

Perspicuity and Existential Alertness in José Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting*

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JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET BEGINS *Meditations on Hunting* by inquiring about the nature of hunting. He poses the question: What kind of occupation is hunting?¹ In itself, this is an innocuous query. Animals hunt. Ortega cites the hierarchy of animal hunting, from the largest and most powerful predators, to minuscule and stealthy insets. Animals hunt to attain food and to protect their territory. Man hunts for nutritional needs, and in recent times, also as a past time.

The Spanish philosopher wrote *Meditations on Hunting* as a prologue to *Veinte años de caza mayor (Twenty Years of Big-Game Hunting)*, a book that his friend, Edward, Count Yebes, published in 1943. Ortega used the opportunity to write an essay that would expand his views on man, which he refers to as an extra-natural being. Man is extra-natural because, while man has a relationship with his physical circumstance, this is not the only factor that defines man. In *Meditations on Hunting* we are reminded that a life worth living is a life that is alert to itself. Being alert to one's existence should not be confused with self-consciousness, though. This kind of alertness is a form of existential authenticity that requires man to sustain a sense of awe and wonder about his own existence and the world that surrounds us. The life-long strain that this demands of man, I refer to as existential alertness. This intensity of vital reflection is fueled by a form of perspicuity that never allows human existence to become too comfortable and conformist; to the point of acting as a detriment to self-reflection. I will argue that existential alertness is an existential category that Ortega's work illuminates in a manner that only a few thinkers have ever entertained.

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting*. (New York: Scribner's and Sons 1986).

Many people think of hunting today as being one activity among many others that man can choose from. Ortega counters this impression by reminding the reader that hunting was originally a necessity, a human response to early man's brutal circumstances in pre-history. Early man's ability to hunt, I contend, depended on his spatial-temporal savvy and alertness. In addition to this, as a form of doing battle with human reality, hunting demanded that early man turn his alertness into perspicuity. The Latin *perspicuitās* means to «see through», to possess clear insight and judgment. Thus, existentially speaking, perspicuity entails seeing through reality. This, then, is the essence of perspicuity that defines man's ability to find coherence in daily experience.

Ortega's philosophical pre-occupation in *Meditations on Hunting* is not hunting as a human activity; rather, the book is an attempt to answer the philosophical anthropological question: What is man? This vital concern that makes itself present throughout Ortega's work is in keeping with the existential orientation of most of his philosophical writing. Early in the text Ortega suggests that mankind has one fundamental and thus essential occupation, that is, to live as an alert being. Alertness and perspicuity are human traits that early man developed in order to assuage the assault of his brutish existence. This is what Ortega identifies as the great virtue of hunting, especially in pre-historic times. It is rare indeed to witness a twentieth-century thinker that turns alertness into an ontological-existential category. This is the case because Ortega's philosophy has much to contribute to natural psychology. That is, the innate disposition of some individuals to see through the veil of appearance that often obscures man's relationship to natural processes and other people. This human attribute is an essential component in valuation of human reality.

Undoubtedly, early man hunted for survival, not sport. Man's existence in pre-history was difficult. For early man, every meal depended on his ability to 'transform' himself into an animal that became a witness to the animal world from the inside out. In order to survive early man needed to complement the animals that it attempted to hunt or capture. Yet the harshness of early man's brutal life is not apparent in the life of animals, Ortega suggests. Instead, the reality of early man's brutal existence was encapsulated in existential concerns that remain representative of modern man's defining suit. In other words, the existential categories «I», «They», «We», and «World» do not exist in the animal kingdom. What man refers to as the «world» is simply the local environment for animals. In reference to the animal world, any talk of environment, eco-system and other related terms, is to be understood in human terms. That is, as

personification. For man, the locality of our immediate surroundings signals a profounder level of engagement with that which is other than «I». For man, this other than I reality even includes time. This is because human life is more than mere biological life. According to Ortega, human life transcends the biological, thus enabling man to cultivate an inner dimension that is aware of itself as being more than life. This condition allows man to exist as a biographical being that participates in life; as a being that can know existence from the inside out. This means that early man needed to remain alert at all times in order to preserve his well-being. Early man could not afford to allow his ability to perceive danger to languish. Individuals who did so perished. Ultimately, the stress brought on by this enlivened sense of living in perpetual danger necessitated a level of self-reflection that, while modern man will never fully comprehended, enabled early man to reason about his surroundings, and his place in it. This created a level of alertness that required great perspicuity. This venerable psychical trait allowed early man to anticipate the hunt with greater efficiency and accuracy than previously. The cultivation of perspicuity granted early man an ability to see through the early stages of developing situations. This, in turn, gave man several options as to the possible direction that any given situation could take. This proactive glance, this anticipatory form of looking, is actually not looking at all, but seeing in the round, as it were.

