On Life and Language:
Limit, *Context* and *Belief* in Wittgenstein and Ortega y Gasset

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Despite both thinkers belonging to the tragic generation of 1914, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1888-1951) and José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) never actually met in their lives or in their texts (neither those they wrote nor those they read). Coming from very separate philosophical traditions – the logical atomism of Wittgenstein and the neo-Kantianism and phenomenology of Ortega – the works of these two philosophers nevertheless show latent conceptual affinities. We shall limit ourselves to suggesting three possible conceptual keys: *limit*, *context* and *belief*. We shall then finally take Wittgenstein's distinction between *sagen* and *zeigen* in the light of the difference Ortega highlights between *talking* and *saying*, reflecting upon the limits of language and the meaning each thinker gives to silence.

With this paper we seek to progress a little further on the hermeneutical construction of a bridge between these two traditions, the analytical and the phenomenological, between these different takes on philosophy, which, despite employing different methods, rely on congruous ideas and intellectual sensibilities. The space of life and the space of language converge in their respective intellectual projects: Wittgenstein started out interested in untangling the logical structure that linguistically configures the world, finding a limit whose opening and transcendence is only *shown* to us by the silent life; Ortega built the architecture of a vital reason from which he would subsequently undertook a lucid reflection on the limits of language. Beyond merely outlining the cultural coordinates of a contemporary *Zeitgeist*, we are seeking to propose a comparative reading of certain texts of both authors, which, in our opinion, reflect a common concern for a series of philosophical problems, synthesised in the following interpretative hypotheses:

LIMIT. Wittgenstein and Ortega walk the same conceptual path, that of the *philosophy of the limit*. Following this frontier philosophy that separates *Erscheinung* from *Dinge an sich* (Kant), *Vorstellung* from *Wille* (Schopenhauer), Wittgenstein also traced an ontological and epistemological limit between what can be *said*, and therefore expressed in language, and what can only be *shown* beyond language, in silence. Ortega seeks to integrate reason and life, yet these two fields are ultimately held captive at the border that separates the rational *method* used from the vital object pursued. Limited life comes face to face with an unlimited world. The limit between *sagen* and *zeigen*, between *razón* and *vida*, between reason and life, thus represents the distance between theory and practice, between logical-linguistic knowledge and life experience. The limit therefore operates as a foundation and a condition for the possibility of the metaphysics of language and of life.

Wittgenstein understands that philosophy must seek the limits of logical-rational language, as it is they that also encode the ontological limits of the world (5.6). However, sense lies beyond the demarcations of language: "Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische" (6.45). But this sense is not *said* in any linguistic manner – it can only be *shown*, expressed through silence.

For Ortega, the limits of reason become evident in the vital *quehacer* or routine; hence his insistence in the ideas of circumstance (*Meditations on Quixote*, 1914), perspective (*The Theme of our Time*, 1923), horizon (*Man and People*, 1949-1950), which are not only images that display concepts but also an expression of a philosophical space structured on the basis of said demarcatory notions. Thus in the eyes of Ortega the figure of man appears as a *forger of limits*, of foreshortenings, distances, perspectives, landscapes. His task or *quehacer* consists in tracing vital limits to the unlimited and infinite world: "...el hombre (...) tiene que forjar un escorzo finito de la infinitud" […man (…) must forge a finite foreshortening of infinity"] (Ortega. 1980, 227).

For Ortega, the *theme of our time* consists in replacing the domain of pure reason with that of vital reason. This effort at integration between these two spheres (*reason* and *life*) presupposes, however, awareness of a limit that operates as a condition of possibility, since we can only integrate, unite, what is distant, what has been separated by a limit.

From this point of view, it would be worthwhile to read *Tractatus Logico* Philosophicus from Ortega's perspective of *vital reason*. Because the very genesis of Wittgenstein's first book reflects the existence of a limit between the *logical-rational* sphere of *saying* (*sagen*), as expressed in *Notebooks 1914-1916*, and the *vital* sphere of *showing* (*zeigen*), which is reflected in the so-called *Geheime Tagebücher*. As we know, the former was written on the odd pages (right-hand side) and the latter, in code, on the even pages (left-hand side) of the manuscript Wittgenstein carried with him throughout the First World War. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that this conflict and anxiety over the limit between logic and life felt by the young philosopher was transmitted to Russell, via a letter in 1913, with the following words:

> "Über Logik kann ich Dir heute nichts schreiben. Vielleicht glaubst du dass es Zeitverschwendung ist über mich selbst zu denken; aber wie kann ich Lögiker sein, wenn ich noch nicht Mensch bin!" (Wittgenstein. 1980, 47).

