

The idea of Life in José Ortega y Gasset and the reformulation of the question of Being

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“We need to correct the point of departure of Philosophy,” Ortega would say in 1929, “the radical fact of the Universe is not simply: thought exists or I exist thinking—but that if thought exists there *ipso facto* exist, I, who think, and the world thought by me—and the one exists with the other, without possible separation.”¹

When Ortega speaks of “correcting the point of departure for Philosophy” he does not mean that he is going to speak about Being as such, but that he intends a reelaboration on the way by which we achieve our formal understanding of reality—Philosophy—through a reelaboration on what constitutes the “first principle” or the ground upon which that formal understanding of reality is achieved. It is in this sense, which is plainly within the Kantian tradition, that he will be doing Metaphysics.

1. Ortega y Gasset, *Qué es filosofía* (1929), VII, 402-403.*

* Roman numerals and arabic numerals refer to the *Obras Completas* of José Ortega y Gasset. The year in parenthesis refers to the approximate date in which the author's ideas were produced and/or date of publication. For formal reference details, cf. Bibliography.

It is for this reason that he will say, speaking of his relationship to Heidegger, while resenting misunderstandings as to his book, *The Theme of our Time*², which had been published in 1923: "Nobody, in short, has remarked about my 'Ratio-Vitalism'. And even now, after underscoring it, how many will be able to understand it—understand the *Critique of Vital Reason** which is announced in that book?"³

Ortega therefore did not intend to "renew the question of Being" by a "renewal" of the notion of Being itself without a previous "renewal" or "reformulation" of the question about Being, i.e. by a critique of the question itself. With Descartes and the Moderns, Being becomes "a question", it becomes "questionable", i.e. doubtful, so that the question on Being becomes the question about knowledge itself: How is knowledge possible before we may say that the object of knowledge is achieved, i.e. Being? Ortega is even more radical than that: who says that we are actually able to know, so that we may examine the possibility conditions for the knowledge which we supposedly possess? The philosophical question is not the question about the possibility conditions for knowledge, but the question as to the process—or the reality—from which our need for knowledge arises and which drives us towards knowledge as an ideal *desideratum*, something which Ortega was already describing since 1914, possibly since 1910.⁴ It is at this level that Ortega will dispute with the Moderns.

"Philosophy's first problem is not finding out which reality is the most important one, but which reality in the Universe is the most indubitable one, the most certain... We establish ourselves,

2. Ortega y Gasset, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923), III, 141 ff. Translated as *The Modern Theme* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961**)—for purposes of the present essay, the translation of all passages quoted from Ortega's original Spanish is solely mine.

3. *Pidiendo un Goethe desde dentro*** (1932), IV, 404.

4. The concept is the means for our possession of reality and it is our *tó asphalés*, the "security" of culture vs. the insecurity before "undomesticated circumstances"... cf. *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914), I, 353-355. (Translated as *Meditations on Quixote* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963) cf. also *Adán en el Paraíso* (1910), I, 479 ff.

* All emphasis in all quotations is in the original unless otherwise stated.

** Whenever the author should not appear in a footnote, it will be a work by Ortega y Gasset.

surely at this level, and the only thing we do is to dispute with the Moderns on which is the radical and indubitable reality," Ortega will say.⁵

We may therefore see that Ortega did not intend to make of "life as radical reality" an equivalent to the *Esse* of the Scholastics;⁶ it is rather the equivalent to Kant's *Vernunft*. While for the Scholastics "the thought about Being" was the presence of Being through the existents and it thought as a participation in Being, the *Esse Subsistens* by which both thought and existents subsist,⁷ for Kant "the thought about Being" is the "Being which thought puts". Being for Kant is not a property of things but a property of thought.

Ortega will say, "...the question What is Being? means also, not *who* is Being, but *what* is Being itself as a predicate..."⁸ regardless of Being as such. Being as a predicate is then an activity of thought and that is why Kant's efforts become a Critique of Reason. Reason—the imagination and the Categories—becomes the activity by which Being "comes into the world". The sense of "being" used in this fashion pertains to the "whatness" of things—their essences—rather than a pure predication of existence.⁹ "Being" thus meant "that in which, of which, things consist", their nature. With Kant, the "perceived" character of things is an ingredient in the determination of their nature.

