


Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Existence in *The Modern Theme*

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The man of the West is undergoing a process of radical disorientation because he no longer knows by what stars he is to guide his life.¹
Ortega y Gasset.

§1. The Roots of Ortega's Philosophy of Existence

RTEGA BEGINS *The Modern Theme* (*El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*) by citing the importance of the concept of generations in human history and ends it with an exposition of man's perception of reality.² These two concepts are related because a generation is the interplay of the individual and collective poles of man in the world. Ortega refers to different generations as varieties of the human race. This is indicative of his allegiance to individual existence as opposed to collective life. *The Modern Theme* is one of Ortega's first works. Yet it contains many of the dominant themes of his later thought. The trajectory of his thought demonstrates the foundational importance of *The Modern Theme* to his ideas on philosophy of history, ratio-vitalism and the existential categories that inform his work.

Diligent readers of Ortega's philosophy realize that *The Modern Theme* establishes a line of thinking that is pinned between vital-reason as lived-experience and a positivistic worldview that promises man a utopian explanation of human reality. These are two opposing metaphysical stances against human contingency; Ortega saw positivism as destructive of man's capacity for self-reflection. The latter, he accurately predicted in several of his works, including *The Revolt of the Masses*, would become the dominant weltanschauung in the twentieth century, especially through specialization and the disproportionate growth of scientism in relation to man's existential security. Ortega articulates this belief throughout his work. Already present in *Meditations on Quixote* is his

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*. (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 79.

exploration of the contrast between profundity and superficiality; latent and patent aspects of truths. *Meditations on Quixote* is an existential reflection on the individual vis-à-vis the cosmos. In that masterful work, Ortega tells us that “Individual life, the immediate, the circumstance, are different names for the same thing: those parts of life from which their inner spirit, their *logos*, has not yet been extracted.”²

Meditations on Quixote addresses the danger of confusing the forest for the trees. In that work, profundity and superficiality in human reality speak to man’s capacity to distinguish appearance and reality. Man experiences life as dynamic, though transparent to itself. Ortega argues that truth addresses individuals as existential agents that seek fidelity with lived-experience. While avoiding the neo-logisms and pedantry that academics have come to accept since the publication of *Meditations on Quixote* in 1914, Ortega launched a critique of rationalism, for he thought of it as becoming a substitute for biographical existence. The latter is one of the terms that Ortega uses to describe man as a metaphysical/existential being: “Erudition, then, occupies the outskirts of science because it is limited to accumulating facts, while philosophy represents its central aspiration, because it is pure synthesis.”³ Ortega refers to this form of synthesis as understanding.

While many readers know what reason and rationalism mean in Ortega’s work, the same cannot be said of biographical existence. This is the crux of the matter in *The Modern Theme*. By 1923, the year *The Modern Theme* was published, Ortega understood that science and positivism attempt to explain the universe, including human life, in mechanical terms. The Spanish thinker realized that in order to rein in the passionate and bloated confidence of hyper-rationalism — this is one of the many ironies that Ortega points out — it was necessary to understand life as biographical existence, not merely biological life. Biographical existence is an existential category that Ortega first formulated in an essay published in 1910, “Adan en el Paraíso” (“Adam in Paradise”) and *Meditaciones del Quijote* (*Meditations on Quixote*). Biographical life is a fundamental existential category in Ortega’s work.

§2. The Idea of Biographical Life

By arguing for a perspective of human life as extra-natural, that is, life that knows itself as existence and not merely biology, Ortega shuns the reduction of life to a

² José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), p. 43.

³ Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, p. 39.

bio-chemical process. Ortega's thought is metaphysical/existential in its ability to relate philosophical reflection to philosophical anthropology. One way to understand this is by confronting human reality through the lived-experience of individuals. Exercising subtle language and lyrical expression, Ortega shows how man has come to grow disillusioned with the utopian pretensions of positivism. Writing in the early to mid-twentieth century, Ortega predicted that this form of disillusionment would eventually asphyxiate modern man.

The Modern Theme draws a line from generations as natural-life units of human age groups, which are made up of individuals, and vital sensibility. Vital is an existential category in Ortega's thought. Neither vital as biological or vitality as vigor are appropriate interpretations of what Ortega means by vital. Instead, vital is existential because it recognizes that for biological life to know itself, it must come to terms with its own existence through self-reflection. This is a process that escapes animal and plant life. For this reason, vital in vital-reason is reason that knows itself as differentiated life as a human being. In Ortega's thought, the aforementioned is a delicate operation that cannot be relegated to theorizing, especially when describing human life in collective terms. Even at the individual level, vital-reason displays a degree of engagement with human reality that cannot supplant life with reason. This is why he writes: "What we are going to call vital sensibility is the primary phenomenon in history and the first we should have to define in order to understand a particular age."⁴ This is also why Ortega argues that history is the result of ideas, as these are the hallmark of individuals: "The active, creative nature of personality is, in fact, too evident for the collectivist picture of history to be acceptable."⁵

