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The Political Thought of José Ortega y Gasset

José Ortega y Gasset (1898-1955) was perhaps the greatest political and social thinker of Spain's famous "Generation of 1898." Yet his contemporaries, Unamuno, Baroja, Valle-Inclan, and Maeztu, have in their respective fields received considerable attention while the substance of Ortega's thought, save for *The Revolt of the Masses*, has been relatively undiscussed by modern social scientists. I propose to examine a particular aspect of Ortega's thought: the relation between man and the state. By way of introduction, I will sketch some of the framework within which this aspect is developed—specifically, Ortega's general theory of man and society. Following this introduction and a presentation of the man:state relation, I propose to examine a few of the ramifications of this relation in his political philosophy.

I

First, it is necessary to form a general idea of where Ortega stood—what label it is appropriate to apply to him. One way of categorizing philosophers is to search for a key question and to classify their answers. Such a question is that of the locus of fact or ultimate truth for the philosopher. The naturalists and positivists look to the physical fact as the fundamental unit of knowledge. The rationalists see the possibility of an architectonic structure of reality knowable through the extension and development of reason. And the romantics may be said to locate truth within the human being in his spiritual or intuitional perceptions. This last is a broad category and should be subdivided into three classifications: those who require a relation between the individual and his Creator as an essential element in the perception of truth (mysticism); those who find their ultimate truth in the *collectivity* of men in some form, be it culture, community, or state; and those who may be described as *radical* romantics, because they see in each individual an ability to comprehend a portion of what is closest to ultimate truth by some process of interior awareness. Nietzsche and Bergson are exemplary of radical romanticism.

Certainly Ortega belongs to the radical romantics. For him, facts

have no objective meaning apart from that given them by their observer. Reason is likewise a limited instrument totally dependent for its power upon the uses to which it is put by individuals. Only *life*, described as a spontaneous biographical adventure guided by reason, is the proper source of value and perspective for all philosophy.¹ Identification with this point of view places Ortega in the camp of the radical romantics and it may be that Ortega's contribution to political thought was that he developed some of the potential of the romantic approach to politics.

In order to see the value of Ortega's contribution to political philosophy, we must consider the intellectual problem which Ortega took on in developing his philosophy of man and the state. He lived at the time when the juggernaut of Darwin and Freud had blasted apart the rational image of man and introduced a powerful analysis of elemental, seemingly subhuman, forces in human life. The First World War and the civil strife in Spain were graphic and immediate illustrations of the maladies of modern civilization. The philosophies of despair were gaining increasing currency.²

The challenge to strike boldly in clear and lucid terms on behalf of humanist values was a very complicated one. Ortega projected his values of humanism and individualism into his approach to the "other" and came up with a philosophical justification for something besides anarchism or totalitarianism—which was where similar assumptions were leading other thinkers in Ortega's time, *e. g.*, Heidegger and his affinity for fascism, and the anarchism of the existentialists.

What is the nature of the system of thought that Ortega places before us? The fundamental value is *life*, knowable directly only through individual life, and described as a spontaneous creative impulse in man. This mental and physical impulse or momentum courses through our bodies and minds. The first problem for Ortega in starting with life as a normative concept was the relation between reason and life.

What Ortega saw in life as a normative concept was the element of spontaneity and freedom which is essentially human. What Ortega was against was the containment of life by pure principle or by the

¹ Leon Livingston, "Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Art," *PMLA*, Vol. 67 (September, 1952), p. 616.

² Cf. Ortega, *Meditations on Quixote*, p. 164; see also H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 151, for a discussion of Freud's *Civilizations and Its Discontents*, as well as p. 105 and p. 138.

deification of some aspect of existence, *e.g.*, the intellect, the “I think” of Descartes and the “pure reason” of Kant. In this way Ortega joined the revolt against rationalism or, as H. Stuart Hughes points out, “not so much against the eighteenth century tradition (of rationalism) as against its late nineteenth century reincarnation—in travestied form—as the cult of positivism.”³

He resolved the problem of spontaneity vs. reason by declaring that *reason is interdependent with life, but subordinate to it*. The phenomenon of reason is one of the principal supporting processes of life. Reason *assists* in the making of one’s life according to individual potential. The rational existence is not, in itself, a good end. He called this approach *ratiovitalism*.⁴

