is translated into human history as historical reason, imitation becomes a major stumbling block to *ensimismamiento* (authenticity).

Vital reason is the demarcation point that distinguishes between pure reason and vital reflection. The latter is Ortega's conception of existential reflection, or what can also be considered a form of practical reason. Vital reason is differentiated from pure reason in Ortega's work because pure reason signals the subjugation of vital existence by intellectualizing it. Ortega seeks to resolve the tension that exists between reason and life, especially in modern philosophy.

He suggests that what ought to concern man most is vital life, not history. History, then, is the culmination of man's action as a being who must cultivate choice-making as *quehacer* (having-to-do). In addition, because vital reason is life as biographical and not merely biological, the significance of existential reflection—or the absence thereof—both lead to historical value-aggregates that become registered as man's consciousness in history.

Thus, returning to Ortega's conception of scientific truth, we can now add that science does little to penetrate the barrier that people face in communicating with each other. The question whether science contributes much to man's existential condition is crucial in Ortega's thought. One reason is that when people resort to imitate each other out of

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ René Girard, *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

existential exhaustion; science ultimately becomes something on which to pin man's hopes and aspiration, which does not require existential reflection. It is easy to see how science becomes the dominate history-building force in man's life. This is why Ortega begins *Towards a Philosophy of History* by addressing science and not history.

In discussing the vitality of human existence, and how man appropriates this, Ortega is concerned with the question of how existential reflection affects, both communication with others, and his interpretation of human history. Language may approximate the meaning that people have in mind in an outward, objective manner. However, Ortega is not confident that language succeeds in creating genuine communication about existential concerns between people. Of the ways that people can communicate, speech is perhaps the most effective. Of course, the problem is that speech is effusive because it is not recorded. The latter condition makes Ortega doubtful about the extent of the bonds that people can build, for if there is no substantial historical evidence of vital communication, what remains is the mere illusion of communication. Ortega is adamant, the best man can do to make himself understood is achieved through one-to-one verbal communication. For this reason, he argues that his published work does not propose to communicate with "humanity," but rather with individuals who are like-minded. This is Ortega the realist, the thinker that places his hope in spontaneous dialogue.

The latter is in evidence when Ortega writes the following about the language of the physical sciences: "...When it [language] comes to physics it is already ambiguous and inadequate; and as conversation approaches subjects more important than these, more human, more 'real,' it increases in imprecision, crudeness and obscurity."⁹

Once again, we must return to the question of the tension between pure reason and life. Modernity, Ortega is adamant to point out, has vulgarized the difference between the two. This, in turn, means that the vital realm of human existence has suffered from man's inability to say something substantial about the essence of subjectivity. How this concern influences human history is clear, for modern man seeks to know only objective processes that remain outside the realm of existential concerns. This creates the illusion of stability in human history; that history takes place on a plane that is divested from existential inquietude.

The stoic in Ortega suggests that existential reflection —what we have described as vital reason— is a heroic act given its solitariness. Ortega realizes that the written word has become "abused" and has fallen "into disrepute." He explains:

I believe, therefore, that the measure of a book is the author's ability to imagine his reader concretely and to carry on o kind of hidden dialogue with him, in which the reader perceives from between the lines the touch as of an ectoplasmic hand that feels him, caresses him, or deals him

⁹ Ortega, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, 45.

an occasional gentlemanly blow.¹⁰

The aforementioned quotation brings to light the perennial question as to the proper subject of philosophical reflection, and the question of the temperament of thinkers. We must keep in mind that Ortega equates temperament with vocation. He agrees with Socrates that philosophy is best entertained as self-reflection and practiced in dialogue form. As a consequence, the dialogue must occur among parties that celebrate good will, or what Socrates regarded as the spirit of philosophy. However, Ortega's idea of reading between the lines falls short of the perceived rigidity that elenchus often elicits. Instead, the one who reads between the lines must be an equal to the writer, as it were, for both must cultivate a form of the *vita contemplativa*.

Toward a Philosophy of History displays many similarities with *The Revolt of the Masses*. In *The Revolt of the Masses* Ortega analyzes the idea of mass and noble man. In that work, the Iberian philosopher offers an existential account of what constitutes a good and moral life. In *The Revolt of the Masses* *ensimismamiento* and *alteración* (authenticity and inauthenticity) are highlighted as the dominant forces in human life, and by implication, history. Yet in typical Ortega fashion, he takes existential concerns and applies them to history, culture, literature, etc., throughout that book. This is important to keep in mind, because Ortega is under the impression that readers of *The Revolt of the Masses* understand his basic philosophical presuppositions, and can follow the trajectory of his reasoning throughout the book. Again, this is a fine example of reading between the lines that presupposes a modicum of good will. The latter, when it takes place, is what philosophical reflection aims at. This is the moment when language either serves as a force that helps man communicate with each other, or as a blunt instrument of obfuscation.