§3. Existential Reflection and Practical Self-Interest

Ortega's attention to the nature of differentiated life as will-driven and capable of self-reflection is a reaction to positivism. When he differentiates biological life from self-awareness as an aspect of interiority, as he does in *The Modern Theme*, Ortega is merely pointing out the obvious: "The business of thought is to reflect the world of phenomena, to adjust itself to them in a way or another: in short, to think is to think truth, just as to digest is to assimilate actuals."⁶

⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁶ Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, 38. Ortega has the following to say about the generations: "The changes in vital sensibility which are decisive in history, appear under the form of the generation. A generation is not a handful of outstanding men, nor simply a mass of men; it resembles a new integration

By suggesting that man is a thoughtful and willing being, Ortega highlights the claims made by positivism as scandalous. He further developed this idea in *The Revolt of the Masses*. The idea of man as differentiated and capable of self-awareness serves as the vehicle that makes science and positivism possible. Ortega points out that science and positivism are modalities of human existence. He refers to man's many life-modalities as having-to-do. In other words, life that recognizes itself as extra-natural, as is the case with man, fills the hours of the day by assuaging the assault of contingencies. While animal life must equally address natural necessities such as food, shelter and danger, these are not internalized as existential concerns.

When doctors describe the function and diseases of the liver, the heart or kidneys, knowledge of these organs is attained as understanding that is ultimately self-interested. It is conceivable that medical science can remain theoretical; only interested in knowledge as a sport. It is also conceivable that astrophysicists are merely interested in the laws of physics as theoretical mathematical curiosities. Even knowledge of weather patterns on planet Earth can be entertained as a theoretical form of art-for-art-sake. These possibilities can be granted to positivism, even in its most radical embodiment. However, intellectual honesty demands to know how long this form of knowledge as sport can sustain itself before theoretical and intellectual burn-out sets in. The aforementioned exhaustion becomes a form of disillusionment that undermines man's grasp of human reality. This stage of disillusionment naturally affects man existentially.

In addition, even if one grants the possibility of knowledge for its own sake without serving life, as Ortega suggests it must, man is still left with the reality of knowledge as a form of egoism and narcissism. No doubt, scientism and portions of modern science operate as make-work. Yet there exists an existential agent in scientific knowledge, if not its operation, that supersedes the physical laws man aims to uncover.

Meditations on Quixote is Ortega's breakout book, where he addresses man's metaphysical/existential predicament. The Spanish thinker pays attention to ontological questions. Albeit, he does so without over-intellectualizing. *Meditations on Quixote* puts on display the exploratory possibilities that essays can supply philosophy. As an essayist, Ortega follows in the tradition of thinkers like Erasmus, Montaigne and Pascal, to name a few philosophers with the gift of clear

of the social body, with its select minority and its gross multitude, launched upon the orbit of existence with a pre-established vital trajectory. The generation is a dynamic compromise between mass and individual, and is the most important conception in history. It is, so to speak, the pivot responsible for the movements of historical evolution," p. 14.

and diligent exposition. *Meditations on Quixote* does not bombard readers with clinical and overtly pedantic epistemology. Ortega's writing never falls prey to the hypothetical snares of analytic philosophers. *Meditations on Quixote* explores existential concerns, and avoids intellectual calisthenics. This is one reason he often points out Comte and other positivists in his early publications: "The ideal of the nineteenth century was realism. 'Facts, only facts,' clamors a Dickensian character in *Hard Times*. The how, not the why; the fact, not the idea, preaches August Comte."⁷

Meditations on Quixote is misleading because, while writing about Don Quijote, Ortega's main line of thinking is existential reflection in response to human existence. He does not deviate from reflection on life as lived—experience. Life as lived—experience, tragedy, and having—to—do are modes of differentiated human existence. This is one reason why he focuses on the question of 'why?' Because Ortega's main concern is ontological, he addresses the why? of human reality and how man experiences reality as lived—experience. Don Quijote is a study of interiority, as this is experienced as lived—experience. Eschewing theoretical suppositions, Ortega's depiction of Quijotismo depicts life as resistance to objectivity, and a solitary task. This is an example of life as tragedy. Everything about Quijote speaks to man as an extra—natural being that knows itself to exist in the objective world.

In his discussion of the relationship of the forest and trees — symbols of appearance and reality in the forest of the Escorial — Ortega concedes that knowledge is limited. While man can ascertain meaning through engaging with individual trees, the forest is constantly fleeing from us. Life is characterized as individual self—awareness. It is as vital—reason that life can transcend itself. However, transcendence does not mean engagement with absolute truth and understanding. This is also why individual existence is unique and non—transferable. Ultimately, man's necessity of having to confront individual existence makes life tragic.