Before Kant, therefore, Being was the *reality* by which things are possible; with Kant now, things are in need of man in order to

5. *Qué es filosofía* (1929), VII, 422.

6. Not in a material sense, of course; that life could be conceived as the formal equivalent to the ESSE is argued by Juan David García Bacca in *Nueve Grandes Filósofos Contemporáneos* (Caracas, Venezuela: Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educación, 1947), Vol. II, pp. 76 ff.

7. Fr. Iohannes Lotz, SJ, will say: "Habemus unam *experientiam* quae in se habet *polaritatem*, ex parte On et ex parte LOGOS...ergo experientia ontica semper iam est ontologica". (*Experientia Metaphysica et Religiosa* Rome: Mimeographed course at the Pontifical Gregorian University, lecture of 6 December 1971). We will find the same direction of thought in Karl Rahner, *Espíritu en el mundo*, the translation of his *Geist in Welt*.

8. *Filosofía Pura: Anejo a mi folleto "Kant"* (1929), IV, 55.

9. Fr. William J. Richardson, SJ, will point to this same distinction in *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) pp. 125 ff.

posses the determination of their existence or their nature. "...according to Kant," will say Ortega, "cognoscible existents are not as such (*no son en sí*), but they consist in what we put in them. Their being is our *positing* (*nuestro poner*)."¹⁰ This is the way by which Kant will focus on "the thought of Being" as a critique of thought itself. It is in the formal way of formulating the question on Being that Ortega will be similar to Kant.

This should not mean that the Being of things is reduced to thought, to the "BEING-Thought", for Kant, Ortega will explain. "Kant does not mean to say that 'things' in the world are reduced to 'the thing' thought, that the existents should be secondary modes of the primary existent thought—something which Kant rejects and which he calls 'material idealism'. Yet it is not a question about the existents, but that the *being* of the existents—no matter which they may be, corporal or psychological, insofar as cognoscible—lacks sense if it is not seen in it something that supervenes to things whenever a thinking subject comes into relationship with them".¹¹

Thus, it is not the act of thought which is Being, but it is that by which Being "comes into the world". Thought is not Being; it produces Being, it "provokes" the appearance of Being. This Being is not *ipsa rei manifesta*—things of themselves do not possess a nature except in the presence of man—but *veritas rerum manifesta*.

It is in this sense that Ortega feels to have discovered the ultimate meaning in Kant's Metaphysics: neither the subject nor the object possess Being apart from each other. The Being of the subject consists in its relationship to things and viceversa. This would be the equivalent of "Intuitions without representations are formless; representations without intuitions are empty". Ortega, following Kant, would say (or we could suppose him saying): "The world without man is formless; man, without the world, is nothingness". Thus Being is not something which is thought; neither is it a property of things independent of thought; it is rather that which happens and/or arises through the relationship or basic

10. *Anejo a mi folleto "Kant"* (1929), IV, 55.

11. *Ibid.*, IV, 55-56.

reality which is man-world. For Ortega, this is the sense or direction to which we are led once Kant transformed the question about Being and therefore transformed our understanding of Being as such.

Being then is neither the property of things nor is it the property of thought, neither is it a something which subsists by itself and which would make possible the relationship by which Being "is put into the world". That would be "the cosification of Being"—that would mean falling back on the traditional notion of Being as an "in itself"—Ortega will point to the temptation to "static Eleatism"; with Kant, Being becomes the product of an act, of an activity, the activity by which things come into relationship with a thinking subject.¹²

In 1928, while commenting on Max Scheler, Ortega will say: "It seems right that we should ask ourselves whatever may be that sense which the world has or does not have...In order for the world to make sense, it is not enough that it and the things in it possess a form of existence (*modo de ser*)...but for Positivism... nothing possessed Being (*ser*)". With Husserl and through Phenomenology, the world once more adquired sense: through the contemplation of essences. The new Adam of this Paradise where everything had sense was Scheler, only that he became "drunken" with so many essences. "Now it is necessary to complete his effort by adding what was lacking in him," will say Ortega, for Scheler had died that year, "architecture, order, system."¹³ That systematic aspect had to be achieved, through recourse to a point of departure which should be it itself systematic.¹⁴

Going over the same ideas and while criticizing Positivism and its limitations in the pure facts only, by which no systematic understanding is ever really achieved, Ortega will say that same year of 1928, "But today we find ourselves very far from that radical

12. *Ibidem*, IV, 56.

