

Ortega y Gasset on Metaphysics

Ortega y Gasset sobre la metafísica

PEDRO BLAS GONZÁLEZ

Recibido: 5–Diciembre–2017 | Aceptado: 21–Diciembre–2017 | Publicado: 22–Diciembre–2017

© Studia Humanitatis – Universidad de Salamanca 2017

Unas lecciones de metafísica es el testamento de José Ortega y Gasset para la metafísica en relación con el anhelo existencial. Aunque Ortega escribe sobre metafísica en otros de sus trabajos, es en *Unas lecciones de metafísica* donde él define la metafísica como surgiendo de la inmediata necesidad (existencial) del hombre de encontrar coherencia en la existencia humana individual, que el hombre experimenta como un ser «naufragado» en el cosmos. La reflexión metafísica apunta a establecer coherencia y sentido en la vida humana. Como resultado de la inquietud existencial, Ortega argumenta que la metafísica es la piedra angular de la reflexión filosófica seria para las personas que «lo necesitan».

Metafísica · Existencialismo · Fenomenología · Filosofía Continental.

Some Lessons in Metaphysics is José Ortega y Gasset's testament to metaphysics in relation to existential longing. While Ortega writes about metaphysics in other of his works, it is in *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* that he defines metaphysics as springing from man's immediate (existential) necessity to find coherence in individual human existence, which man experiences as a «shipwrecked» being in the cosmos. Metaphysical reflection aims to establish coherence and meaning in human life. As a result of existential inquietude, Ortega argues that metaphysics is the cornerstone of thoughtful philosophical reflection for people who «need it».

Metaphysics · Phenomenology · Existentialism · Continental Philosophy.

P. Blas González (✉)
Barry University, EUA
email: gonz7750@bellsouth.net



Ortega y Gasset on Metaphysics

PEDRO BLAS GONZÁLEZ

RTEGA Y GASSET ARGUES THAT METAPHYSICS serves as the ground of philosophical reflection because metaphysics is a response to man's immediate, thus existential concerns. While science and other disciplines spring from mediate necessity, that is, from the contingencies that man encounters in the world, metaphysics is the manifestation of existential inquietude. Metaphysics is the only adequate tool that enables man to address the pressing concerns of lived inner reality, what Ortega refers to as «necessity born within me».¹

Ortega's *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* sets out to explain the paradoxical nature of metaphysics. The lessons that he offers are not bogged down by pedagogical and pedantic hairsplitting, the kind of sterile stuff found in the vast majority of contemporary books of philosophy. Missing from this formidable tome are incessant references to other thinkers, as well as historical and epistemological explanations of the development of metaphysics. Instead, as is the case in much of Ortega's work, the existential questions that accost us are evaluated as informing the life of concrete, proto first-man individuals. The fourteen lessons that make up the book form a series of elegant arguments that demonstrate the fundamental role that metaphysics plays in human existence. Ortega ends the book by establishing a life-as-vital-reason thesis that bridges the idealist and realist perspectives on human reality: «The indubitable reality is not, then, the reality of what is there, but the reality of what stands before me for the very reason that it is here before me».²

Vital-reason is Ortega's response to the philosophical materialism of positivism, what he calls the «imperialism of physics», which leaves no room for the cultivation of personhood. The essence of vital-reason is that it is a

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), p. 16.

² Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, p. 141.

philosophy of existence. That is, it posits that the core of human existence is dominated not by objects and the physical processes that regulate them, but is made coherent through existential categories. What is the purpose of philosophical reflection, if not to understand the nature of differentiation, as this finds its ultimate manifestation in individual human persons?

After returning from studying neo-Kantianism with Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen in Marburg, Ortega began to react negatively to the straitjacket of neo-Kantianism. His response to the over-intellectualizing of neo-Kantian thought culminated in the creation of the philosophy of vital-reason. Ortega argues that pure reason has a place in the laboratory, as it were, but is an inadequate vehicle to explain questions of human existence. Hairsplitting, he realized, is detrimental to thoughtful philosophical reflection, especially when it becomes apparent to thinkers that the fruits of their reflection must be put to work in the service of life. In truth, readers of Ortega's work find that the Spanish thinker had little patience for pedantry, especially in a discipline as essential to human thought as philosophy. Metaphysics, Ortega explains, is not a luxury, but a necessity for reflective people to live contented lives. This is why Ortega suggests that metaphysics only exists for people who need it.

