

La Razón Vital: Reason and the Arts in the Social Theory of José Ortega y Gasset

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the thought of twentieth-century Spain's pre-eminent social critic: José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). I begin with an contextual analysis of Ortega's concept of "vital reason"—his attempt to find a balance between what he considered to be the hyper-rationalism of the nineteenth century and the anti-rationalism of many fin-de-siècle thinkers. In his approach to the study of modern society, Ortega was influenced by artistic and literary models, and thus his work retains a distinctly aesthetic flavor unique in mainstream modern social theory even today. Ortega was also one of the first to call for an end to ideological (or "partisan") theory, which falsely polarizes the world and ultimately prohibits real understanding and the possibility of mutual exchange between competing social and political ideas. Ortega's moderation consists in self-reflexivity and the priority of dialogue, but does not seek to eliminate difference. Rather, presaging the work of Thomas S. Kuhn, Ortega upheld the necessity of an "essential tension" between competing ideas, one that can feed off its components, and can draw from tradition as well as from the new.

Ours is once again a period rich in experimentation and conceptual risk-taking. Older dominant frameworks are not so much denied—there being nothing so grand to replace them—as suspended. The ideas they embody remain intellectual resources to be used in novel and eclectic ways. The closest such previous period was the 1920s and 1930s when evolutionary paradigms, laissez-faire liberalism, and revolutionary socialism and Marxism all came under energetic critiques. Instead of grand theories and encyclopedic works, writers devoted themselves to the essay, to documenting diverse social experiences at close quarters, and to fragmentary illuminations.

– Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*

Theory becomes intelligible only when it becomes rooted in the life for which it was at once possible and necessary.

– Julián Marías

If ever there lived a writer¹ whose work and life fused to form an almost indistinguishable whole, that writer was José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955). "I am I and my circumstances," is a familiar Ortegan refrain, and one that reveals not only his philosophical thesis but also his vocational vision. Catapulted into fame at a young age as a leading voice of the Spanish "Generation of 1914," Ortega lived and wrote his personal destiny in a period of extreme social, political, cultural, and intellectual unrest, both within Spain and on a broader European scale. In this paper I will undertake a critical re-evaluation of several themes that underlie Ortega's writings, by working on two levels: the meta-theoretical (or, perhaps, methodological), in discussing the syncretistic nature of the Ortegan approach to sociological theorization (i.e., his "perspectivism"); and the more strictly theoretical, in an investigation of his central motif of "vital" (or, "historical") reason. In an era of intense ideological polarization Ortega's anti-partisanism did not prevent him from dwelling upon those issues that he felt were of critical relevance to the socio-political, cultural, and intellectual ferment of his country and Europe in his day.

Ortega saw his mission as twofold, and as difficult as it was imperative; feeling the urgent need to somehow awaken his nation from its stagnation *vis-à-vis* the rest of Europe, he

also recognized the myriad changes occurring in Europe—changes that would soon wash away the nineteenth century, along with its particular socio-political framework and its ideas. Criticizing not only the patriotic "irrational" vitalism of Miguel de Unamuno and the "Generation of 1898," but, with equal vigor, the psychologism that characterized nineteenth-century Germanic thought (and which he identified with the shibboleth of Cartesian rationalism), Ortega saw that Spain's "return" to Europe could not involve a "return" to a mode of thinking that was fated to become obsolete (and, he would argue, necessarily so). As the herald of a new dawn for Europe, Ortega felt that his own generation, though of great promise and potential, had as yet failed to capture their destiny—a "revolutionary" destiny. As such, they (and he) were trapped, as it were, between the lingering death of the old and the difficult birth of the new.

History, Circumstance, & Vital Sensibility

I believe that in all of Europe, but most especially in Spain, the present generation is one of... deserters. Few times have men lived less clearly with themselves, and perhaps never has humanity borne so docilely forms that are not akin to it, holdovers from other generations that do not respond to its ultimate beat. From this derives apathy, so characteristic of our time, for example, in politics and art. Our institutions, like our spectacles, are stiffened residues of another age.

– Ortega y Gasset

From his earliest writings, Ortega stressed the necessity of taking circumstance into account in philosophical enquiry. Not only the nature of phenomena, but also the entire context in which such have arisen must be investigated. The collaboration with past theories and ideas ensures, says Ortega, "freedom from errors already committed" (*El tema* 11), and gives philosophy (or, as Ortega would prefer, theory) a progressive (though not a teleological) character. We attempt, argues Ortega, by means of history, to understand the changes which occur in the minds of human beings. Although certain historical phenomena depend on others, complete holism or "hyperorganicism" is a "loose exaggeration of the mystics" (13). As such, changes of an industrial or political nature are superficial, for they depend upon contemporary

ideas, upon prevalent fashions in morals or aesthetics. Yet ideology, taste, and morality are themselves no more than consequences or demonstrations of “the root feeling that arises in the presence of life, the sensations of existence in its undifferentiated totality” (13). It is *vital sensibility*, according to Ortega, that is the primary phenomenon in history, and it is to such that one must look if one wishes to understand a particular age and its legacy, not to mention its potential. Correspondingly, only when this vital sensibility is felt, by a number of people, to be changing or obsolete, can there begin a transformation in thought and in society.