13. *Max Scheler, un embriagado de esencias* (1928), IV, 508.

14. Ortega will say: "...so that a systematic phenomenological thought may be possible one must start from a phenomenom which should be, *it by itself*, system. This systematic phenomenom is human life and from its intuition and analysis one must

paradox (i.e. how it is possible that the originary forms of the world be subjective, which was the complicated act of magic which the German Idealists had been attempting) and we think that the first 'condition of possibility for experience' or knowledge of something is that that something *be*, and that *it be something*; therefore, that it possess form, figure, structure or character".¹⁵ In a footnote Ortega will add, "With this it is not prejudged if that *being*, form, structure, etc., is possessed by things by themselves or if it 'arises' in them only when man confronts them. What is decisive in this case is that not even in the latter situation (case) is *being* a 'form of the subject' which it throws over things".¹⁶

By all this Ortega implies that the real is what it is, independent of the subject and the object, that the real—what is—is something that happens when subject and object come together, so that things by themselves do not possess being; the subject by himself does not possess it, either. The making thus of Being as something which arises in virtue of a relationship drives us away from the Eleatism which was characteristic of the traditional notion of Being. The determination of things or existents which was derived in the Ancients through their pre-existing essences and in the Modern through the activity of Reason, now is derived from the standing relationship between man and the world, the relationship which is the perspective and which is independent of both man and world (or "things").¹⁷

Being "comes into the world", then, through an activity, through

begin". *La idea de principio en Leibniz* (1947), VIII, 273. Ortega adds a footnote explaining that he held this conviction since 1914.

15. "La Filosofía de la Historia" de Hegel y la Historiografía (1928), IV, 531.

16. *Ibidem*.

17. Ortega will emphasize the independence of "conscience" from the reality which is "life" (the self finding itself in the circumstance and so constituted in a socio-historical perspective): "Before being psychic subjects we are sociological subjects," and in a footnote, "...my 'conscience' is in my life, it is a fact of my life". cf. *Ibid.*, IV, 540. It is reasonable to conjecture that for Ortega the dialectic by which "Being comes into the world" is not grounded in Reason—he will demonstrate the "irrationality of Reason"—but in the socio-historical facts by which the world-perspectives will be constituted.

an *act ever in fieri*, in analogical fashion to the Agent Intellect for Aristotle and the Medievals. Being is that which is beyond the act and which is grounded in the act itself. Even for conscience to be, it must be conscience of itself and not pure intentionality. Let us emphasize once more, however, that Being is the result, not the antecedent of that relationship; neither does it consist merely in that relationship. This leads us to the consideration of movement, as Ortega will do in his *Prólogo a "Historia de la Filosofía" de Emile Bréhier*.¹⁸

Indeed, to think the act by which Being arises, is to think the historicity of man. Each historical period is a product of the perspective—the real perspective—in which men find themselves and the ideas with which that period is "grasped". If Being was a *real* (i.e. existent) Absolute (i.e. "outside" of History and Movement), Aristotle would be right in postulating his idea of Entelechy, or finality. If Being was an Absolute which the human mind had to grasp as its ultimate "end", we could then speak of the *dynamis*, the "potency" in History and in the minds of men. History would be the story of errors in which humankind seeks to achieve the fullness which is final union with the Absolute. Hegel and Comte, indeed, saw History as the story of achievements (*aciertos*, literally, "hitting of the mark") while retaining their own philosophies as the absolute *end* for those partial achievements. But the fact is, human action and human reality are not absolute, but relative; the act by which Being arises is relative itself; so that we must speak of a movement which "terminates"—will say Ortega, recalling the Greek term, *péras*—but does not "end" (*télos*).¹⁹

This is what is most significant for us about Kant today, Ortega will say. "That *Being* be question and, because question, thought, did not force Kant in the least to take up an idealist position."²⁰ Indeed, Being does not consist in thought; as we have seen. Thought is rather "the door" of Being. The development of

18. VI, 409 ff.

19. cf. *Ibid.*, VI, 412-417.