II

The second major question which Ortega had to face in choosing to place his emphasis on individual life was the relation between the individual and society, which brings us to our principal enquiry. In his quest for a satisfactory relation between the true individual and society, Ortega joined currents with traditional romantic philosophy. The aspect of romantic thought is commented upon by Professor Hans Kohn in *The Mind of Germany*:

The romantic individual regarded himself not as a representative of universal order, but as a unique being and demanded complete freedom, in life and work, for his creative genius. At the same time, the romantics for all their revolt against society, did not accept the titanic loneliness of the Storm and Stress. They longed for a community of like-minded individuals who could live a full life according to their innermost emotions and convictions.⁵

This description, while affirming the essential self-centeredness of romantic thought, presents the two elements of romanticism: the individual in search of creative freedom, and the individual seeking a degree of social integration. The proper analysis of romantic political thought consists in a measurement of the balance between these two elements and an examination of the method of their reconciliation.

Goethe accepted the necessity for their balance and his thought,

³ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴ For an analysis of the metaphysics of ratiovitalism, see James T. Conway, “Ortega’s Vital Reason,” *Thought*, Vol. 32 (Winter 1957-1958), p. 29.

⁵ (New York: Scribners, 1960), p. 50. For an analysis of the implied contradiction, see Judith Shklar, *After Utopia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 150.

though individualist in temper, contains a careful appreciation for the limits of human endeavor and the need for participation in social intercourse. The German national romantics violated this balance with their glorification of the mystical union of the community. Nietzsche, on the other hand, tilted the balance in the other direction with his strident exultations of the will to power.

How does Ortega handle the association between the individual and society or, for our purposes, the state? The key to the answer is to be found in Ortega's treatment of circumstance as a component of his definition of the individual. Circumstance in Ortega's usage refers to the totality of our surroundings—including our social surroundings. Our circumstance is a part of us. It is not merely an external reality with which we have relations; it is something we *are*. This relation of mutual submersion, so to speak, of the self and circumstance implies a dependent relation between man and the state. The individual is involved in his political circumstance and, while he can effect an alteration of it, he is required to live with it and to overcome it. It is this link between the individual and his circumstance which prevents Ortega from taking what is the logical next step for some radical romantics after the affirmation of individual sovereignty—the renunciation of society.⁶ While Ortega's view of society is hardly positive, he still refrains from the existentialist rebellion.

Ortega's perspective on the individual and his circumstance indicates that, while circumstance cannot be escaped, it is not determining except in that it narrows down the alternatives for what can be our free choice in the pursuit of our self development. There is the possibility of choosing in a free and creative way between the alternatives which face us.⁷

So there is in Ortega's theory an integration of the individual and his circumstance. This integration is a contribution to political thought, it seems to me, because it points to the significance of circumstance in individual life without depreciating the role of individual initiative and freedom.

With the formulation of the man:state relationship in mind, we will consider its implications for Ortega's political philosophy. The

⁶ Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, tran. by Anthony Bower (New York: Random House, 1956), p. 22 and p. 93. Cf. Edward Sarmiento, *Month*, Vol. 6 (December, 1951), pp. 339-345.

⁷ Thomas Landon Thorson examines the relationship of this kind of choice to democratic theory in *The Logic of Democracy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962).

flaw in Ortega's thought is that there is little mention of social obligation or duty. This is a familiar characteristic of radical romantic thought. One could try to argue that duty to one's own self-development would imply a structure of duties to deal fairly with others and with society as a matter of conscience or some such; however, this is a weak association based on certain Christian assumptions not shared by Ortega.

The flaw is a product of Ortega's emphasis upon living according to the vital momentum peculiar to each individual. The fundamental ontological formula at the base of Ortega's thought is not, as is the case with many major thinkers, between man and God, or man and man, or man and culture, but rather between *man and himself*: between the given creature and his potential. It is the way in which this relationship is worked out that constitutes the philosophical measure of each man. Social circumstance enters into Ortega's fundamental formula as a component of individual existence—a component with a somewhat negative influence on an individual's freedom to realize himself. This has a profound influence on the social and political ideas which are put forward by Ortega. One can easily see the ethical implications of Christianity where there is a filial connection between man and his Creator. Likewise, one can understand the ethics implied by communism where the relation between man and man is idealized. But when this fundamental relation is interior to the individual and does not include a term which refers to something besides the given individual, the problem of a social ethic becomes extremely difficult. Basically the only use the Ortegean individual has for another individual is as a tool for his personal advancement. There are no built-in ethical restraints in Ortega's philosophy. He commends the great man and excuses him from conventional morality because it is foolish to expect conformity from one who has surpassed the ordinariness of the masses.⁸