With his meta-historical theory of society, Ortega prefigures Thomas Kuhn’s theory of “structural revolution” within the natural sciences. As Kuhn has argued, new theories (in science) are not born *de novo*, but rather “emerge from old theories and within a matrix of old beliefs about the phenomena that the world does and does not contain” (*Structure* 234). Even a researcher sufficiently trained in traditional thought cannot afford to simply wander in search of anomalies, “relying merely upon his receptivity to new phenomena and his flexibility to new patterns of organization.” “Reactive” research, research in the name of novelty, seeks merely to return science “to its preconsensus or natural history phase.”

With respect to the human sciences, Hayden White has written critically of an all-too-frequent modern (or “post-modern”) tendency to reject the past and the study of such. The anti-historical attitude, which often coincides with an “irrationalist” ethos, underlay, he says, both Nazism and existentialism in our own century. Interestingly, White mentions Ortega as one who fell prey to this anti-historical bias. Although passages can certainly be cited to confirm White’s suspicions, they are, upon further analysis, products of his personal anger mixed with a certain flair for rhetoric, and are more than counterbalanced, particularly in Ortega’s later writings, by a multitude of expressions confirming the necessity of historical knowledge. When Ortega writes that “our institutions are anachronisms,” and that we must have “the courage to break resolutely with such devitalized accretions of the past,” he is expressing his contempt, not for the past nor for the study of such, but rather for the rationalistic excesses of the previous generation(s), as well as, perhaps, some frustration regarding the continued strength of such a “de-vitalized” ethos in philosophy and social theory, even when recent scientific discoveries were provoking skepticism even in the so-called hard sciences. It seems unlikely, despite White’s accusation, that Ortega would have agreed with Nietzsche’s proclamation to the effect that “History ha[s] to be seriously hated as a costly and superfluous luxury of the understanding if human life itself [is] not to die in the senseless cultivation of the vices which a false morality, based on memory, induce[s] on men” (Nietzsche 21). Indeed, Ortega recognized the “use” of history sufficiently to change the motif he cherished most (and the title of his final work), from “vital” to “historical” reason.

What, then, is the solution to the problem of the use of history with respect to social theory? “It is sufficient,” says Kuhn, for a productive researcher to adopt existing theory as “a lightly held tentative hypothesis,” employing it “*faute de mieux*” in order to get a start, “and then abandon[ing] it as soon as it leads to a trouble spot, a point at which something has gone wrong” (*Structure* 234). Kuhn’s plea, like that of

Ortega, is for a sort of pragmatic moderation, making use of the “essential tension” between divergent and convergent thinking. The successful theorist, no less than the successful scientist, must display at once the characteristics of the traditionalist and of the iconoclast, while refusing to become one or the other *in toto*. “Most importantly of all,” says Kuhn, “we must seek to understand how these two superficially discordant modes of problem solving can be reconciled within the individual and within the group” (237). Ortega’s syncretistic approach to theorization is just such an attempt to understand and deal with this problem.

Art and Science as Models for Social Theory

I cannot help thinking that the renewal or reinvigoration of idea and theory we so badly need in sociology in the present age, indeed, in all of the social sciences, would be greatly accelerated if sufficient awareness of the unity of art and science, especially with respect to the sources of imagination in each area, were present at all levels of teaching and research.

– Robert Nisbet

In the 1970s, Robert Nisbet made a plea for a form of sociology less dependent upon methodology, and particularly the emulation of the scientific method. Reacting not against science *per se*, but rather against “scientism,” Nisbet makes a distinction between what he calls the logic of discovery and the logic of demonstration, both of which are, of course, necessary to the proper study of human society, but the former of which has been all but neglected in favor of the scientific rigor of the latter. This distinction parallels the Kuhnian dialectic so necessary for scientific research.

On another level, however, links between sociology and the arts are nothing new. Indeed, a literary approach to social theory had an early adherent in Germaine de Staël (1766-1817), who, in 1800, wrote of the necessity of reflection—“the moment of self-consciousness necessary to retrace the memory of one’s own feelings”—and (by way of this stance) the “constitution of duration” and the establishment of “the perspective necessary for us to look at what we are experiencing” (Staël 2); and to relate such to the particular context in which we are experiencing. Mme. de Staël recognized the interplay between literature (and the arts more generally) and the religion, customs, and laws of the day, and it was this connection that she sought to explain by way of the relation of changing visions and fashions in the arts to the triumphs and failures of socio-political ideas and institutions. Nisbet draws attention to the great sociological themes of the late nineteenth century—community, masses, power, development, progress, conflict, egalitarianism, anomie, alienation, disorganization—which, he says, were in close affinity with almost identical themes “in the world of art—painting, literature, even music” (Nisbet 3). An equally close affinity existed between the sources of “motivation, inspiration, and realization” of these themes in both sociological theory and the arts.²