Ortega contends that metaphysics is not like other disciplines that are fashioned and nourished by the demands made on man by the world. Metaphysics is not just another field of study. So, what then is metaphysics? Ortega's answer to this question is rather curious. It is also anathema to the goals of today's education industry. In effect, metaphysics is not a discipline that one can study as, say, biology, chemistry or ornithology. These other disciples only concern themselves with the question of what there is in the cosmos. Traditional subjects of study, Ortega argues, entice students that may indeed enjoy the nature of study, but who do not do so from an existential need. The latter illustrates the difference between what can be referred to as positive fields of study, which address technical questions, and metaphysics, which Ortega suggests originates in man's finding himself shipwrecked in the world.

Some Lessons in Metaphysics begins with the blunt assertion that study, in many cases, is a deception. Ortega utilizes this bold affirmation to establish the nature of metaphysics as an existential pursuit. This means that the reflective activity that metaphysics entails cannot be taught, only its trajectory in human history. In addition, this enables Ortega to convey his conviction that metaphysics cannot, in good faith, become subsumed by epistemology. Epistemological

questions, the kinds of concerns and interests that lead to science and technology, and that in worst case scenarios become mired in scientism and technicism, are questions that man entertains from mediate necessity. These types of questions say nothing about man's existential predicament. Mediate concerns take an inventory of what there is in the cosmos. For instance, mediate concerns address physical processes that relate to biological life, not biographical existence.³

On the other hand, metaphysics addresses questions of the nature of «why?» Metaphysics locates the individual's mode of existence in a vast field of objects, sensations, and other people that must be made coherent if man is to understand the order of human reality. This brings us to the basis of metaphysics and what this human endeavor means. *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* establishes Ortega's idea of immediate/mediate necessity in relation to *reparar* (to be conscious of)/ *contar con* (to count on). Because, according to Ortega, man encounters himself in the world as shipwrecked, metaphysics serves as the vehicle that man uses to orient himself in the world.

The text of *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* is a compilation of lectures that Ortega gave between 1932 and 1933, while serving as the Chair of Metaphysics at the University of Madrid. A close reading of Ortega's work demonstrates that his conception of metaphysics is the foundation of his philosophy. Because metaphysics acts a form of philosophical anthropology, Ortega contends that it is generous to describe man as *Homo sapiens*. The desire to know, he tells us, is not a moniker that accurately describes man as a species. Ortega suggests this in many of his works. For instance, in *The Origin of Philosophy* he argues that philosophy is an activity that history appropriates only from the outside. That is, as a historical fact. This means that the history of philosophy is what most people think of when they think of philosophical activity. Instead, in its infancy philosophy came about as the result of a pressing existential need. Ortega refers to the existential condition responsible for philosophical reflection and its fruits as pertaining to an inward activity.⁴

³ What will be the reception today to Ortega's assertion that study, for the most part, is technical in nature—a mediate concern—and that it can no longer be an immediate, existential concern in the twenty-first century? This is in part due to man's demoralization. Ortega's bold statement warns post-modern man about the abysmal future of education and study in a highly politicized and radicalized milieu circa 2017.

⁴ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Origin of Philosophy*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), p. 64. Ortega explains: «But no sooner did philosophizing become a repetitive occurrence, an habitual occupation, and people began seeing it from the outside – the way people always see everything – than

Metaphysics is existential reflection that man initiates after discovering the fundamental character of human experience as being shipwrecked. The nature of man as shipwrecked in the cosmos is an indication that man's existential inquietude cannot be quenched through social-political means. Metaphysical reflection aims to establish coherence in human life. As such, metaphysics has human security as its target. This is what immediate necessity means; a need that motivates some people to do battle, as it were, with the nature of human existence. The correlation between immediate/mediate necessity and *reparar/contar con* is established by Ortega by citing a direct line of connectivity between immediate/mediate necessity at a metaphysical level and *reparar/contar con* as existential concern.

