

THE CHARACTER OF IDEAS AND THE ROLE OF THINKING IN ORTEGA Y GASSET

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One is surprised to find an affinity between Ortega y Gasset's positions and those of a North American Pragmatist such as Charles Sanders Peirce¹. Usually one will not notice this affinity—or at least, one will not notice the decidedly practical character of ideas in Ortega, for one will tend to read him in Cartesian terms, or in Kantian terms, so that the exact import of Ortega's "Vitalism" will escape one's reading. I would like to take up this topic, therefore, in order to clarify the sense of thinking for Ortega—which is a way of also clarifying his concept of Historical Reason as the foundation for all sense—as a reading which ends, but is never finished,² and which is an imperative task for man. As we shall see in the following considerations, it is not a question that Ortega should have proposed that everyone should perforce be a philosopher, but that it is a constitutive element of each man's authenticity that he should appropriate in some way the ideas with which he should decide to live.

Since early in his writings Ortega will give evidence of having in some way conceived the notion of ideas as "actions in view of the fact of living" (*acciones para la vida*).³ If it is true that Vital Reason was not always Historical Reason for him—as it would be at least after c. 1926—⁴ the practical sense of ideas remained unaltered since the beginning. Ortega was always clear on this point and this is what distinguished him from the start *vis a vis*, for instance, the positions of a Husserl. This may be readily explained in terms of his Kantian background—rather than that of Descartes—and even then he went beyond Kant as he himself so announced in his courses since 1924.

Ortega was always clear as to life—or "History", in the later elaborations—as the foundation of sense for ideas (or concepts). The source of all sense is man's activity ("quehacer"), which by nature is historical.⁵ The sense of man's activity or the "quehacer" is inserted in a concrete process of ideas and beliefs implies that the individual intention is also subordinate to the historical sense of that "quehacer".

The radical truth, the fundamental one, is that fact of "having to do" or "having to deal" as a purely formal category. *Vis a vis* that brute inexorable imperative, the will is absolutely free, autonomous—that is why Ortega will say that Kant already discovers Vital Reason under the species of pure Practical Reason.⁶ Now, every activity is contextual—no activity occurs outside of the frame of reference of a given circumstance. That is

why the formal character of the "quehacer" is complemented, as in Max Scheler, by the a priori material principle which consists, not in the ideal hierarchy of values, but in the sense-giving system which is the socio—historical context.⁷

The "nature" or sense for the objects in experience is therefore the historical possibility which is constituted as sociological institutions and which defines the field of reality for the subject and the object.⁸ Reality is therefore "emergent"; it arises from a possibility which appeared from the contingent coming about (*acontecere*s) of past actions exercised within anterior contexts. Viewed in itself and as such, this process does not seem to be governed by a teleology, or a type of necessity. Yet, the specific moments of the process are quite defined and determined as sets of specific possibilities established as "facts" or "social" reality by the past actions of men.

For Ortega, then, ideas are possible ways of dealing with the circumstance. These ideas do hold the traditional role adscribed to them, that of conforming themselves to the objects of intention for the subject. The true sense of reality, however, the fundamental sense of the objects of knowledge (which does not preclude the other, derivative senses) is not that of essences or of psychic phenomena, but of historically established "facts", which function as socially instituted beliefs, in view of which ideas are elaborated. For the self reality means to be projected towards a future way in which a dealing with the circumstance will be carried out and the ideas must conform or correspond to the real possibilities given by the socio-historical moment for the future activity to make true sense. Thinking will therefore be the activity by which the self will seek to make present for itself (through knowledge of the past) the sense of its own historical moment, the possibilities given within that moment, and the specific ideas or possible ways of conducting its own activity.

We may thus appreciate the importance of the study of history for Ortega. If there is no accurate knowledge of our past, we may never attain the true sense or intelligibility of the objects in our experience or circumstance. To lack the historical sense of our experience or circumstance is to truly lack intelligence and to relapse to the level of the barbarian or the semi-animal status.

In this manner we may also see how there is no contradiction between the absolute freedom of the self and a priori personality, ethos or character which must forcedly be expressed in the personal biography.⁹ The a priori self is constituted within the generational sensibility which is itself constituted in the possibilities defined by the socio-historical moment of ideas and beliefs, of the past actions (*acontecere*s) and ideas which come to make up the true sense of the circumstance. As such, then, the a priori

personality is a material principle for the self-determination of the self in his "ensimismamiento" or the "epoché" of his thought and it functions as an imperative, before the absolute freedom of a self who seeks for its choice the character of ideal or practical necessity.