Nisbet’s own “essential tension” lies in the balance of the two types of logic employed in the study of human behavior. Whereas the logic of *demonstration*, subject to rules and prescriptions, is critical for a fuller understanding of reality, the logic of *discovery*, which cannot be summoned by obeying the rules of the first,³ is utterly vital to the

representation of novel ideas and changing situations. “What Tocqueville, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Tönnies give us in their greatest works is a series of landscapes, each as distinctive and compelling as any to be found among the greater novels or paintings of their age” (Nisbet 7). The point is, in the end, rather simple, but of vital importance to an understanding of how the study of human social behavior has been, and can be, carried out. The bias towards scientism (logic of demonstration without corresponding logic of discovery) has been as prevalent, if not more so, in the social sciences of this century than even in the natural sciences,⁴ and the tension engendered by a recognition of the importance of not only the act of creation but also of the possible utility of literature and the arts in developing social theory has been, by and large, neglected.⁵ “Sociology is one of the sciences,” Nisbet concludes, “but [it is] also one of the arts, nourished by precisely the same kinds of creative imagination which are to be found in such areas as music, painting, poetry, the novel, and drama” (9).

Art, in the broadest sense, is, like science, a form of the “illumination of reality”—the exploration of the unknown and the interpretation of physical and human worlds. According to Nisbet, “Behind the creative act in any science, physical or social, lies a form and intensity of imagination, a utilization of intuition and what Herbert Read has called ‘iconic imagination’, that is not different in nature from what we have learned of the creative process in the arts” (Nisbet 7).⁶ The creative arts, according to Ortega, are not necessarily means of escapism, but rather, like non-dogmatic science, can ultimately contribute to the illumination of certain aspects of a very unclear world, aspects both good and evil. Ortega recognized the futility of modeling human theory after the natural sciences, but was also wary of the doctrine of aestheticism, which proclaimed the utter uselessness of the arts, except for their own sake.

Interestingly, the English word “novel”—with its double meaning of “a fictitious prose story of book length; or this type of literature,” and “of a new kind or nature; strange; previously unknown”—provides a double rubric under which the essential tension of Ortegian thought can be clarified. As Milan Kundera writes, the “either-or” prerogative of modern life “encapsulates an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge” (Kundera 7). The novel (derivative from Italian feminine *novella*), as the prototype of a distinctly European (and distinctly modern) art form, allows for precisely this non-judgmental stance, and this is what makes the novel’s “wisdom” (the wisdom of uncertainty) difficult to understand, and difficult to accept as a serious resource for academic speculation outside of the sphere of literary criticism. Ortega, a “liberal” in the Rortyan sense (accepting the prioritization of Freedom over Truth), is also a “liberal” in the Kunderan sense, in his interdisciplinary and non-judgmental (i.e., “perspectivist”) approach to the peculiarities of human social life.

Germaine de Staël fled the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France, and her writings reflect, like her twentieth heirs Koestler, Orwell, and Nabakov, a profound distaste for authoritarianism and dogmatism in theory as well as in socio-political practice. As both Rorty and Kundera argue, the arts, and the novel in particular, are incompatible with totalitarianism, providing glimpses of human cruelty and

violence in whatever society they are rooted. Kundera proffers Ortega’s hero Cervantes as a figure of equal importance to Descartes or Galileo, two men often cited as founders of the Modern Era. Holding the human world under a permanent light of scrutiny, the sole *raison d’être* of the novel is, as Hermann Broch insists, “to discover what only the novel can discover” (Kundera 5). Ortega also saw the novel as a bastion of multiple perspectives in a world bereft of a Supreme Judge.

Of course, another writer and social critic who experienced the French Revolution was Edmund Burke (1729-1797), often called the father of modern conservatism. If we take the second meaning of the term “novel” (derivative of Italian masculine *novello*, from Latin *novus*), we are faced with the other side of the essential tension, and the focal point of the Burkean attack on the hyper-reactivity of the Revolution in France: the Cult of Novelty. Ortega himself was not free from this modern fallacy, whereby newness is considered *ispo facto* of qualitative superiority, but he recognized, in the Generation of 1898, the errors of the edification of novelty for novelty’s sake.⁷ In his moderation, Ortega could be called a (Burkean) conservative, Unamuno and the anti-rationalists taking the place of Burke’s foil, Thomas Paine, as an example of a necessary reaction that had gone too far.

Perspectivism and Truth

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short, a sum of human relations, which have enhanced, transformed and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long usage seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and obligatory.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

In an early essay entitled “Adán en el paraíso” (Adam in Paradise), Ortega discusses art as the form of culture that provides us with a model of an “integrated” world. The artist achieves this effect through the development of a perspective “that at once limits and liberates his vision” (Gray 82). Limited by the “one-out-of-many” approach to a particular illumination of human reality, the artist is liberated by the very inconclusiveness of “truth,” and by the inexhaustible nature of human existence. “That supposedly immutable and sole reality with which to compare the content of artistic works does not... exist: there are as many realities as there are points-of-view. The point-of-view creates the panorama” (82). This idea was to be of crucial importance to Ortega’s later formulation of the subject’s relationship to the circumstantial world. Ortega’s perspectivism is not to be confused with extreme relativism or subjective idealism, which he constantly battled in his writings.⁸ The philosophical critique of subjectivism and (the “monstrosity” of) egocentrism is imperative in Ortega’s mission, for these were all-too-evident reactive dangers into which the individual may fall when made cognizant of the ruse of scientism and disabused of the notion of absolute, a-historical, transcendent Truth.