In his famous letter to the editor of *Tractatus*, Ludwig von Ficker, Wittgenstein also wrote that the true sense of the book was ethical, as it transcended what was *said* in its pages. Ever silent, life can only be *shown* beyond the limits of language.

CONTEXT. The two philosophers understand the meaning of words as part of a *language-game* (*Sprachspiel)* in Wittgenstein, and of a series of social *uses* in Ortega. Along separate paths, they criticise traditional referentialist semantics to arrive at a pragmatic semantics that makes them perceive the meaning of language from the dimension of *context* and the vital and social *circumstance*.

The comprehension of language that Wittgenstein brought about in *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (*PU*, 1953) criticises the traditional metaphysical use of the same, according to which concepts are essential mental entities that have a correlate in the outside world. He

contrasts a *metaphysical use* and an *everyday use* of language (*PU*, §116). The linguistic method thus consists in rejecting all types of ontic presuppositions as the semantic foundation of words and placing these, contrasting them, with the greatest possible number of examples and cases in which we make use of them. The presupposed semantic essence is replaced by the *description* of particular circumstances of use, since the manifold language games in which we participate are no more than different and possible *forms of life* (*Lebensform, PU*, §23).

We must bear in mind that in his *PU* Wittgenstein uses three different terms to refer to the situation of use: two of them to refer to the pragmatic space, *context* ("Zussamen-hang") and *surrounding* ("Umgebung"), and a third to mention the set of particular conditions that operate within said space, *circumstance* ("Umstand"). The first two therefore function as synonyms, although in most cases the author uses the word "context" (§525, §625, §686) instead of "surrounding" (§583, §584).

The context contributes to clarifying the process of learning a meaning, thus brushing away the old *cobwebs* inherited from subjectivist metaphysics. As opposed to the image of the mental mirror, the point of view of context or surrounding is that which now determines linguistic analysis: "Was jetzt gechietht, hat Bedeutung – in dieser Umgebung. Die Umgebung gibt ihm die Wichtigkeit" (Wittgenstein. 1988, 364).

Ortega also locates the subject of meaning from the perspective of circumstance. The philosophical roots of both thinkers are very different, including those referring to specific reflection on language, with Ortega's meditation on language still influenced by Humboldtian tradition, whose comprehension of the phenomenon of language appears defined as an expression of a certain *Weltan-schauung*. Despite divergences with the Wittgensteinian approach, both authors concur in their criticism of referentialist semantics (Ortega. 1983, IX, 643), demand it be replaced with pragmatic semantics.

There would therefore be continuity between vital circumstance and linguistic context. Some texts by Ortega show said affinity, so in *Mission of the Librarian* (1935), for example, we can read: "Nuestras palabras son, en rigor, inseparables de la situación vital en que surgen. Sin ésta carecen de sentido preciso, esto es, de evidencia" ["Our words are, strictly, inseparable from the vital situation in which they arise. Without this they lack precise sense, i.e. evidence"] (Ortega. 1983,V, 233). Because, according to Ortega, life is not made up of "things" but, above all, of *pragmata*: affairs, uses, etc.: "Debemos, pues, contemplar la vida como una articulación de campos pragmáticos" ["We must therefore contemplate life as an articulation of pragmatic fields"] (Ortega. 1983, IX, 642-643).

In *Man and People*, Ortega establishes a distinction between *talking* and *saying*. Speaking refers to a language already formed by society, to a language that has become socially established mechanical *use*. Talking reflects the use of language employed by the Ortegan *hombre-masa*, man-mass. Saying, on the other hand, expresses the attempt to transcend the system of linguistic uses established by talking, with a view to a (re)creation and innovation of language. From this conceptual division would come a *reproductive use* (talking) and a *creative use* (saying) of language.

Like Wittgenstein, Ortega believes that: "*El lenguaje está limitado siempre por una frontera de inefabilidad. Esta limitación se haya constituida por lo que en absoluto no se puede decir en una lengua o en ninguna*" ["*Language is always limited by a frontier of ineffability.* This limitation has been formed by what absolutely *cannot* be said in one language or in any"] (Ortega. 1983, IX, 756). The limits of language in the Wittgensteinian *saying* find in Ortega a linguistic expression in the face of the silent and ineffable showing: "El silencio, la inefabilidad, es un factor positivo e intrínseco del lenguaje" ["Silence, ineffability, is a positive and intrinsic factor of language"] (Ortega. 1983, CB, IX, 755). Silence does not therefore mean a negation of language. Compared to the transcendence of language implied by silence in Wittgenstein, in Ortega it has an *immanent* sense.