Ortega makes use of his reflection on hunting in pre-history in order to offer a philosophical analysis of the nature of man and his need to cultivate self-reflection. He argues that man's superiority over nature is his ability to see through, and hence anticipate the limitations that nature imposes on reason. This is the kind of perspicuity that man needed to develop in order to survive. This is one reason why Ortega argues that man is extra-natural. Human existence, he tells us, is informed by existential categories that are not found in the animal world. Ortega equates the life of early man with hunting. This means that early man could not sit on his laurels. Whatever he accomplished today, tomorrow he was challenged by his circumstances again.

It is important to realize that the Spanish thinker explores these existential concerns in *Meditations on Hunting* in the same essayistic manner and with the same intensity that he addresses philosophical questions in other works: Ortega never allows his writing to become consumed by hairsplitting. He eschews the abuse of neo-logisms. There is nothing of the analytic thinker in this philosopher of life. Ortega is never pedantic. Instead, his conversational style engages ideas with the knowledge that philosophical thought cannot be

exhausted in any one essay or book. While discovering that these important concerns are essential aspects of man's ability to reflect about the nature of existence, existentially speaking, from the inside out; Ortega remains cognizant that pedantry is detrimental to philosophical reflection.

While Ortega briefly describes early man's need to hunt, he quickly turns his attention to hunting in modern times, which he refers to as insipid: «In our time —which is a rather stupid time— hunting is not considered a serious matter».² This statement sets up Ortega's main thesis in *Meditation on Hunting*. That is, man in modern life must keep himself occupied given that Statism and bureaucratization have made modern life empty of meaning and purpose. It is also important to realize that Ortega views diversion as being more important than politics. Man must find a diversion, otherwise modernity, which he considers to be a demoralized historical epoch in *The Revolt of the Masses*, will make man wholly inauthentic through *alteración* (inauthenticity).³

Ortega is adamant in his understanding that human beings are conscious of the fleeting nature of human existence. This is why occupation is the essence of life, especially in the form of vocation. *Ensimismamiento* (authenticity) makes life worth living because it serves as the foundation of happiness. Man's having to make choices —in terms of what occupation to dedicate life to— is one way that Ortega entertains the idea of free will. Because man must forge a life for himself, life is a *que-hacer* that defines our existence. Ortega understands that man is often preoccupied with chores that people never choose on their own terms. How to embrace or reject these chores determines man's ability to be happy.

Ortega recognizes that human life is replete with strife. Life offers man little security. Yet vital reason does enable man to work within the limitations that human reality imposes. Ortega argues that man can achieve a measure of transcendence. This is the case because, as an extra-natural being, man is future-oriented. Anticipating what is and is not possible within the limitations that time sets for man is commensurate with man's existential perspicuity. Like

² Ortega y Gasset, p. 19. Ortega goes on to add: «It is thought that enough has been said on the subject by calling it a diversion, presupposing, of course, that diversion as such, is not a serious matter».

³ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. (New York: W.W. & Norton 1993), p. 136. Ortega is clear as to what he means by demoralization: «An 'unemployed' existence is a worse negation of life than death itself. Because to live means to have something definite to do —a mission to fulfill— and in the measure in which we avoid setting our life to something, we make it empty». Ortega expands on this: «Human life, by its very nature, has to be dedicated to something, an enterprise glorious or humble, a destiny illustrious or trivial» (p. 141).

hunting, which takes great effort, a thoughtful existence forces man to cultivate character and attain nobility of spirit. The other alternative is to live a life of *alteración* that is consumed by inauthentic, pseudo-values that originate in inertial thinking. Ortega argues that the latter is the life of animals, a mere biological reality that is conditioned by brute environmental forces. This is a form of life that lacks freedom and therefore only reacts to material processes. The opposite of effort, then, Ortega tells us, is inertia: «And if the traditional sentiment whispered: “To live is to feel oneself limited, and therefore to have to count with that which limits us”, the newest voice shouts: “To live is to meet with no limitation whatever and, consequently, to abandon oneself calmly to one's self”». ⁴