Ortega’s perspectivism is tied in with the early twentieth-century modernist movement, typified by the move from an ideology of absolute space and linear time to a new sense of multi-perspectives. Not only Einsteinian physics⁹ and Gödelian logic but the work of Husserl in philosophy, modernist architecture (Wright, Gropius), cubist art (Picasso,

Braque), and modernist literature (Proust, Joyce, Woolf) reflected, and generally celebrated, this shift. Contra someone like Joyce, however, Ortega was concerned with the integration of perspectives for the purposes of national recovery and philosophical order. In *Meditations on Quixote*, he proposes the exploration of Spanish reality through Cervantes's great novel (which inevitably seems to play a role in any form of Spanish intellectual activity or self-investigation of Spanish "character").¹⁰ Of course, *Don Quixote* itself is an intricate patchwork of diverse perspectives on the world, but Ortega singles out the purgative aspect of the work, which is "criticism as a form of higher patriotism" and reveals a depth of experience covered by the superficialities of custom and ordinary politics. The "Cervantine" way of looking at things, if grasped adequately, would lay bare, or at least make more evident, the Spanish national condition. Using Quixote (and Cervantes) as his starting-point, Ortega laid down the basis for his interrelated ideas of perspective and circumstance: a self without a surrounding world was "a phantom inheritance of Cartesian and Germanic idealism," while the world without a point-of-view to constitute it was "no world at all but merely an inchoate cluster of matter and energy" (Gray 93).¹¹

Perspectivism seems to lead to relativism, but, although Ortega lionized genuine doubt (as opposed to complacent skepticism) with regard to Truth, Truth itself is not relativistic. It is merely that that portion of reality which each person is able to "illuminate" is necessarily so in the sense that "[e]very individual is a perceptual organ which can apprehend something that escapes the rest of mankind, and is like an extended arm which alone reaches into certain depths of the universe that remain unknown to others" (Gray 103). Thus, this stance is not an outright denial of Truth, but rather allows for the possibility of many truths. The seeking out of these particular truths is an imperative, says Ortega, for "the reabsorption of circumstance is the concrete destiny of man" (120). Moreover, each person, each people, each era must "come into the truth" in his/her/its own particular fashion. Since there is no (or, may be no) single pre-established or transcendent objective Truth 'out there', each vital project reveals one more facet of the total Truth—"which can finally be known only through the juxtaposition of all prospects" (130). In this sense, the perspectivist approach to truth echoes the "pragmaticist"¹² version of Charles S. Peirce, who allowed that, although there *may* be a final Truth about the world's structure, the "doctrine of fallibilism" states that we have no sure way of knowing whether any belief about the world is absolutely true or not. The fallibility of ideas (which Ortega distinguishes, as we shall see, from beliefs), does not lessen their importance or stature as vital perspectives capable of illuminating certain aspects of reality and provoking us to act or see things in new and possibly beneficial ways.

Reason and Reaction

The rise of the sciences propelled man into the tunnels of specialized disciplines. The more he advanced in knowledge, the less clearly could he see either the world as a whole or his own self, and he plunged further into what Husserl's pupil Heidegger called, in a beautiful and almost magical phrase, "the forgetfulness of being."

– Milan Kundera

The positivism of the late nineteenth century, which had come under a wave of attack from thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Unamuno, Husserl and Heidegger, nevertheless maintained a deep influence within intellectual culture. With the span of a generation to use as critical distance, the faults of the reaction, despite its necessity, became more apparent to the mid-war generation of European intellectuals. Of course, criticism of the Enlightenment, the dawn of the Age of Reason instigated by Descartes, Bacon and Galileo, was nothing new. As early as Luther and Pascal (not to mention the later Romantics), critics abounded, and the "counter-enlightenment" had been renewed, periodically, in England, Germany, France, and America over the past four centuries. However, the nineteenth century, the Age of Technology, solidified philosophical rationalism by providing scientific justification for Enlightenment thought, and philosophy as a whole became further imbued with aspirations to the status of the empirical sciences. Julián Marías calls this turn "the limiting of [philosophy's] question, the amputation of what it had been, which was precisely the condition of its existence: its *radicality*" (Marías 59-60). The loss of the radical element in theory (presumably coextensive with Kuhn's "divergent thinking") occurred when theorists began to be content "not only with 'not much answer', but with 'not much question'" (60). The reaction in this period was, in large part, a reaction to positivism's perceived narrowing of the philosophical problematic, as well as being an overflow of growing despair among many thinkers faced with the seeming lifelessness of pure reason.