If for Wittgenstein "logical space" (*Logische Raum*) has its limits, for, *textual space* is also composed of inevitable limits, beyond which appears the silence that haunts its edges. The reader maintains a dialogue not only with the text but also with its context, patent and latent, endeavouring, through interpretation, to rescue the writing from its original silence (Ortega. 1983, IX, 762).

There is also something tacit in saying referred to the vital situation from which this saying arises, since man "no dice esta situación: la deja tácita, la supone" ["does not speak this situation: he leaves it tacit, he supposes it"] (Ortega. 1983, V, 233). In the same way, language games, which Wittgenstein describes as linguistic and cultural contexts, are presupposed by the talker, who must know the "rules" of use of these games, otherwise to participate in them would be impossible. But these linguistic games are not *said*, but simply practiced – they are *used*.

Language and silence are therefore inseparable: all saying implies perspective and limit, which are constructed upon manifold other possible *sayings*, which are silenced (Ortega. 1983, IX, 555; VIII, 396). Languages traces inevitable ellipses, dangling in the silence that which discriminates the talker, having chosen one linguistic perspective, excluding the others. The *perspectivism* of Ortega – ontological and epistemological – is therefore also *linguistic*.

BELIEF. Wittgenstein and Ortega create a theory on the methods of constructing *beliefs*, in individuals and socio-linguistic communities. For Wittgenstein, beyond the framework of the presuppositions of logical-rational language rises the sphere of aesthetic, ethical and religious beliefs. According to Ortega, ideas have a rational and conscious nature unlike beliefs, with which we act on a pre-rational level. They also belong to the sphere of the unutterable. This is why, according to Ortega (*Ideas and Beliefs*, 1934) we *have* ideas (*man gesagt*, in the perspective of Wittgenstein), while we simply *exist* with beliefs (*man gezeigt*).

Ortega gives us an example to illustrate how we exist with a belief: when a man gets ready to go out he does not question the reality of the outside world (streets, buildings, etc.) that awaits him on the other side of the door to his home. This belief is not held as a problematic reality, as a doubt, but he simply exists in this belief, it accompanies us in our day-to-day living.

For Wittgenstein, doubt must also have a limit, since: "Wer an allem zweilfeln wollte, der würde auch nicht bis zum Zweifel kommen. Das Spiel des Zweifelns selbst setzt schon die Gewissheit voraus" (Wittgenstein. 2000, §115, 18), and since: "Ein Zweifel, der an allem zweifelte, wäre kein Zweifel" (§450, 59). And, like Ortega, he adopts a pragmatic position in the face of the Cartesian supposition of all-embracing doubt: "In allen gewöhnlichen Fallen wird ein Zweifel, ob wirklich eine Tür da ist, unmöglich sein" (§391, 50). Life thus becomes the irreducible pragmatic

criterion for keeping certain basic and everyday beliefs out of doubt: "Mein Leben zeigt, dass ich weiss oder sicher bin, dass dort ein Sessel steht, eine Tür ist usf" (§7, 2). Life therefore *shows* (zeigt) what language does not *say*, what it silences.

Ethical and religious beliefs, however, transcend the limits of language, despite our tireless efforts to express them. To express the inexpressible, to say the unsayable. This is the paradox, according to Wittgenstein, surrounding all attempts to want "to write or talk Ethics or Religion", since they are "*beyond the world*, and that is to say beyond significant language". But there is the inevitable "tendency in the human mind" that strives to refer rationally and linguistically to beliefs. To persistently "run against the boundaries of language", however, is hopeless: "The running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless" (Wittgenstein, 1965, 12). The obstinate and absurd – yet human – temptation to transcend the limit, to get away the cage of language in which we live.

Logos, language and reason, has always sought to capture the echoes and beats of life, no matter how silent. The philosophical trajectories of the two authors studied here cross inversely. Wittgenstein initially condemned the meaning of life to mystic silence, to subsequently draw life closer to language, thereby converting it into a *form of life*. And Ortega began his philosophical odyssey fully convinced of being able to trap life in the logical-linguistic nets of reason, while his second intellectual *navigation*, however, highlighted the impassable abyss that separates words from the vital situations in which they arise. As if language were ultimately incapable of fully understanding life: life being made up of words, certainly, but also silences, gestures, looks that transcend it.

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