Thus Ortega's scale of judgment is the contrary of that advanced by conventional social theorists. The measure of worth in a man is the extent to which he succeeds in developing his potential, not the

⁸ Ortega presents his position on the "great man" most fully in an essay, *Mirabeau o el Politico*, substantial portions of which are to be found in *The Historical Thought of José Ortega y Gasset* by Christian Ceplecha, pp. 88-92. Ceplecha and other critics of Ortega have seized upon this point in an effort to portray Ortega as a fascist—a criticism I deal with below. Cf. J. S. Villasenor, *Ortega y Gasset, Existentialist* (Chicago: Regnery, 1949), p. 111.

fidelity with which he observes the social usages of his culture. There is no ethic of obedience or submission to authority; there is only the ethic of *authenticity* which is a purely individual ethic.

Hans Kohn points out that in German Romanticism this disregard for the precepts of social obligation and law was a product of the social idealism attendant upon the revivification of the old communal myths.⁹ The feeling was that law in such a community would not be necessary because the individual would be freed from the evil forces in contemporary society which compel him to err against his brother. The assumption is, of course, that individuals are capable of achieving a state of existence where laws and social obligations are extraneous because of the attainments of the individual—in other words, man is perfectable through community.

There is something like this idealism in Ortega's writings. There is the implicit assumption that one could achieve a station where he had developed his creative abilities and his facility in dealing with circumstance to an extent which would make him independent of the need for restraint imposed by social strictures. The difference is that Ortega does not accept the role of the community in this respect; his creative individual surpasses others because of his superior *self*-development. In this particular, he reaffirms the radical (or root) quality of his romanticism.

This is the negative assessment of Ortega's attitude toward man in his obligations to society. The position described here is a sort of raw vitalism which seems to link the Spanish philosopher firmly with Nietzsche.

On the positive side, it must be realized that Ortega was reacting to the excessive culturalism of his time—a culturalism which, in Germany, contributed to the rise of fascism. Ortega was arguing the brief for individual sovereignty over his own existence, and for a constructive attitude on the part of the individual with respect to the conduct of his life. He called for the development of each individual according to his potential. While he did not dispense prescriptions for self-restraint, he did assert that the individual cannot aspire to absolute knowledge of any kind. The Sage of the Escorial, as he was sometimes called, was well aware of the limitations of mankind.¹⁰

⁹ Hans Kohn, "Romanticism and the Rise of German Nationalism," *Review of Politics*, Vol. 12 (1950), pp. 443-472.

¹⁰ Cf. Ortega, *Mission of a University* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), p. 77; *Concord and Liberty* (New York: Norton, 1946), p. 182; *History as a System* (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 34.

The statements Ortega made concerning the immunity of the man of genuine stature from normal strictures of morality are damaging to his political philosophy because they seem to condone demagoguery. However, it must be recalled that Ortega's analysis of the demagogue as a man of pure action, a man irresponsible to the concepts he handles, was a penetrating exposure of the faults of contemporary dictators. Ortega's great man was the man with a balanced sense of responsibility to the masses he leads. Also, Ortega's theory of creative elites must be recognized as a realistic assessment of contemporary constitutional democracy. The whole structure of political parties is, at its best, a mechanism for admitting to power those small groups of creative people who have formed an intelligent program for the state which is acceptable to the public. The polyarchal model developed by Dahl and Lindblom is another reflection of this reality.¹¹

It is true too that Ortega qualifies the implications of that fundamental relation in his philosophy by insisting that an individual is defined not only by his *self*, but also by his *circumstance*. And this includes his social circumstance. Man is dependent upon society; he needs it and can use it to good advantage through common social action. There is the possibility at least, of a beneficial relation between man and society.

Nevertheless there is a permissive streak in Ortega with respect to the true man of stature. There is also a clearly indicated preference for rule by some form other than democracy pure and simple; there is a stratification of society implied which is intended to carry over into the ruling function. There is, in fact, an anti-social inflection in his writings. To be authentic in one's personal life may and, in fact, probably will require acts which are anti-social, i. e., acts which are in violation of the prevailing usages established by society. Ortega is distrustful of the corruptibility of social usages. His fears concerning the rise of the mass man are a clear manifestation of a distrust of the contemporary form of society.