Particularly after the decline of both Romanticism and Idealism in the late nineteenth century, the primacy of scientism became indisputable. As Michael Oakeshott has suggested, in the political realm at any rate, rationalism, as a "strong and lively manner of thinking which, finding support in its filiation with so much else that is strong in the intellectual composition of contemporary [modern] Europe, ha[d] come to colour the ideas, not merely of one, but of all political persuasions, and to flow over every party line" (Oakeshott 22). In philosophy and social theory, a new wave of criticism erupted at the turn of the twentieth century. Rationalism had had difficulty, in the past, in assimilating history, and history was sacrificed in all rationalist paradigms up to and including Comte's positivism.

According to the so-called "vitalists," explicative reason (the logic of demonstration) "leaves out the thing itself," while contributing to, in Heideggerian terms, the "thingification of man." Essentially, the critique of rationalism instigated in various ways by Schopenhauer, Schelling, and Kierkegaard, renounced the explicative reductionism of the scientific ethos. Thus, vitalism was not so much a renunciation of human capacity for understanding and analysis as it was a refusal to accept the idea that the process of understanding is simply an explicative/reductive one. Ortega and his generation were thus faced with two basic alternatives: acceptance of devitalized rationalism; or an explicitly anti-rational vitalism. Ortega, for his part, chose neither.

The vitalists were unified by a powerful, though not always consistent rhetoric of change. Whether it was the *Lebensphilosophie*¹³ of Bergson, the pragmatism of James,¹⁴ the irrationalist skepticism of Dilthey,¹⁵ or the broader camps of aestheticism, organicism, or proto-existentialism, their

language was confrontational, and frequently disdainful towards the common rationalist enemy. While accepting the significance of the vitalist reaction, Ortega deplored the bravado of the challenge, which, he felt, seemed at times to be merely a “voice of despair” rather than a well-developed statement of the new philosophy’s different character.¹⁶ As such, although Ortega was still faced with the fallacy of scientific mimesis in philosophy, in attempting to deal with the “violent wrenching of that deeply rooted attitude” a half-century after the conflict had exploded in full force, he employed a certain pragmatism and was concerned to avoid the reversion to some kind of pre-scientific or anti-rational framework or paradigm. Employing the (Kierkegaardian) innovation of introducing philosophy to the reality of human life, Ortega was among the first to push beyond the forced dichotomy perpetuated by his immediate forebears.

Vital Reason and Historical Contingency

[The rationalist] wants so much to be in the right. But unfortunately he will never quite succeed.... His knowledge will never be more than half-knowledge and consequently he will never be more than half-right.

– Michael Oakeshott

Declaring the obsolescence of post-Cartesian philosophy, the ever-passionate Generation of 1898 thinker Miguel de Unamuno effused that “all reason is anti-vital; all life is anti-rational.” Rethinking the words of his erstwhile mentor and eventual foil, Ortega, faced with the need to inculcate significance in a (godless) world divested of any authorising force save the rather dead weight of explicative rationality, steadfastly avoided the irrationalism that would devolve into “anarchic subjectivism,” “vulgar sensualism,” or (perhaps the worst of the three, in view of later world events) blind patriotism of the “blood and soil” variety. In *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, Ortega argues that the moribund Cartesian paradigm was founded upon the twin poles of rationalism—representing the reigning but declining culture (the scientific tradition initiated by Galileo, Descartes and Bacon, and deconstructed by Oakeshott); and relativism—“an inadequate contrapuntal ‘answer’ to ‘physico-mathematical reason’ affirming the relativized truth of merely subjective experience” (Gray 13). The latter represented the claims of “culture” against devitalized reason, but was nullified by the difficulty of establishing truth-value from the relativistic position. “In attempting to counter the tyranny of earlier rationalism, relativists tended toward a solipsistic or mystical defense of individualized experience” (16).

Reason was *always* rooted in life, says Ortega, life being understood as the “organic” basis of all existence and consciousness. All that is known, even the “truth” of mathematical reason, can only be known through the “circumstantially limited perception” of the particular subject concerned. Reason must not be considered absolute in the sense that it elucidates laws existing independently of the human need to order experience. Drawing on his perspectivism, Ortega would say that the truth of the world is, in the end, a composite of the varying perspectives on reality provided by the cumulative human record.¹⁷ “Vital reason,” rooted in the historical experience of human existence, and cognizant of the fact, would require a self-understanding of the human being in a Quixotic (or, we might say,

Wittgensteinian) sense, as a pilgrim on an interminable quest following a road of successive philosophical answers to the dilemmas of everyday existence. Thus, says Ortega, though the crisis of the twentieth century is novel in its content, in form it is simply one more in “an ongoing series of crises that have periodically forced Western man to reorient himself in the world” (Gray 17). This is the point at which history comes into play, allowing us to question White’s criticism of Ortega’s apparent anti-historicism, and betraying instead a Rortyan conception of historical contingency and anti-foundationalism: since the scientific solutions to the problems of human life no longer fit the situation, human beings must recognize their inveterately historical nature, understanding the present situation in terms of former patterns of existence that may or may not be any longer viable. Understanding the imperative of one’s time is tantamount to understanding the past, and vice versa. History is, first and foremost, a lesson, not to be denied, but also not to be worshipped or blindly accepted. There are *no* eternal answers to the question of what it means to be human.

