

ORTEGA'S VITALISM IN RELATION TO ASPECTS OF *LEBENSPHILOSOPHIE* AND PHENOMENOLOGY

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José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) claimed that since 1914, with the publication of his *Meditations on Quixote*, the basis of all his thinking had been the phenomenon of human life.¹ Both Ortega and his commentators have noted the similarity of his idea of human life to certain aspects of recent German philosophy, most especially to the thought of Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl. The purpose of this paper is to describe some delimited aspects of this relation that have previously passed unnoticed, namely (1) Ortega's rejection of what he considered to be the "idealism" of these thinkers, and (2) Ortega's establishment of the idea of life as a new conception of reality which would not succumb to what he considered to be the erroneous idealistic presuppositions of Dilthey and Husserl.

Before we can proceed with this task, however, it is necessary to outline what it was that Ortega understood by the term "life." The word is a *terminus technicus* in his philosophy and does not refer primarily to biological phenomena. Rather, by "life" Ortega referred to the fundamental reality given to human experiences, i.e., our life as we actually live it. The question of the nature of our life is not answered by such a physical science as biology, for its common meaning is best revealed when the person speaks of his or her life in the biographical sense of ordinary discourse. For Ortega, man's being exists as self-disclosure, and what is most immediately and most transparently disclosed is his own life. We may note here that Ortega's 'life' is a general expression for what the previous German tradition of *Lebensphilosophie* had termed *das Leben*, the components of which are meaningfully connected "lived experiences" (*Erlebnisse*). For Ortega as for Dilthey and the *Lebensphilosophie* movement, the experiential character of life is "lived" and presented from the "inside" of the subject, as it were. Life is not externally given to us through the senses in the manner of the physical world, and its nature is not inferred through sense observation and hypothesis formation which led to the covering laws of matter. Rather, its immediate givenness is its actual being. *Esse est percipi*. Our awareness and the content of which we are aware become a unity, but a unity which knows itself and is evident to itself. Thus, for Ortega it is always possible to reflect on our life, to bring it to an immediate and clear self-consciousness.

Ortega's was not a theory of life, but what might be called a phenomenological description of it. To verify or falsify a description we must observe our life to see if the description "fits" what we actually live, for this is our fundamental evidence on the subject.² Also, for Ortega there are three

characteristics of life: first, life is, as we have noted, awareness of itself; second, life makes itself; third, life decides itself. The latter two characteristics imply for the concept that life is an entity that consists not only of present self-awareness, of what actually is, but of what it is going to make of itself and of what it will become. Therefore, at the basis of life there are praxiological and temporal attributes (Ortega, 1969, p. 57).

But Ortega added another desideratum to his concept of life which would prove vital for his subsequent critique of Dilthey and Husserl's purported idealism: his idea of "circumstance." With this notion, he wanted to say that life is a polar entity; it consists of an 'I' with what is not an 'I.' This "not-I" is circumstance or world. Any phenomenological reflection on life will reveal that it is always in a world, i.e., that life is always outside itself in the midst of circumstances or surroundings. Life, then, is not given as only pure consciousness or idea; what is given, rather, is that life is always directed outside itself to a circumstantial world. For Ortega life is a polar concept, a "unitary duality" of subject and object, a fusion of 'I' and its actual circumstances. "I am myself and my circumstances" became his philosophical battle cry. For Ortega any idealist claim or assumption that the polar nature of life will convert to pure consciousness or idea is false. Such a conversion would make the subjective pole into what it is not, i.e., an immanent mental substance exclusive of a world. On the other hand, a realist position which maintains that reality is an objective thing independent of an 'I' is also false. For Ortega, life or reality is not the independent being of an independent object, nor is life a self-enclosed consciousness. Life is always given as a polar immediacy and dynamic interaction of an 'I' and a world.

Ortega thus believed he had overcome the errors of both idealism and realism in his conception of life. Realism holds, he claimed, that the fundamental being of things is *res*, which is independent of the subject. But Ortega's life idea requires that the external world can have an indubitable and objective status only for the subject for whom it is there (1969, p. 135). But idealism's attempt to convert everything into the immediacy of thought also appeals to something not actually given in the immediate presence of life, i.e., that the world is idea. What there truly is for Ortega is not an idea, an independent consciousness, nor an independent objective world, but an 'I' existing in a set of circumstances that also exist. Only the coexistence of I and world "without chance of fusion or separation" is fundamentally given.¹ For Ortega this coexistence is the fundamental reality on which philosophy must meditate (1975, p. 55).

Ortega saw his own vitalism in the related context of the thinking of both Dilthey and Husserl. I would now like to discuss one aspect of this complicated relation by comparing Ortega's idea of life with a similar notion in Dilthey, and also to show how his idea provided Ortega with one basis for a

critique of Husserl. Most especially, I would like to state the interrelation of all three thinkers in the context of Ortega's critique of idealism. Let us begin by looking briefly at Ortega's relation to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Ortega stated that while he knew of Dilthey's existence at the turn of the century in Berlin, he had not read his works until 1929. It took him, he claimed, four more years to understand Dilthey, and the lateness of his start cost him ten years of intellectual development.⁴ Dilthey's *Gesammelte Schriften* began to appear in Europe in 1928, and Ortega admitted in his 1933 essay on Dilthey that the idea of life had been discovered by the latter in the late nineteenth century. Yet Ortega also said in 1934 that he had not reached the idea of life as the fundamental reality by "positive imitation of anyone." Rather, he was directed to it by the problems that confront philosophy itself (1975, p. 60).