Ortega makes an innovative connection between happiness and the alert man in *Meditations on Hunting*. He argues that happiness is grounded in *ensimismamiento*. Existential alertness enables man to attain authenticity because it keeps man from being controlled by his circumstances. This entails that an authentic life fights off objectification in its many variegated forms. Hence, Ortega's dictum that «to save myself I must save my circumstances» is the recognition that man is an extra-natural being who is endowed with an inner, self-reflecting dimension. In terms of early man, the hunter saves himself by paying close attention to animal behavior and anticipating patterns that he can then utilize to his advantage in the hunt. We ought not to forget that the hunt, for early man, means life or death. Here, Ortega is addressing early man as a hunter-gatherer. Available anthropological evidence suggests that early man could not have flourished for too long strictly as a vegetarian. The presumption is that a large caloric intake was necessary in order to sustain the amount of energy needed for a frantic nomadic existence. Given the absence of substantial physical data in this area of study, the best that any modern thinker can contribute is a reasoned or reasonable account of the life of early man. This is possible by paying close attention to the ebb and flow of universal values throughout time. It is important to clarify that Ortega's *Meditations on Hunting* concentrates on early man, especially as concerns hunting. The development of agriculture would in turn signal a more sedentary life in established settlements. Yet this still begs the question whether a strictly vegetarian diet was sufficient to sustain health for longer life. A mixed diet makes greater historical sense.

⁴ Ortega y Gasset, p. 61.

Ortega suggests that reason alone does not make hunting progress. On the contrary, reason can stifle instinct, which is a hunter's greatest asset. When Ortega writes about reason being too overbearing, he means man's often ill-advised penchant to over intellectualize life. Man's best tool to counter abstraction is vital reason. Vital reason, in hunting and life, fuels man's capacity to remain alert and thus safeguard man's necessary perspicuity in attempting to make human experience coherent. This is one reason why Ortega argues that «the mission of thought is to construct archetypes».⁵

The hunter exercises a form of reason that is rooted in and which serves life. That is, the reality of the hunt and the efficacy of having to attain food make it so that hunting is understood as a matter of life and death for early man. This is why hunting is man's first occupation.⁶

Hunting for survival forced early man to realize that life is a perpetual task, a *que-hacer*, or what Ortega refers to life as perpetual having-to-do. While man encounters problems in life that he must address, Ortega's philosophical reflection concerns life itself, as a problem for reflection. No doubt, this is a reoccurring existential category that informs Ortega's work. Ortega does not offer a sentimental glance at hunting in pre-history. On the contrary, hunting is the quintessential form of life for early man because of the demands it makes on man. Existentially speaking, the problems that man in pre-history needed to solve were no different than the daily concerns that modern man must confront. The passage of time and what this means to our lives, man's regard for danger, sustenance and the inevitability of death; these are universal concerns. What is not universal about man's problems is the manner and degree of every person's having-to-do. Because every life is a perspective upon the universe, as Ortega contends, the responsibility of every person is to bring coherence to our experience as differentiated persons. Ortega writes: «Life is, then, essentially a task and an open problem —a tangle of problems that must be resolved, in the stormy plot of which, like it or not, we flail about shipwrecked».⁷

⁵ Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting*, p. 87. Ortega explains: «Once understood in its exemplary form, that reality is also elucidated in its obscure, confused, and deficient forms, and these are the more frequent forms».

⁶ Ortega y Gasset, p. 102. «Hunting was, then, the first occupation, man's first work and craft. It is exceedingly important to remember this. This venatory occupation was unavoidable and practically the only one, and as the center and root of existence it ruled, oriented, and organized human life completely – its acts and its ideas, its technology and society».