Elsewhere in his writings, Ortega refers to himself as “nada ‘moderno’ y muy siglo XX” (not at all Modern but very much of the twentieth century). To be modern is to be subject to the ephemeral fashions of “time-bound taste,” while to be “twentieth-century” refers to recognition of the significance of the most advanced ideas of modern thought. “While declining to ride on the merry-go-round of shifting intellectual fashion—the trivial form of trying to be up-to-date in every detail—[Ortega] nonetheless allied himself solidly with the new priorities being established in contemporary scholarship, art, philosophy, and science” (Gray 17). The difficulty in overcoming the merely modern was that the primary thinkers of the late nineteenth century, whose deeds and modes of thought pressed upon the next several generations, imbued their ideas with a rhetoric of timelessness, mainly through the language of positivism and the a-temporality of the scientific method. The modern age as a whole has been guilty of the folly of attempting to make permanent what are merely its own particular versions of modernity. Neither Cartesian rationalism, nor Comtean positivism, nor even the reaction of the irrationalists or the relativists could pretend, as they nevertheless frequently did, to being the avatars of some sort of “end” (whether of history, philosophy, metaphysics). In Ortega terms, the fundamental of modernity is its fluidity and amorphousness, and the corresponding imperative for the modern theorist is self-recognition of changefulness and fallibility.

In sum, “vital reason” is Ortega’s answer to the essential tensions that had arisen in early twentieth-century European intellectual culture. Any authentic existence must include an element of “personal provincialism” in the sense of a recognition of the primacy of individual consciousness, as well as an acknowledgement of one’s aspirations to a larger, more cosmopolitan existence in the world.¹⁸ In an increasingly globalizing world, the interplay of the local and the familiar with the cosmopolitan and exotic is requisite. Similarly, philosophy must be nourished in active commerce with the world. Theory must remain a solitary affair, in its formulation and development, but must always be cognizant of its experimental origin and its destiny as “social pedagogy” in a world shared with others. In Ortega’s work, the historical and social condition of Spain were never far from the surface,

underlying all of his writings on society, culture, history, and human life. Influenced by Renan, and echoing George Bernard Shaw (although without the latter's skeptical rationalism) Ortega envisioned the possibility of "revolution from within"—the creation of human culture as a "noble spiritual process"; the development of mind, which for him was to be instigated, not by a "Overman," but by a "unified front rooted in generational self-consciousness" (Gray 70). Yet, ultimately, it was not just ideas that would be remodeled, but also methods, techniques of study, and practical reforms. Ortega always maintained a concrete sense of the world, putting forth the notion of "socializing culture," which emphasizes the *praxis* of constructing culture as an ongoing process comprising all spheres of human activity. "To socialize man is to make of him a worker in the magnificent human task, in culture, where culture encompasses everything from digging the earth to composing verses" (81). "Let us save ourselves in things!" he proclaimed, meaning institutions, schools, and improved material conditions.

This brings Ortega to the notion of *amor intellectualis*, that "cognitive love" that would teach not only Spaniards but all people to cultivate both curiosity and altruism. These forms of caring for the world and for others in turn required *en-simismamiento* (turning inward): The "I" cannot truly 'be' without meeting and absorbing its circumstances, and these in turn are rendered shapeless and center-less unless the "I" turns to them—"is to them, with loving attention to their structure and detail." The creed of Ortega's mundane phenomenology would be: "I am myself plus my circumstances, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself" (Gray 96). We grasp reality through the concept, says Ortega, which in turn orders our circumstances, making them in fact a "world." In this sense, the mission of the concept is not to displace the intuition, the real impression, but rather reason is necessary to *order* existence, and is always involved in the process of life-experience. Echoing, in this respect, Nietzsche (who said, "it is very easy to *think* things, but very difficult to *be* them"), Ortega stressed the importance of the body in the Age of Vital Reason—human life as the "radical reality" was to be the demand of the day.

Ideas and Beliefs: The End of Ideology?

What, then, is the role of the intellect to be in Ortega's post-partisan world? In order to answer this question Ortega makes an important distinction between *ideas*, a term that retains its everyday meaning, and *beliefs*, which he delimits in a very precise sense. Beliefs are all those things that we take for granted, without thinking of them. "At each moment, our life is supported by a vast repertoire of such beliefs," such as the impenetrability of walls (*Sobre* 19). Ideas are formulated about things with which we either have no belief, or of which are belief becomes shaky and thus put into question. "Ideas, then, are those 'things' we consciously construct or elaborate, precisely because we *do not believe* in them" (20). Ideas are thus borne of doubt, and they become useful only when a belief (or a certain connected set of beliefs) is weakened. Beliefs do not in any way "correspond" with some abstract truth about the world or about human life, but are rather "old ideas," which, over time, because of their usefulness in some sense, have become compressed into beliefs. However, Ortega takes the pragmatist stance on this point, so that, in fact, beliefs *are* reality—"since a belief in anything and that

thing's being real for us are one and the same thing" (22). Ideas exist and function when we think of them, and if they convince us, we say they are true, yet truth "simply means that certain requirements specified by a theory are met. Nothing more" (20). As Ortega puts it, though we may *have* ideas, we *inhabit* beliefs.