If this is true, then what may we say is the comparative status of the idea in these two thinkers? Dilthey, too, had claimed that his idea of life had given a new meaning to the expression "to be real." For him *das Leben* is also a *terminus technicus*. It refers primarily not to a biological state, but to the inner conscious processes of all humanity, and to the meaningful relations our individual life has to the lives of other men.⁵ For Dilthey, life is always an "inner" or subjective event in the sense that it is always experienced as one's internal condition. Life is never given to us externally in the manner of sense data, for its givenness is always equal to its being experienced from the inside. The subject intends his own life as an object. Thus the subject and object of human experience become identical. This self-awareness (*innere Wahrnehmung*) is given as an immediate and self-evident presentation of the life world as it actually is. *Esse est percipi* is also a formula that covers Dilthey's sense of life's immediacy. The life of the individual is not perceived as a mere appearance which covers a deeper reality, for Dilthey identified it with reality itself. Thus, it is not required that external sense perception will provide the empirical basis for our judgments here; for "in the internal world of our subjective life, we comprehend reality as it actually is without the mediation of the external sense world."⁶

Dilthey's claims, stated above, were sanctioned by Ortega, but he asserted that Dilthey's fundamental error—an error which Ortega did not want to duplicate in his own vitalism—lay in Dilthey's claim that the contents of life experience "are comported as ideas, as consciousness." Here, Ortega points his critical finger at what he considers Dilthey's idealism. Ortega had noted correctly that for Dilthey everything which exists is subject to being a fact of consciousness.⁷ Ortega attempted to distinguish his vitalist position from that of Dilthey's by revealing the latter's idealist presuppositions. As we saw above, Ortega had previously rejected all idealism as one-sided because it lacked a credible "world" component in its

epistemology. It is because of such considerations that Ortega would claim in his *Leibniz* volume that because of his belief in consciousness "it is stupid to say that Dilthey has influenced my thinking." Ortega also claimed that his idea of life was different from Dilthey's and not derived from it.⁸ Yet in his *History as System*, Ortega also claimed that Dilthey was "the writer to whom he owed more than anyone else" (1962, p. 216).

But I believe that Ortega's claim to originality is justified when we remember that for him the idea of life can never be understood as consciousness as in Dilthey. For Ortega life is always directed outwardly to an actual world-pole. For him life is given as a fusion of the 'I' and its circumstances in the world. This relationship will never convert to consciousness alone. Just as life is not the "I-independent" *res* of the realist position, so is it not a consciousness without an objective world pole. This formulation of Ortega's will suggest at once Heidegger's assertion that "being in the world" is a real existential component of *Dasein*, an idea, incidentally, for which Ortega claimed ideological priority.⁹

We can note, finally, that the same anti-idealist tone is present in Ortega's analysis of the early phenomenological movement in Germany. Indeed, before 1914 Ortega had considered using phenomenology as a vehicle for his own thinking. But he came to feel that certain shortcomings in Husserl's movement would prohibit his formulation of systematic insights which Ortega would present in his own philosophy. For example, Ortega claimed that there was an unacceptable idealist element in Husserl's thought. By this, he meant that the latter's notion of "pure consciousness" is not justified in any experiential presentation. "It is not phenomenological description, but hypothesis" he stated, "to claim that an act of consciousness is real." For Ortega there was no such thing as "consciousness of" as a general frame of mind (1971, p. 281). With these criticisms in mind Ortega claimed that he "abandoned phenomenology at the first taste of it" (1971, p. 280). The purported phenomenological description of a Husserlian "pure consciousness" must be replaced by a description of the actual phenomena of human life as Ortega understood it.

Also, for Ortega the phenomenological "hypothesis" of consciousness does not adequately account for the actual relation between the subject and his world. What actually exists, what actually is given, he claimed, is not pure consciousness, but man in relation to things and things to man. Further, if consciousness were "absolute reality" and the true starting point of all philosophy, as Husserl had claimed, then philosophy would begin from a subject "enclosed in itself" and be without reference to objective content. For Ortega such a situation would be the opposite of what obtains in life. For life is a "reaching out from oneself" to objective circumstances. We can note too that between the years 1900 and 1925 Ortega refused to publish his reservations about the phenomenological movement because of

what he considered the “enormity” of his claims about consciousness (1971, p. 281).

In summary, Ortega’s claim to originality in his idea of life seems justified by his rejection of Dilthey’s idealism and by his emphasis on a “world” component in the idea. Also, in Ortega we find the rejection of any idealism which asserts (1) the hypothesis of consciousness; (2) that the world pole component of the life idea can be dissolved into a Husserlian subjectivity or immanence of consciousness; and (3) that human existence can be understood as an idea without a world, or that there is an objective, real world without a subject. It is the contention of this paper that because of Ortega’s additions, modifications, and restrictions to his notion of life, he has made an original contribution to the history of ideas.

NOTES

1. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Idea of Principle in Leibniz and the Evolution of Deductive Theory* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 280.
2. José Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1969), p. 50 ff.
3. José Ortega y Gasset, *Phenomenology and Art* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1975), p. 66.
4. José Ortega y Gasset, “A Chapter from the History of Ideas—Wilhelm Dilthey and the Idea of Life,” *Concord and Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963), p. 136; see also, Ortega y Gasset, *History as System* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1962), p. 216.
5. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 18 vols. (Stuttgart: B. G. Tuebner, 1962, 1977), 7, p. 261.
6. Dilthey, 5, 198.
7. Dilthey, 5, 90.
8. 1971, p. 281 (both quotes are found on this page).
9. Ortega y Gasset, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1964), p. 218.