⁷ Ortega y Gasset, p. 12. Ortega's thought on the nature of progress is enlightening for several reasons. One of these has to do with the assumption that because progress is to take place in the future, human problems will one

Early man's hunting prescience included patience, stealth, quiet waiting for animals to appear and, most important of all: looking. Yet looking for Ortega is not what it appears to be. While looking is often considered to be a latent activity, as in the case of a glance, this is not what Ortega means by looking. Instead, for early man looking was a patent activity, Ortega argues. Ortega's idea of looking is tied to the ancient Greek idea of ἀλήθεια (alētheia): truth as revealing–un–revealing. Truth makes great demands on man. This is the case because truth, following in Parmenides' definition «likes to hide». Truth demands that man make an active search for it. ἀλήθεια does not reveal itself to the passive onlooker. Ortega asserts that for Paleolithic man, living is equivalent to hunting. Yet even hunting requires much diligence. This is attained by a form of reason that Ortega thinks of as being vital in orientation. Vital reason is lived reason, not pure or abstract reason. Pure reason belongs to the realm of ideas, which are ultimately unconquerable, in the sense that ideas cannot be exhausted.

In order for early man to become a successful hunter, he needed to remain alert. Ortega believes that early man likely learned this from animals. In other words, in order to successfully hunt or catch an animal man in pre–history needed to imitate the behavior of animals. This was a simple question of necessity.

In Ortega's estimation, the form of looking that defines alertness is the perspicacious look. Merely glancing at the world and human reality with vacant intent and the inability to process experience does not render man truth. Perspicuity is seeing through reality, not glancing at reality. The former is the activity of reflective persons while the latter merely depicts a lazy sensualism.⁸ Alertness, as far as Ortega is concerned, informs man's ability to extrapolate a

day be solved. Another oversight of the idea of progress is that man, as a collective, can possess a collective view as to the nature of purpose and meaning in human existence. He writes: «If those past problems were of the same caliber as ours, we could take advantage, without further ado, of the solutions provided. Then it would be possible to inscribe our existence within the orbit of antiquity, with the advantage of already having, thanks to that past, our problematic situation resolved through anticipation. That is to say, history would be stabilized; life would have lost its dramatic substance of open enigma and unanswered urgency; over the planet there would have surged a reality radically different from life, with opposite characteristics —to wit, beatitude».

⁸ Ortega y Gasset, p. 130. Ortega further elucidates: «Thus he needs to prepare an attention of a different and superior style – an attention which does not consist in riveting itself on the presumed but consists precisely in not presuming anything and in avoiding inattentiveness. It is a «universal» attention, which does not inscribe itself on any point and tries to be on all points. There is a magnificent term for this, one that still conserves all its zest of vivacity and imminence; alertness. The hunter is the alert man» (p. 130).

broad reality from a field of limited information. Thus, to cite the poet William Blake, the alert man does not see with the eye but rather sees through it.⁹ This is existential perspicuity at its finest.

The existential alertness that Ortega presents the reader with in *Meditations on Hunting* is also found in his other works. For instance, the mass man that he describes in *The Revolt of the Masses* is the type of individual who has traded in existential strife for fashionable, inertial thinking. It is not difficult to realize that the strain necessary to sustain existential alertness throughout life is a form of existential authenticity. *Meditations on Hunting* is as much about hunting as it is about hunting for the nature and essence of human reality. This existential trek through human experience has always been a solitary task. Ortega arrives at this insightful conclusion through reflection in an exploratory, essayistic manner. The latter can be a dangerous task, for more often than not, reality resists all our attempts at discernment. In addition, when ἀλήθεια does yield its fruit, this begets subsequent truths that often lead not to epistemological skepticism but to metaphysical disenchantment in discovering that reality is not easily corralled by human passion, whim or fashion.

Hence, in concluding, the existential alertness affords man the only opportunity it has to control the aspects of human existence that man has power over. In no uncertain terms, Ortega argues in *Meditations on Hunting* that existential alertness is the vehicle that delivers human existence beyond nature. Existential alertness enables man to attain self-reflection, a reflective act that distinguishes human experience from that of the lower animals. In pre-history man hunted for food. This, Ortega contends, kept man busy with what can be considered essential, not superfluous thinking. Modern man, on the other hand, has lost his instinct for danger through his embrace of inertial thinking. Today hunting is enjoyed by many people as a sport because it makes man re-connect with his past. Early man, who many people like to think of as natural man, was alert to a degree that modern man has never had the need to equal given our physical comfort and conformism, which throw a veil over man's existential security.

⁹ William Blake, *Selected Poetry and Prose*. (New York: The Modern Library 1953), p. 324. In «The Everlasting Gospel» Blake writes: «This life's dim Windows of the Soul/Distorts the Heavens from Pole to Pole/And leads you to Believe a Lie/When you see with, not through, the Eye».

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