Using this distinction, as we have seen, Ortega wishes to push both "science" and "theory" over in the direction of literature, in the recognition that science and theory, like literature and the arts, are a "less than serious matter" when compared with lived belief (*Sobre* 22). "*Literature* and *science* belong to the unreal world of the imaginary," he claims, yet rather than this being a rejection of literature and science, it must be provoke a change in our "overly dramatic, unjustified attitude toward ideas, theory" (23). In Rortyan parlance, literature (and science) function as illuminators of reality, and justify the relevance of "sentimentalism" in education and pedagogy. Ortega stresses the import of such a new view, for "thoughts, ideas are not just a game [for g]ames are without responsibility; they create nothing, but only serve to pass the time." On the other hand, thought "gives birth to world-views and life-visions that, once they become beliefs, will be like vast continents for man to inhabit, often for centuries" (24). Thought allows us to imagine the future and confront, without constantly feeling overwhelmed by each new day.

Ortega ultimately comes up with the metaphor of sports as the spirit in which to confront ideas and theory. "To attempt to persuade or convince us of a theory, but without insisting that we believe it, is correct conduct for a thinker; it allows our minds the freedom of movement we need" (*Sobre* 25). Thus, Ortega's stance is a fundamentally anti-foundationalist, historicist, and perspectivist one, which disparages the tendency to hold ideas as somehow sacred ways to Truth, rather than as certain perspectives which illuminate the possibilities of being human and acting human. "Each of these ways of being," he concludes in *Historical Reason*, "represents a fundamental experience undertaken by man, an experience that once assumed turns out to have limitations" (223). Yet even these limitations help humanity see other ways of being not yet attempted. "In short, *man has no nature but, instead, a history*" (223). In 1944, as World War II still raged in Europe, Ortega called for a new way of seeing the world, and a new way of approaching the study of human beings in society: "Man needs a new revelation, and this can only come from historical reason.... In spite of appearances, I say it is imminent" (223).

Implications and Relevance

So let us rise up under the weight of existence. Let us not give our unjust enemies and ungrateful friends the triumph of having beaten down our intellectual faculties. They reduce people who would have been satisfied with affection to seeking glory; well then, we have to achieve glory.... To devote life to a constantly disappointed hope of happiness is to make it even sadder. It is better to direct one's efforts to going down the road from youth to death with some degree of nobility...

– Germaine de Staël

Ortega's "epitaph," a prologue to a collected edition of his works, reveals both his lifelong concern with the place and

the role of philosophy within society, as well as his despair that his own work would be neglected for his lack of systematic rigor and his refusal to join either the right or the left in an increasingly polarized intellectual climate. “There is no great probability,” he laments, “that a body of work like mine, which though of limited value, is very complex, very full of secrets, allusions, and elisions, very interwoven with an entire vital trajectory, will find the generous spirit that aspires in truth to understand it” (Marías 2). Above all, Ortega was in some sense a martyr to the human penchant for dichotomy and binary opposition; like Erasmus Desiderius in Reformation times, he chose his principles, not from a rigidly defined set of ready-made ideas, but from the entire storehouse of European intellectual history. Like Erasmus, this made him anathema to the competing factions of his day, but at the same time makes him all the more relevant to our own age, when. What makes the work of Ortega relevant to our own day is not so much his theoretical ideas (although his concept of vital/historical reason and anti-foundationalist approach to ideas and beliefs reflect a the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty and even some forms of Buddhism), as his attempts to formulate a “post-partisan” social theory, borrowing liberally from literature and the arts as much as from the sciences or rationalist philosophy. The tensions in the work of Plato, Kuhn and Ortega are still very much with us, and, as Rorty argues, perhaps there is no need to eliminate the “incommensurables” of human existence. Ortega made an effort to work with the past, all the while referring back to the circumstances of the present; he was both a “liberal,” in his interdisciplinary stance and desire for generational transformation, and a “conservative” by virtue of his sense of order and the integration of history for the purposes of the present.