§3. History, Mass Man and Individuals

Toward a Philosophy of History is structured in the same way as *The Revolt of the Masses*. The former is an attempt to formulate the meaning of history, as this originates in man's capacity to formulate a coherent perspective of the world.¹¹ Modernity serves as the repertoire, Ortega

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 56. Ortega explains the similarities between these two books best by invoking a further understanding of mass man. We must remember that *The Revolt of the Masses* was published in Spanish in 1929 (*La rebelión de las masas*), and *Toward a Philosophy of History* (*Historia como sistema*) in 1941. "Everywhere there has arisen the mass-man, a type of man built hurriedly, mounted on a few poor abstractions and who is therefore identical from one end of Europe to the other. To him is due the look of stifling monotony that life has begun to assume throughout the continent. He is a man emptied of his own history, with no inward past, and so given over to any so-called 'international' discipline. He is less a man than the shell of one, made of plain *idola fori*: he has no insides, no inalienable privacy of his own, no irrevocable 'I.' Consequently, he is always ready to play at being anything. He has only appetites, he believes that he has only rights and no obligations; he is a man without the imperative of nobility — *sine nobilitate* — the snob."

is never shy to point out, of the mass man. This hollow man who has been emptied of all reflection and vitality rules the world today. What is truly at stake in modernity is the fear that mass man has of existential freedom. Without vocation, what Ortega calls a life plan, mass man does not find it imperative nor fruitful to cultivate existential freedom, especially if he knows that “he has no real mission to fulfill.”¹²

Ortega’s philosophical anthropology offers a profound contribution to many of the human concerns that modernity has issued. Most importantly, his philosophical reflection has passed the test of time that all philosophical systems and schools must muster in order not to become irrelevant. The most important contribution that Ortega’s thought has made to the study of history is to present history, not as collective blocks of time that are classified as historical events, rather by delving into the nature of differentiation, as this is manifested in individuals. By concentrating on the nature of man, or better said, the types of people that exist, Ortega is able to break down history into its most basic components.

Hence, it is not surprising that Ortega’s philosophy of history is anchored in differentiated persons. The mere mention of individualism in Ortega’s work signals the idea of life as the foundation of human existence. Because life is always biographical—a narrative of existential vitality—the focus is placed on existential life, not biology. This is life as radical reality. Radical, we ought not to forget, only means root reality in Ortega’s work. Biology tells us next to nothing about human history. If biographical life is an existential component of human existence, then individuals are best understood as living authentically as individuals, or inauthentically as beings who negate their internal constitution. This makes the problem of mass man in history the greatest concern of philosophers of history.

The question of the revolt of the masses, Ortega contends, is twofold: mass man suffers from what he calls moral hemiplegia—the condition that atrophies moral development—and thus, by implication, brings about the politicization of all aspects of human life. Ortega is adamant: “Total politicalism, the absorption of everything and of the entire man by politics, is one and the same phenomenon as the revolt of the masses.”¹³ As a consequence of politicization, Ortega foresaw that modernity would eventually come to consume man with a frenetic life that leaves no time for solitude and intimacy, the necessary condition for existential reflection to flourish. As a consequence of this hectic existence, *alteración* can be defined as vacuous socialization. As such, *alteración* by way of socialization is life that is externally, not inwardly directed.

Socialization translates to mimesis that restricts the possibility of existential reflection. This goes against Ortega’s understanding of life as biographical—as man as the novelist of his life. Mimesis is most destructive in the absence of *ensimismamiento* because it pins the subject against the forces of objectification, in the absence of the necessary moral/spiritual mechanism that *ensimismamiento* cultivates.

¹² Ibid., 57.

¹³ Ibid., 71.

According to Ortega, blind and reflexive socialization is equivalent to *alteración*. What is significant about socialization in regards to mass man is that mass man in postmodernity is served politicization as the only form of socialization. Ortega considers politicization the lowest grade of living that man can embrace. He explains this in the following way “Nor has there been any approach to a study of the distinct margin of individuality that each period bequeaths to human existence, a study that would be of vital importance.”¹⁴

For Ortega, history is always the history of individuals, regardless of whether they live authentic or inauthentic lives. As we have seen, inauthenticity is easier and more fruitful to imitate because it levels the moral/spiritual demands that life makes of noble man. The latter consists of the embrace of human limitation and the road less travelled, as it were. In many ways, Ortega effectively de-mythologizes human history in his attempt to answer the philosophical anthropological question, what is man? Ortega’s profound contribution to understanding the human person and reality can be summarized in the following fashion “History is full of recoils in this sphere, and it may well be that the structure of modern life is a supreme impediment to man’s living as an individual”.¹⁵

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¹⁴ Ibid., 73.

¹⁵ Ibid.