While man always finds himself in the world in a given circumstance (mediate necessity) at all times, Ortega believes that pressing existential need makes metaphysics a necessity for some individuals. He suggests that the type of existential concerns that lead to the creation of metaphysics at the individual level is not felt by the majority of people. Again, this is why Ortega argues that metaphysics exists for people who need it.

Mediate necessity is characterized as belonging to matter of fact problems that man encounters in everyday life. Because these matters of fact concerns address themselves to man from a conditioned existence, mediate necessity sways man into complacency—the antithesis of existential reflection. Yet it is important to clarify that mediate necessity does not connote a negative experience, according to Ortega. For instance, a young child can be lost to the world in their lived experience of games and play. This is no different than the world of work for adults. However, Ortega argues that the security that children, and especially adults, experience is fragile. It is upon the disruption of this security, what Ortega suggests is a false sense of security, that man must scurry in order to make sense of his experience. This is equally a question of temperament. The young child can become reflective while at play, given an innate capacity to not take the world that surrounds him for granted. Man's mediate reality is pre-reflective experience that man relies on, that is, which takes objective reality for granted (*contar con*).

Besides being existential in nature, Ortega's conception of metaphysics also addresses phenomenological questions. We have already seen how man always

the situation changed. No longer was the philosopher alone with the phenomena in the intimacy of his philosophizing, but in addition to being a philosopher, he became a public figure, like a magistrate, a priest, a doctor, a merchant, a soldier, a jester, an executioner».

finds himself in a circumstance that we must address. However, circumstance is not a sociological category, where circumstance is viewed as pertaining to man's place in society. On the contrary, Ortega argues that what is at stake in any thoughtful philosophical reflection is the nature of man. The surest way to say something substantial about man is by engaging in existential reflection. Ortega calls the latter a process of thought that attempts to know the self from the inside out.

From an objective and detached perspective, man is said to be in a circumstance. But what does this mean from the vital, hence existential perspective of the person who knows that he is in a circumstance? The question of being in a circumstance is encountered phenomenologically. To be in a circumstance means that one is aware, at some level, of the circumstantial nature of human existence, otherwise, man's circumstance would be no different than that of a wave in a raging storm at sea, a placid mountain lake or a tidal pool. Hence, the phenomenological dimension of the nature of metaphysics that Ortega explores comes about as man's reaction to his surroundings at a conscious level, not as mere stimuli in animal life. This is one reason why only individual persons can address the question of man's existential standing in the cosmos.

While Ortega writes that man has no nature, this assertion is not as clear-cut as it appears. Even if man has no nature, he still has to fend for himself, existentially speaking. The reflective act of fending for oneself, according to Ortega, is the ground of metaphysics, and as such this is the nature, or vocational calling of some individuals. Furthermore, Ortega questions what the objective nature of reality must be in the absence of man's perceiving it. This is a phenomenological question that man asks about the nature of the world. However, on closer inspection we realize that the question is ultimately about the nature of man, not the world. Upon finding ourselves in the world, a person may come to discover the «I» that defines him. Yet Ortega also believes that this is not the case for all people.

Ortega asserts that man does not encounter the world as a whole, but rather as my immediate surroundings. His contention is that people do not discover the world as the totality that one encounters in astronomy or geology books. Rather we encounter parcels of reality that surround me —snippets of reality that affect me directly. If the latter is true, then what do people find when encountering the «I» of consciousness. For some people, the latter discovery is

experienced as a vague sense of being other than the world.⁵ Mediate necessity discovers the world through a revelation of being in it. This is what Ortega means by *contar con* (to count on).

The interplay of existential reflection, what Ortega means by man's need for metaphysics and phenomenological discovery of the world, is a delicate operation. What man discovers first is the world, not oneself. It is only in handling things, being with them and having to count on them in order to live our daily lives that man may arrive at the realization that he is not one of the things that make up the physical world. Yet Ortega is clear in his understanding of this phenomenon that this is not always the case. Man only notices the world when the latter fails us. That is, while we are able to count on the world—that external reality that we believe is the source of security—can I proceed about my daily living without a care. The disruption of our security—when we can no longer count on the things that surround us—is when man begins to find himself in a circumstance that beckons our attention.