20. *Anejo a mi folleto "Kant"* (1929), IV, 57. Ortega will refer himself in a footnote there to the announcement then of Heidegger's Kant book.

Kant's ideas might lead to subjetivistic idealism, but Ortega will hold that this is not necessarily so. The object of thought—its product—is not merely thought: every concept or signification conceives or signifies something which is not thought, Ortega will say.²¹ If upon our confrontation with things their Being was evident to us, we would not be perplexed and in search of concepts with which to deal with them.²²

On the other hand, if the nature of the objects was an idea in us, we would not find it so difficult to deal with the world, either, for we would still be in a happy coincidence with ourselves and the world would present an identical aspect to all of us, be it in Vth Century Athens or in XXth Century New York.²³

Thus, thought is altogether subjective but in its activity (within the relationship to things) it attains an objectivity which is not thought. Kant in this sense was not able to exit from his Idealism: "How was it possible that forms originally subjective should turn into the forms of things in the world, was the great and complicated act of magic which occupied Philosophy then".²⁴ That of course implied that things by themselves do not possess a determinate form except through the presence of man.

21. *Ibid.*, IV, 57.

22. "To become aware of something is not to know it, but merely to know that before us something becomes present," Ortega had said in *Adam in Paradise* in 1910 (I, 479). In 1933, in *En torno a Galileo*, he will say: "If it turned out that, as it has always been believed, things had by themselves a Being, it should seem to me very difficult to justify that man should have any interest in occupying himself with it. The contrary case should be more favourable." (V, 84). Further on he will add, "Something is a problem to me, not because I should ignore its being, not because I should not have carried out my supposed duties as an intellectual before it, but when I search in myself and I do not find my authentic attitude with respect to it..." (V, 86). The same year he will repeat the same idea in *Unas Lecciones de Metafísica*: "...if living would mean finding evident before us that Being (of things), the existence of man would be strictly the opposite of what it is...A world whose Being is known consists only of necessities." (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1970), p. 132.

23. In 1923, in *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, he will say, "...that coincidence in aspect before two men positioned in points so diverse...would indicate that it was not a question of a reality external to them, but of an imagination which perchance was identically produced in two subjects. *Each life is a point of view on the Universe.*" III, 200.

24. "*La filosofía de la Historia de Hegel*" y *la Historiografía* (1928), IV, 530-531.

Ortega will affirm with Kant that Being "comes into the world" through the presence of man, but not through the activity which is Reason in relationship to things, but something which is previous to thought and is itself also a relationship and not a thing: the radical fact of the self with the world or circumstance. That radical fact Ortega also calls "life" and it is "radical" insofar it is the "root" within which both Reason and Being may be *understood*.

Should we then wish to speak of Ortega's Metaphysics, we must first speak of his "Critique of Vital Reason" by which a notion of reality—of what there is—may be attained, understood. We must thus refer ourselves to his "Perspectivism" and to his notion of "life" as the most radical perspective. He does not intend the perspective only in gnoseological terms—the perspective is also real—²⁵ but in metaphysical terms. As such, the notion of "radical reality" or of "life", becomes the point of departure for the reformulation, not only of the question of Being, but of the general set of problems which have constituted the themes of traditional Philosophy.

Within traditional Philosophy Being—the form—of things was the being or the form of thought. (This is not Absolute Idealism; because things *are* real, independently of thought; thought only "executes", or actualizes, their form.) Now the Being or the form of things is determined by the perspective—neither by thought alone, nor by things as such alone.

Formally speaking, then, Ortega's reflection is aimed at the activity of thought, as such, at the activity of Reason. In being phenomenologically faithful to the activity of Reason, Ortega saw that it as such, as an activity, as a transitive act, it could not be forced into the traditional mold of "static Eleatism"—of Being as self-identity. He thus refused to "cosify" Being in this fashion; he refused himself to make of Reason a *res, una chose que pense*, such as Descartes did in his conception of Conscience. For Ortega

25. As we have already seen, *supra*. Ortega will repeat the same idea, for instance, in *Prólogo-Conversación a Goethe desde dentro* in 1932 (IV, 390).

