

## *Relativism and Revolt*

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**The Origin of Philosophy**, by José Ortega y Gasset; authorized translation by Toby Talbot, *New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967. 125 pp. \$4.00.*

OUTSIDE THE Spanish-speaking world where his influence has been continuous and profound, the late Don José Ortega y Gasset is known largely by a single, widely translated work. *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La Rebelión de las Masas*) is one of the most frequently cited books of the century and remains the most incisive analysis of the dominant and perhaps decisive phenomenon of our times: the threatened engulfment of modern civilization by the mass appetites that its own scientific and technological advances have engendered. By the masses he did not mean the workers or any other collection of individuals but rather those to whom individuality is abhorrent, whose desire is to be "like everybody else," who are without regard for the past or responsibility for the future,

and who are now able to impose their will by sheer force of their numbers.

The success of the book was due in some part to the verification of its thesis by outward events. Its original publication in 1929 was followed by an epoch of widening mass violence which has continued to the present. With the masses violence is not the *ultima ratio*, as in the civilized order, but the *prima ratio*, indeed the *unica ratio*—the most obvious and simplest means of getting what they want or are persuaded that they want, and their wants multiply with every success. Hence the cult of "direct action," the business of taking to the streets or to the barricades for the redress of every real or imagined grievance or the enforcement of every demand. Thus the violence of which we have seen and are seeing so much throughout this century has become "the norm which proposes the annulment of all norms, which suppresses all intermediate processes between purpose and execution," in other words a moral and cultural anarchy. "It is the Magna Charta of barbarism"—a barbarism that characterizes not only politics

but almost every aspect of social life including sexual and family relationships, and violence in the form of insult has come to pervade our art, literature, and everyday manners.

Ortega was one of the famous Spanish "generation of '98," which came to prominence after the disaster of the American war and included among various others Unamuno, Madariaga, the novelist Baroja, and the dramatist Benavente. Temperamentally, however, Ortega was more of a cosmopolitan than a Spaniard, and his book *España invertebrada* (*Invertebrate Spain*) is actually an attack on the Spanish mentality and tradition; yet he was the founder of the most important literary review in the language and something of a dabbler in Spanish politics. He enthusiastically welcomed the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy, but later, apparently sickened by the fanaticisms of the Civil War, he renounced the republic from his place of exile in Argentina. Toward the end of his life, to the dismay or disgust of some other exiles, he returned to Spain to lecture again at the University of Madrid where he had held the chair of metaphysics, a strange post perhaps for a man who disavowed the validity of metaphysical reasoning. His primary and permanent preoccupation was not so much philosophy, as such, but the successive mutations of philosophic thought, and he has been compared to a weather vane reacting sensitively to every slightest change in the winds of doctrine blowing from the salons and universities abroad.

The latter part of his youth had been spent in German universities and he many times confessed his affinity with the Germanic mind, especially the romantic mind. He came successively under the influences of Hermann Cohen, the neo-Kantian idealist, the existentialists Heidegger and Jaspers, and most of all under that of Wilhelm Dilthey, whose historicism he adopted, amended and elaborated in various writings. All these in one way or another represent a subjective reaction to the

positivism and scientific rationalism which characterized so much of nineteenth-century thought; all deny the possibility of an objective understanding either of the universe or of the nature of man. Man, said Ortega, "is whatever he thinks he is," and what he calls objective reality is merely whatever notion he may form of it. This notion is his *Weltanschauung*, or cosmic vision. It is derived, according to Dilthey, not from natural reason but wholly from life experience, and since experience is invariably affected by the historical environment, the vision necessarily changes from one generation to the next. The change, however, is not complete; the past is in some way and in some degree absorbed into the experience of the present. The past, Ortega tells us here, is a "treasury of errors," but errors in the sense not of being untrue but of being incomplete. They represent the points at which earlier thinkers stopped thinking and from which their successors took over that labor "with a change of direction." Thus the continuity of both philosophy and of history may be found by thinking of the succession of philosophers "as one single philosopher who lived for twenty-five hundred years during which he continued thinking."

This seems somewhat in contradiction to Ortega's assertion elsewhere that the epoch we inhabit represents a radical dissociation with everything past.

We feel that we . . . have been suddenly left alone on the earth; that the dead did not die in appearance only but effectively, that they can no longer help us. Any remains of the traditional spirit have evaporated. Models, norms, standards are no use to us. . . . The [contemporary] European stands alone without any living ghosts by his side; like Peter Schlemihl he has lost his shadow.<sup>1</sup>

But then it seems that the story of philosophy like other historical narratives has a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*, a starting point and a finish line. The first Ortega marks off with great confidence as

late in the fifth century before Christ, for the first real philosophers turn out to be Parmenides of Elia and Heraclitus of Ephesus, inhabiting opposite positions on the periphery of the Greek world. The temporal location of the journey's end is somewhat obscure, but apparently has already been reached, for he suggests that "what we are now beginning to engage in under the traditional aegis of philosophy is not another philosophy but something new and different from all philosophy." What this something new may be, he does not tell us, or at any rate not explicitly, but there are some indications here as in *The Revolt of the Masses* of a kind of intellectual nihilism.

The present collection of essays was detached from a projected but apparently never completed commentary on *The History of Philosophy* by his friend Julián Mariás. Ortega often complained that he was continually misunderstood not only by his students but by his closest admirers; here he set out to clarify himself with a dazzling show of etymological scholarship and semantic virtuosity reminiscent of the White Knight's discourse to Alice on the distinction between the name of a thing and what it is called and what it ontologically is. Philosophy, it appears, is a concomitant of freedom, using the word in a much wider sense than its legal or political contexts. Freedom to Ortega meant a multiplicity of choices, intellectual as well as behavioral, and this results from the discovery of new techniques, widening areas of intercourse, and most of all the accumulation of wealth and leisure. In a primitive state of society the opportunity of choice scarcely exists.