As long as man does not pay attention to the world, that is, as long as we count on the security that our surroundings afford us, the world is not a problem for us. Problem in this sense means a problem to reflect upon. This sets up the paradoxical nature of phenomenology that Ortega espouses, which in turn can lead to metaphysics. The traditional phenomenological concern with the nature of objective reality is that we cannot know what the world is like when we are not perceiving it. When we do perceive it, we are now said to change the structure of reality through our perception. However, Ortega adds an intriguing twist to this phenomenological question. According to him, man counts on the world—objective reality—because it is the source of human security. This means that the world is not a problem for us existentially. Again, not being a problem of reflection for us means that I do not develop an immediate necessity to reflect on the nature of the world: my circumstance. The phenomenological question, what is the world like when I am not perceiving it? Is never posed as long as I count on the world. When we do turn inwards and

⁵ Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lesson in Metaphysics*, p. 60. The Spanish thinker writes: «When man finds himself, he does not do this in and by himself, apart and alone; on the contrary, he always finds himself within another thing which, in turn, is made up of many other things. He finds himself surrounded by what he is not himself, by a surrounding, by a circumstance, by a landscape. In the vital idiom of our most common life, we usually, and in general, call this circumstance the world. Let us say, then, that always when I meet myself, I find that self in the world; but again, one must be careful not to give this term 'world' any learned meaning, but hold to the commonest one: 'world' means everything about me, everything that surrounds me. This means that on finding myself, I find myself a prisoner».

reflect, we do not address the world but the nature of the «I» that I have discovered. This is the existential and metaphysical component of human existence that the phenomenological question that *reparar* (to be conscious of) sets up. The latter comes about as a result of immediate necessity. In existential terms, immediate necessity is what Ortega means by authenticity.

The opposite pole of this conundrum is that when man finds himself counting on reality, we experience life as *alteración*. That is, we are living outside ourselves inauthentically. According to Ortega, it is necessary for man to take a respite from the world. This entails that human existence is only encountered authentically through *ensimismamiento*. This act of self-reflection is the fruit of discovering the world as a problem for reflection. Paradoxically, life as *ensimismamiento* is life-as-negation-of-the-world. The significance of *ensimismamiento* is that man cannot attain this state of self-reflection before confronting reality on its own terms. In Ortega's thought, *ensimismamiento* exhibits two strains. On one hand, *ensimismamiento* is attained through the non-conformist awareness of not becoming demoralized by the world and society. In this state of being man is not dominated by life as mere biology, and the passing fads of the man-made-world: society. This is what has traditionally been referred to as authenticity by existentialist thinkers. *Ensimismamiento* is attained by turning inwards in an act of introspection. Yet what this means cannot be known until immediate necessity dictates that man begins to reflect on the nature of the self—what is not the world.⁶ Another component of the paradox of *ensimismamiento* is that the greater the comfort that man finds in his surroundings, the less that he is willing to embrace immediate necessity.

The latter has great implications for ingenuity, invention, values and culture. While Ortega's analysis primarily concerns the nature of man's need for metaphysics, there remains the question of man's scientific endeavors. While science may not be responsible for metaphysics—the opposite is actually the case—science originates in the process of addressing some technical aspect

⁶ *Ortega y Gasset, Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, p. 87. «But suddenly the light goes out, and I, who was at that moment occupied with the earth and not the light, stop what I am doing when it lighting ceases and set to work with the light. I need to go on reading, and the light denies me its habitual service. My life, which consisted then of reading, is disturbed and set at naught by the lack of light; it is converted into something else, into another situation, another life made up of not being able to read—because there is no light—a life made up of negation. The negation of my life which I find in my life, this not being able to be what I need to be, namely, a reader, makes me recognize that I am not coinciding with my environment (my circumstance), that this is different from me, that I cannot 'count on it' that it is strange and alien to me. In short, that I am estranged».

of the world as physical reality. While this problem may not be existential in orientation, it does originate in a form of practical necessity —mediate necessity— that can only be assuaged when a solution to the problem is sought.⁷

In concluding, while philosophical reflection is indeed as Kant argues an «infinite synthesis», this ought not to be taken to mean that knowledge is relative. On the contrary, what genuine philosophical reflection has discovered in over twenty five hundred years is that human reality is made coherent through a given number of metaphysical propositions that light the way for the attainment of truth. Fundamental propositions inform, or point out man's deformation of reality, as the case may be, as these are tested in human reality. If human history can be said to be the laboratory for the truth of fundamental principles to play out, lamentably individual human existence, on occasion, serves as its guinea pigs.