what is the case is a transitive activity which consists, not in "being itself", but in intending "the other", which is the object of the intention. In this sense Ortega was faithful both to Kant and to the phenomenom thought-Reason. Things in turn consist in being thought, in being the object of the intention. "Co-existence, then, does not mean the static (lying) contiguity of the world and I...in a neutrally ontological field, but that that ontological field...is constituted by the pure and mutual dynamism of a happening."²⁶ I *happen* to things and things *happen* to me, and the one is not given without the other. Being, then, as the radical or foundational reality is the least static of things. Being is something which *happens*. That which happens es indeed an *Erleben*, an experience; yet it is not an *ideal* experience only, it is not an immanent activity of conscience, or the simple ideal orientation of the subject, but the true, actual encounter or "happening" of the subject before what is not itself, the co-happening of the self and the world.

It is in this sense that Ortega will say in 1929: "Yet neither am I a substantial being nor is the world so either...I, insofar as subjectivity and thought, find myself as part of a dual fact whose other half is the world. Therefore, the radical and unsophisticated fact is not my existence, is not (that) I exist—but it is my, co-existence with the world."²⁷

In 1923, Ortega will say: "*The theme of our time* consists in submitting Reason to Vitality".²⁸ Reason, as rooted in life, will explain itself in terms of life as its "first principle". Indeed, "Pure Reason must be substituted by a Vital Reason where it will be localized and will acquire movement and power of transformation."²⁹

In 1925 Ortega announced his project for the reformulation of the question of Being, stating that Phenomenology had to be integrated into systematic thought, a thought which would be sys-

26. *Prólogo para alemanes* (1932), VIII, 51.

27. *Qué es filosofía* (1929), VII, 402-403.

28. *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923), III, 178.

29. *Ibid.*, III, 201.

tematic by reason of taking a point of departure which should be it itself system.³⁰ This is the sense also of Ortega's criticism of Husserl. Thus, since early in his thought, for Ortega, to live meant primarily to deal with the world³¹ and in a second instance, an activity of conscience—but of a conscience whose activity is rooted in the first, primary fact of "self-circumstance". Thus, through life as the fact in virtue of which man acts, we are able to systematically understand man and the world.

We may now understand Ortega's criticism of Heidegger from the point of view of his own Ratio-Vitalism: previous to "the quest for Being" there is that primal or "first reality" which is man's co-existence with the world. To speak of "the world as such" or of "things as such" will always be hypothetical, something which both Heidegger and Ortega hold, having received it from the Kantian tradition. Ortega will say: "The idea that what there is around us...is composed principally of 'things', in the sense of substances is one of those beliefs...That is why, because they are lively beliefs, we do not recognize them as such, but they present themselves before us as being reality itself."³²

Being becomes Presence within the radical perspective of Life or Radical Reality. At this point Ortega parts from Heidegger: Radical Reality does not in fact possess the Parmenidean attributes of absolute Being. Radical reality is not reality in that sense; it is flow, transitive activity. From the fact of his existence as self-contrapposed-cum-circumstances, man emigrates to beliefs, ideas which render his radical existence intelligible (ideas such as "substances"); ideas, which, once they function as a system of beliefs, will also function as "indwelling" for man. For Ortega, and in this sense, man does not dwell in nearness to Being.

For Ortega Being becomes Presence, not as the Being of Existents, but as the Being (quality of existence) which arises in virtue of man's co-happening with the circumstance or world and, in a second instance as the Being (idea, nature, essence, concept) which

30. *La idea de principio en Leibniz*, VIII, 272 ff. (1947).

31. cf. for instance, *Adán en el Paraíso* (1910), I, 479 ff.

32. *Sobre la historia del "ser"* (1946), IX, 777.

man puts as a function of his socio-historical installation in the world.³³ To speak of the Being of the Existent (*Ser del Ente* or *das Sein von Wensen*) is for Ortega an exaggeration typical of Teutonic furor.³⁴ For him, it is not true that man should come into a state of strangement or fallenness vis à vis the world from which he should be recalled once the *Zubanden-sein* character of things would fail and reveal their *Vorhanden-sein* and, together with it, the *Da-Sein* character of man. In view of radical reality, it is a matter of fact that man *is* in estrangement in the world.³⁵

For Heidegger, the fact that man should discover himself in estrangement should be the moment of revelation, or the initial moment in the process by which man will attain Being as “un-concealment”. To this, Ortega will argue that Heidegger will never define clearly the meaning of his use of *Sein* as such, plus the historical fact that man did not always pose the question about Being, except in our Greek tradition.³⁶ This is why he will tell Heidegger that for the Negroes of Africa, to do philosophy is to dance and not to question themselves about Being.