One lives by utilizing the frugal repertory of intellectual, technical, ritualistic, political and festive resources created and accumulated by tradition. . . . Amid a life of poverty the individual needs God so much that his very life derives from God. . . . The instruments of life are so crude, so inately ineffectual . . . that man has faith only in the *virtue*

which God, through magical rite, infuses them. . . .

All this is changed in a situation of abundance, or as Ortega calls it, of Pleonasm. The world and its manifold possibilities interpose themselves between God and man. The hold of tradition is weakened, its necessity no longer apparent, its validity no longer beyond question. Man becomes uncertain of what he should think or should do simply because there are so many things he might do and so many opinions about them he might adopt, for a multiplicity of choice imposes the necessity of selection. Thus he falls for a time into "a sea of doubt," a fluctuation of opinion from which sooner or later he must find some escape.

The means by which one emerges from doubt and becomes lodged in firm conviction constitutes the [philosophic] method. Every method is a reaction from doubt. Every doubt is a postulation of a method. Descartes in his invention of "methodical doubt" provides a superb example of skill and intellectual elegance in combining both elements with utter simplicity.

To Ortega it was clear that Parmenides, though he employed as his fragments show, a poetic and mythological language, did not believe in the gods, either those of the Olympic religion or those of the later mystery cults. Heraclitus, one of the earliest writers in prose, was more explicit: he attacked not only Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus who were remote from him in time but also Pythagoras and Xenophanes who were less so. The preachments of both Parmenides and Heraclitus were of course directed not to the many but the few—to a privileged intelligentsia who had the time to be concerned about *alethia* (i. e., reality as distinguished from appearance or from popular belief) as Ortega believed philosophy, a somewhat derisive term to the Greeks, should have been and *was* originally called. He thought it of high significance that the quest of *alethia* began among the Ionians and Italiotes rather

than in Athens; his explanation seems to be that in the colonies the philosophers could enjoy the protection of enlightened tyrants whereas democracies tend to be more jealous of religious tradition, as was shown in the popular hostility toward Anaxagoras when he came to Athens as the guest of Pericles, in the ridicule of philosophers in *The Clouds* of Aristophanes, and in the subsequent trial and condemnation of Socrates.

Whenever philosophy is discussed, Athens is the first that comes to mind. The truth is closer to the contrary, and the question might well be asked if Athens was not a hindrance for philosophy, since its tenacious reactionism consubstantial with its democracy, was responsible for the pathological evolution of Greek thought which prevented it thereby from obtaining full maturity. This supposition, however—that Greek thought remained sickly and hence abnormal in development—has the ring of blasphemy not only for Hellenic worshippers, but more generally for those who regard historical events per se as something merely to be annotated.

What one is able to make of all this is that the business of philosophizing began "one fine day in Greece" some twenty-five hundred years ago as a challenge to religion; that as the areas of freedom grew more expansive each successive philosophy was challenged in its turn and then absorbed by another on something like the Hegelian formula of thesis, antithesis, synthesis and the process has gone on and on until today, or at any rate until yesterday, but is now approaching an end, presumably because our mass society is demanding the fulfillment of all possibilities at once. *Panta rhe!*, said Heraclitus, "everything flows," and chasing the river downstream in the hope of bathing in it a second time brings one at last to the ocean of nothingness.<sup>2</sup>

In a little-noticed critique of Ortega, written twenty-five years ago in the midst of the second World War—that "inferno

of horrors"—José Sánchez Villaseñor, a Mexican Jesuit, interpreted the violence and anarchy of the mass revolt as an inevitable consequence of the ethical relativism engendered by a long line of subjective philosophers stretching from Immanuel Kant to Jean-Paul Sartre. Their great and dreadful sin, Fr. Sánchez maintained, was their repudiation of metaphysics and of abstract reasoning in general. Thus, he insisted, Ortega as the great popularizer of historical vitalism, the doctrine that life experience, whether of an individual or of a people, must provide the direction of all thought and action, cannot escape a great share of responsibility for the phenomena that frightened him into writing *The Revolt of the Masses*. For one point on which Ortega and his critic appear to agree is that philosophic notions hatched in the tower, or on the porch, or in the study sooner or later become the currency of the streets.

There is no more dangerous explosive in the universe than an idea. The great historical changes were conceived in the brains of a few exceptional individuals. For this reason, the intention to reduce philosophical activity to meaningless toil seems like naive childishness. . . . As if one could with impunity play with dynamite! It is still worse if the disseminator of those ideas is a writer of world-fame.<sup>3</sup>

Still it must be said that Fr. Sánchez's commentary and his call for a new synthesis that would restore the primacy of metaphysics, and with them sure and permanent norms of morality seems a bit quaint nowadays when many, possibly most of his colleagues seem to be abandoning the "perennial philosophy" of Aristotle and the schoolmen for the apocalyptic evolutionism of Teilhard de Chardin.

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY

<sup>1</sup>*La Deshumanización del arte (The Dehumanization of Art)*, 1939.

<sup>2</sup>An apparent refutation of Heraclitus' famous dictum about the impossibility of bathing twice in

the same river was accomplished many years ago by the city fathers of Philadelphia by placing the outlet of the sewerage system at a point on the Delaware some miles upstream from the intake point of the water supply, so that one day's bathwater was as likely as not to turn up in the next day's bath.

<sup>3</sup>*Ortega y Gasset, Existentialist*, by José Sánchez Villaseñor, S. J.; translated from the Spanish by Joseph Small, S. J. Chicago, 1949.

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