In sum, we may say that since his earliest formulations,¹⁰ for Ortega thought is the cultural work of "rescuing" the circumstances—understood in the Kantian manner, as the revealing of the ideal order of things which thought "puts". With the subsequent development of his positions, that ideal order will no longer be understood in terms of the categories of the subject, but in terms of the long historical disciplining of a humanity which essays diverse approaches or ideas and in this way patiently obtains the manifold senses of "things".

NOTAS

¹There is a possibility that Ortega may have been acquainted with the philosophy of Pragmatism through *Leonardo*, an Italian journal in which Peirce collaborated with a number of articles. See Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de Filosofía*, "Pragmatismo" in Vol. II (Buenos Aires, Editora Sudamericana, 1971) p. 464.

²See Ortega, "Qué es leer" in the *Obras Completas*, Vol. IX (Madrid, *Revista de Occidente*, 1962) pp. 751 ff.

³See the following references in the *Obras Completas*: "Prólogo a 'Historia de la Filosofía' de Emile Bréhier", Vol. VI, pp. 390-391; "Epílogo al libro 'De Francesca a Beatrice'", Vol. III, pp. 324-325; "Introducción a un 'Don Juan'", Vol. V, p. 137; "Las Atlántidas", Vol. III, pp. 291 ff.; "Biología y Pedagogía", Vol. II, pp. 27 ff.; *Meditaciones del Quijote*, Vol. I, p. 322.

⁴The point may be particularly observed in the succeeding editions of *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*. When one compares the 1934 edition with the original 1923 edition, one is able to see clearly how Ortega came to assimilate "Vital Reason" to the more refined concept of "Historical Reason". The comparison of the editions may be found in Ciriaco Morón Arroyo, *El Sistema de Ortega y Gasset* (Madrid, Ediciones Alcalá, 1968) p. 74.

⁵The notion of "quehacer" generally implies "having to deal" with things; it means to be occupied with, it is for the self to be in the fundamental formal relationship of having to deal with his circumstance. This purely formal character of the relationship in which the I and the

circumstance are established is therefore of a practical character, insofar the actual or material character which defines the sense of the object and the concrete field of possibility for the activity of the subject is established through the historical process of ideas and beliefs. With this we may appreciate the importance which knowledge of our past holds for Ortega: historical ignorance is equivalent to lack of intelligence as to the true sense of the objects in our circumstance. See "Ideas y Creencias" in the *Obras Completas*, Vol. V (Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1964) pp. 379 ff.

⁶See "Filosofía Pura: Anejo a mi Folleto 'Kant'", in the *Obras Completas*, Vol. IV (Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1962) p. 59.

⁷It is in light of this that we may then explain the apparent contradiction between the apriorism of the personality or vocation and the existentialism of the pure invention of one's own biography, as we may find it expressed in the essays on Goethe, for instance. See *Obras Completas*, Vol. IV, pp. 383 ff. and Vol. IX, pp. 551 ff.

⁸See Xavier Zubiri, *Naturaleza, Historia, Dios* (Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1978, 7th ed.) pp. 315-340.

⁹Ortega himself seems not to have seen an intrinsic contradiction here, since we will find him working both concepts at the same time in a number of passages in his essays. The reader may compare the following texts, all from the *Obras Completas*: "Qué es Filosofía", Vol. VII, pp. 430 ff.; "La Rebelión de las Masas", Vol. IV, pp. 132, 165, 194, 243, 266; "Para el Archivo de la Palabra", Vol. IV, p. 366; "Goethe desde Dentro", Vol. IV, pp. 388-399 ff.; "En Torno a Galileo", Vol. V, pp. 137-139; "Historia como Sistema, Vol. VI, p. 32; "Ensimismamiento y Alteración", Vol. V, p.338; "Prólogo a 'Aventuras del Capitán Alonso de Contreras'", Vol. VI, p. 505; "Prólogo a 'Introducción a las Ciencias del Espíritu' por Guillermo Dilthey", Vol. III, pp. 60 ff.; "Idea del Teatro", Vol. VII, p. 468; *Goya*, Vol. VII, p. 549.

¹⁰See, for instance, "Estética en el Tranvía" in *Obras Completas*, Vol. II, p. 38; "Sobre un Goethe Bicentenario", Vol. IX, pp. 551 ff.; *Historia como Sistema*, Vol. VI, p. 34.