Notes

1. Ortega referred to himself as a “writer” or a “theorist” in most instances, shunning what he thought were the strictures placed upon philosophers, sociologists, and political theorists.
2. “The relation of the individual to village, town, and city; the relation between city and countryside; the impact of authority or dislocation of authority upon human life; the pursuit of the sacred; the torments of anonymity and alienation: all of these are to be seen as vividly in the novels, dramas, poems, and paintings, even in the musical compositions, of the ages as they are in the works of the sociologists from Tocqueville and Marx on” (Nisbet 4).
3. The misconception that the logic of discovery *can* be summoned by obeying the rules of the logic of demonstration, says Nisbet, can result only in “intellectual droth and barrenness” (Nisbet 5).
4. “The greater scientists,” says Nisbet, “have long been aware of the basic unity of the creative act as found in the arts and sciences. A large and growing literature attests to this awareness. Only in the social sciences, and particularly, I regret to say, in sociology, the field in which the largest number of textbooks on ‘methodology’ exist, has awareness of the real nature of discovery tended to lag” (Nisbet 5).
5. Nisbet claims to have been “struck repeatedly” by the number of instances in which visions, insights, and principles native to sociology in its classical period were anticipated,

“were set forth in an almost identical shape and intensity, by artists, chiefly Romantic, in the nineteenth century” (Nisbet 8). Nisbet cites Burke, Blake, Carlyle, and Balzac as just a few writers whose reactions to the democratic and industrial revolutions “created a pattern of consciousness that sociologists, and others in philosophy and the sciences, fell into later.”

6. The clarion call for the use of literature in philosophy, as a valuable and nearly inexhaustible source of perspectives on the human condition, has been picked up more recently by American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who believes that it is literature, and not philosophical speculation or natural science which alone has the ability to promote a sense of human solidarity. Using Read’s term, the “iconicism” of literature and the arts, the illumination of certain aspects of (social) reality from various perspectives, is more crucial to social theory than is often supposed, allowing as it does for a recognition in us of the “humiliation and cruelty of particular social practices and individual attitudes” (Rorty 3). In contrast, or in tension with this is the relevance of the “ironic” perspective on the human condition *vis-à-vis* the private level of existence. “A truly liberal culture,” proclaims Rorty, “acutely aware of its own historical contingency, would fuse the private, individual freedom of the ironic, philosophical perspective with the [iconic] public project of human solidarity as it is engendered through the insights of and sensibilities of great writers” (202).

7. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, another exiled dissident, wrote in 1993 an article for *The Guardian* newspaper entitled “The Wrong Stuff,” condemning the Cult of the New in art and academics. Arguing for a more ‘balanced’ perspective in creative writing, Solzhenitsyn argues “the loss of a responsible organising force weakens or even ruins the structure, the meaning and the ultimate value of art.” A “raucous, impatient, avant-gardism,” pursued at any cost, may well be a dangerous thing, dismissing all artistic and cultural achievement on a predetermined pursuit of originality. Solzhenitsyn’s “healthy conservatism,” with its flexibility to the claims of the Old and the New, comes very close to Burke’s argument in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, when the latter warned of the Terror that became a grim reality in the proceeding years.

8. “[T]he Spaniard of the future, rejecting the passionate embattled ego of Unamuno’s personalism and the self-absorbed sensualism of the man in the street, must instead become a modest participant in the total view of reality constructed from the multiple viewpoints of all men and women” (Gray 83).

9. Ortega speaks at some length about “The Historical Significance of the Theory of Einstein” in *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, interpreting it as a justification of his own perspectivist approach. “The fact of the matter,” says Ortega, “is that one of the qualities proper to reality (and revealed by Einstein) is that of possessing perspective, that is, of organizing itself in different ways so as to be visible from different parts” (*El tema* 144). In sum: “The theory of Einstein is a marvellous proof of the harmonious multiplicity of all possible points-of-view. If the idea is extended to morals and aesthetics, we shall come to experience history and life in a new way.”

10. Not only Ortega and Unamuno, but nearly all modern Spanish thinkers (Azorín, Ganivet, Machado, Fuentes) fall

back upon Cervantes and/or Quixote in illuminating a wealth of different aspects of Spanish reality in the Modern Age.

11. "Things and objects came forth into order only with the intentional perspective of a purposeful being who gave coherent shape to his surroundings, thus making culture from the raw material of mere impressions and wresting meaning from the brute, resistant force of circumstances" (Gray 93).

12. Peirce, alarmed by the semantic confusions of "pragmatism" (particularly the attacks on James), preferred to call his theory "pragmaticism," guessing correctly that the very unwieldiness of the term would discourage possible usurpers.

13. *Lebensphilosophie* was a polemical affirmation of the rights of life contra other things and other valuations, whether they be reason, abstract thought, cosmic nature, the spirit, and so on.

14. Jamesian pragmatism, though less obviously vitalist, relies upon a method that is somewhat anti-rationalist. Marías criticizes pragmatism by suggesting that, like *Lebensphilosophie*, "it had to seek the unfolding of its possibilities by going beyond itself to other deeper and more radical forms of theory (i.e., Dilthey, Bergson)" (Marías 81).

15. Dilthey's was a particularly forceful type of vitalism; he considered the very reality of nature to be "irrational." Dilthey's theory was eventually overtaken by phenomenology.

16. Ortega cites Kierkegaard as one who had a penchant towards biting sarcasm, often, according to Ortega, unjustified.

17. Ortega: "One such perspective was that of Descartes, and though it had bulked inordinately large in the reasoning of succeeding generations, it was not ultimately privileged as a viewpoint on life" (Gray 16).

18. Here we might note a parallel with Gadamerian hermeneutics in terms of the latter's emphasis on "prejudice" and "foreunderstanding."

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