Thus the Being for which Heidegger queries is the Being of Eleatism, and that is a product of Man’s conceptual phantasy. “It is not notorious, then, that since Parmenides the Being-of-things we do not obtain it from things,...but we obtain it from Nothingness...With the collision with this introduction to Non-Being, the Universe of things is transformed into the Universe of Existents (*entes*).”³⁷ With Descartes, Eleatic Being is unsustainable, because it is not “by itself”, but relative to the human intellect; yet the human intellect in turn does not sustain itself, which is the mistake committed by the Idealists; the idea of Being only makes sense when seen functioning within the reality of human life.³⁸

This is why man does not dwell (*wohnen*) in the world and “in nearness to Being”, as Ortega will emphasize at the Darmstadt Co-

- 33. cf. *Ibidem*, ff.
- 34. *La idea de principio en Leibniz* (1947), VIII, 276.
- 35. *Ibid.*, VIII, 285.
- 36. *Ibid.*, VIII, 287.
- 37. *Ibid.*, VIII, 230.
- 38. *Historia como sistema* (1935) VI, 31 ff.

lloquia in 1951, four years before his death.³⁹ For Heidegger, man “dwells in nearness to Being as the poet close to the Source” and therefore “dwelling is the fundamental Being-structure’ of There-Being”;⁴⁰ dwelling is the point of departure for the two dimensions: open-ness unto Being in its polyvalent One-ness and comportment with Beings. Heidegger will say: “...mortals *are* in polyvalent Being, inasmuch as they dwell...”⁴¹

For Ortega, however, Being is a concept which arose in virtue of socio-historical circumstances...it is a predicate without a subject, just as Nothingness is a subject without a predicate.⁴² Being as a question does not come purely from the subject, it cannot be so; “Being” or “existence” (*ente*) primarily arise as *a need*, a human need, the need to make sense of the world and of himself and to thus produce the installation, the *wohnen* of man on the earth, which is the circumstance.⁴³ For Ortega, then, it is neither possible that man should seek, query or produce the question on Being, nor that he should dwell in Being. Man dwells in his beliefs, in the concepts which function as *effective* “reality” for him and through which he communicates with the circumstance.⁴⁴

Ortega will say, “Being is certainly the being *of* things; but it turns out that that, which is what is most proper to them, since it is their ‘self-sameness’, they do not possess insofar (they are) things but that it is supposed of them by man. Being, indeed, would be a human hypothesis”.⁴⁵ Ortega will recall to the reader together with these words what he wrote in 1929 in *Anejo a mi folleto “Kant”*, the article which we already quoted in the previous paragraphs. What there *primarily is*, what lies behind the appearances, is not the categories of the Mind or the *Esse* of the Greeks, but the radical fact of the self happening to things and things happening to the self. The understanding of the world and of

- 39. *Anejo: En torno al “Coloquio de Darmstadt, 1951*, IX, 625 ff.
- 40. Fr. William Richardson, op. cit., p. 581.
- 41. *Ibidem*.
- 42. *Sobre la historia del “ser”* (1946) IX, 772.
- 43. *Anejo: En torno al Coloquio de Darmstadt, 1951*, IX, 640 ff.
- 44. *Ibidem*.
- 45. *La idea de principio en Leibniz* (1947) VIII, 235.

things thereof will be Vital or Historical Reason—Reason rooted in reality, which is life or “self-cum-circumstance”.

For Ortega, therefore, Metaphysics continues to be “the science of reality” and of the first principles. The difference now lies in that the way to Metaphysics is no longer Reason as conceived in the Ancient fashion or in the Modern version; but Reason as “Vital Reason”, i.e. in Reason as rooted in the life of man and in History as the intelligible realm within which God, for instance, could be given.

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