This anti-social cast to romantic philosophy creates, according to Shklar, the "unhappy consciousness"—the romantic individual's feeling of futility in modern society.¹² And this unhappy consciousness led the older tradition in romanticism to attempt a philosophical formulation adequate to explain the state in some more acceptable fashion. The burden of their effort was to make the state out to

¹¹ See Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), Chs. 10 and 11.

¹² Shklar, *After Utopia*, p. 150.

be a creative organism which serves the interests of true enlightened culture.¹⁸ This is the great political vision of the romantics. However, in Germany it led to the mystical nationalism which ended in ignominy.

Ortega participated in this trend, but not in the way that the German romantics did. For him, culture was the enemy of spontaneity. But, as indicated above, it plays a vital role in individual life. Also, there is the possibility of the individual making his imprint on the state. The state is a living institution, according to Ortega. It exhibits some of the characteristics of an individual in the course of its existence; the problems of following an effective program and renewing the spontaneous sources of creative life are common to the individual and the state. The state has a mission and, typical also of individuals, if it abdicates this mission it will enter into decline. There is always movement in living organisms—either progressive or regressive, ascending or descending. The crucial and determining element is the spontaneous spark of individual effort and imagination which must continually enliven the collective existence. The analogy of the state to a living organism has its great dangers. But Ortega's use of this analogy is intended to emphasize the changing and creative aspects of the state rather than the self-sufficiency of the state.

This view of society accounts for the tones of social pessimism in Ortega. Durkheim and Weber saw in society the development of a-personalism and a relegation of the human values to private life. They foresaw an increasing sense of *anomie*. Ortega's pessimism was similar in its causes. He simply felt that contemporary societies had not lived up to the advances expected of them. The principal outgrowth of this is the rise of the masses. In this complaint, he echoes the fears of the nineteenth century romantics about the Philistines, the common men who had no understanding of spiritual values and who, if not controlled, would rule society with their "average" standards. What made this a particularly despicable prospect was that the concept of average standards, good enough for one and all, would become a mass battering ram against the individual constructions of each man's conscience. It is this very human exercise of the individual in the sanctity of his conscience which is a prime source of spontaneous life. Ortega's solution to the impending rule of the masses is the familiar device of rule by creative minorities, a further reflection of his emphasis on individual creativity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98-99.

III

What then is Ortega's contribution to romantic political thought? What is the result of his effort to strike a balance between the individual and the community, the two poles of romanticism? His contribution may be summed up in one word: *perspective*. For the individual, Ortega's perspective means a constant effort to be authentic in his personal life—true to his potential. For politics, it means that Ortega renounces utopianism because it is beyond the capacities of men, but he does not embrace anarchism as a consequence. He says the state must play a role in individual life.¹⁴ Social circumstance is an integral part of individual life and must be worked with, not rejected.

Beyond this his political perspective concerns the dynamics of the state—the combination of forces that keeps it operating. The most vital forces are the creative minorities and they must have the freedom to develop, but no man nor group must be invested with omnipotence. The perspectivism of Ortega indicates that the state must be very much the creature of its subjects, and that it has no mission apart from maintaining the best possible conditions for vital life. This is not a philosophy of romantic nationalism nor of existentialist anarchism, but an assertion of independence from society and the state as the overlords of existence. The role of the state in preserving the order and movement among men is affirmed and the appropriate form of organization of society to achieve this purpose is indicated. While Ortega is pessimistic about the current condition of society, he does not find this sufficient cause for despair.

There is value in Ortega's perspective for those who are concerned with the justification of constitutional democracy because within it are arrayed in a favorable light the major tenets of democratic thought: individual worth, freedom of expression, individual and social creativity, and the limitation of political power over the individual. In essence what is democratic in Ortega is his estimate of human nature and individual worth. What is aristocratic is his contempt for those who abdicate their originality. And his significance for modern political thought is his integration of romantic individualism with the need for a dynamic, creative state.

¹⁴ See Janet Weiss, "Presence and Absence of Existentialism in Spain," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XV (December, 1954), pp. 180-81.