Ortega is correct that metaphysics is the fuel that runs human existence. This is the case because the radical reality that man must ultimately confront is that he is a created being who finds himself in the midst of the cosmos. This realization —Ortega is correct on this count— means that man has the burden of seeking cohesion in existence. Yet coherence in human reality cannot only be sought on intellectual and scientific grounds. It is for this reason that all attempts to reduce man to a nihilistic, biological entity will continue to fail. Thoughtful philosophical reflection is a constructive enterprise that struggles to attain truth, regardless of how difficult these may be to digest. Philosophies of negation act as pseudo-philosophies, whose aim is not to seek cohesion in human reality, but destruction.

The gravest concern for man in the twenty-first century and beyond is how best to cultivate the different strains of being that make up a person. Post-modern philosophies of destruction cannot achieve this end. The eradication of metaphysics signals the erosion of man's ability to ground human existence in the time-tested truths exhibited by existential categories.⁸

⁷ Ortega writes in *The Origin of Philosophy*, p. 63. «What would happen to this normal, fundamental phenomenon of human life at a time when ordinary men, mass-men, become progressively petulant? As a matter of fact, something very amusing, which I have seen happen with increasing intensity and frequency, often to an astonishing extent among the younger generations: when a young person today reads and understands us, he immediately *thinks that the idea occurred to him*».

⁸ This writer's commentary on Ortega's *Some Lessons in Metaphysics* can serve a dual purpose. Besides attempting to bring Ortega's ideas on metaphysics to light for new readers of Ortega, this commentary also tries to bring contemporary relevance to Ortega's concern with the nature of metaphysics. Part of

this relevance is Ortega's contrast between study of ... and study that originates in existential reflection. While the education industry is fueled by the former, it nonetheless, is embarrassed by the existential and intuitive nature of the latter. Because the nature of genuine philosophical reflection eschews positivism, the education establishment has relegated the latter to the order of a trivial pursuit. Alfred North Whitehead reminds us of the difference between thinkers and scholars, when he writes in *Modes of Thought* that «the scholar investigates human thought and human achievement, armed with a dictionary» (p. 173).

REFERENCIAS

- ORTEGA Y GASSET, José (1967). *The Origin of Philosophy*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- ORTEGA Y GASSET, José (1969). *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- WHITEHEAD, Alfred North (1938). *Modes of Thought*. New York: Macmillan.



PEDRO BLAS GONZÁLEZ, es Profesor de Filosofía en la Barry University, EUA. Doctor en Filosofía [PhD] en la DePaul University. Sus principales áreas de interés se centran en la filosofía iberoamericana, el idealismo alemán, la metafísica, la fenomenología y la filosofía de la historia; y más concretamente en la relación que existe entre la subjetividad, autoconocimiento, autonomía personal y filosofía. En sus principales publicaciones se cuentan: *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2005); *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2005); *Ortega's «The Revolt of the Masses» and the Triumph of the New Man* (New York: Algora Publishing Algora Publishing, 2007); *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay* (Moorpark, California Floricanto Press, 2007); y, *Philosophical Perspectives on Cinema* (Lockport, NY: Lincoln Publishing, 2011).

DIRECCIÓN POSTAL: Department of Theology and Philosophy, Barry University, 11300 NE 2nd Avenue, Miami Shores, FL, United States of America. e-mail (✉): gonz7750@bellsouth.net

CÓMO CITAR ESTE TRABAJO: BLAS GONZÁLEZ, Pedro. «Ortega y Gasset on Metaphysics». *Disputatio. Philosophical Research Bulletin* 6, nº 7 (2017): pp. 199–209.