Ortega's transition from *Meditations on Quixote* to *The Modern Theme* signals recognition of the resistance that the modern world offers the reflective life. While *Meditations on Quixote* addresses individual existence as lived—experience, *The Modern Theme* is concerned with man in the modern world. Thus, modernity is like the forest that only supplies man with complexities that evade cohesion. Beginning with *The Modern Theme*, Ortega went on to further develop his ideas on noble and mass man. One example of this is his description of noble minorities in *The Modern Theme*. From his discussion of interiority — what is essentially man's

⁷ Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, p. 163.

discovery of the nature of subjectivity — Ortega begins to concentrate on the plight of subjectivity in the world. Noble man lives a noble existence because he confronts the contingencies of life head–head on, courageously. This entails understanding that human existence cannot rely on the life of others to attain coherent knowledge of the plight of the individual.

§4. Life for the “Purpose of Being Lived.”⁸

An essential component of subjectivity (interiority) that Ortega identifies in *Meditations on Quixote* and his later work is the idea of life as circumstance. The idea of life as one of the circumstances that inform human existence plays a pivotal role in *The Modern Theme*. In that work, Ortega argues that people must cultivate the capacity to adapt to their own nature. Stated in different terms, man must appropriate their scale of possibilities and limitations. This is a response to the demands that life makes on man. Acceptance of our circumstance entails reflection on fundamental aspects of life as existence. In other words, privation of the aforementioned, as is the case in animal life, means ignorance of our personal circumstances. The latter becomes a problem when people compare their respective circumstances in society.

Ortega’s work recognizes that modernity makes living life for its own sake an unprecedented challenge. The strain between life and the positivistic underpinnings of modernity is the central component of *The Modern Theme*. The understanding of rationalism that Ortega espouses makes modernity complicit with abuse of reason through the creation of hyper–rationalism. The form of reason that Ortega promotes must work in the service of life as lived–experience. This is what he means by vital–reason.

The main problem that modernity poses for man, as Ortega suggests in *The Modern Theme*, is the question of truth. However, one must exercise caution when framing this age–old philosophical question. Ortega is not concerned with technical aspects of epistemology, especially as positivism conceives the latter. Epistemology is not a great concern of Ortega’s in *The Modern Theme*. His main focus in that work is the relationship of life as lived–experience and man’s capacity to decipher coherence in objective reality. Ortega suggests that truth is obscured by modernity. This is tragic because truth acts as the anchor of man’s capacity to appropriate human reality.

In a chapter entitled “Relativism and Rationalism” Ortega calls truth a “highly dramatic problem.” This is one indication, according to Ortega, that truth is not

⁸ Ortega y Gasset, *The Modern Theme*, p. 74.

a theoretical concern. Instead, “truth, if it is to give an adequate reflection of the nature of phenomena, must be complete in itself and invariable.”⁹ Not considered an academic theory, Ortega views truth as serving to create security for man. Security is ultimately an essential component of man’s metaphysical/existential make-up. Hence, truth becomes a problem for modern man, not because it is objective and difficult to appropriate, but because modern man fragments it by making it relative. The relationship between relativism and rationalism in modernity is a major concern for Ortega. He thinks of relativism as skepticism. Skepticism, he believes, is suicidal in nature.

Objective truth, as Ortega conceives it, is ascertained through his ideas on perspective. Perspectivism is the understanding that, while truth is objective, it is filtered through an individual’s capacity to ascertain it. On the other hand, if objective truth is denied by relativists, then relativism cannot be taken seriously. Ortega’s suggestion is poignant, for truth must serve as a guide for life. Once truth is equated with opinion, man becomes lost through his incapacity to save his circumstances. Again, Ortega’s main line of thought is about life as lived experience, not splitting hairs about epistemology.¹⁰

§5. *The Modern Theme*: Life Viewed Through the Lens of Radical Skepticism

According to Ortega, modern life is squeezed between rationalism, which denounces life and relativism and skepticism, which denounce truth. Thus, the greatest concern that Ortega views as comprising the modern theme is life obscured through a glass darkly: radical skepticism.

While skepticism destroys man’s search for metaphysical/existential security, in Ortega’s work radical skepticism takes on added significance.

For Ortega, radical means root: the foundation of life as lived-experience. The form of vital-reason that Ortega argues for is the seat of human reality. Vital-reason is radical and foundational because it makes all other truths possible. For

⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 29. Ortega’s concern with the question of truth is existential in that it casts man in the role of solicitor of truth if the latter is to serve human existence. He explains, “In the first place, if truth does not exist, relativism cannot take itself seriously. Secondly, belief in truth is a deeply-rooted foundation of human life; if we remove it, life is converted into an illusion and an absurdity. The operation of removal is itself devoid of common sense and philosophical value. Relativism is, in the long run, scepticism, and scepticism, when its justification is that it opposes all speculative theory, is in itself a theory of suicidal character.

this reason, if man's capacity to appropriate truth by placing it in the service of life is corrupted by radical skepticism; vital life loses its bearings.

Far from cultivating life as lived–experience, Ortega argues that rationalism and skepticism are antithetical to life. Relying on calculative and quantitative principles, rationalism after Descartes and later in positivism, destroyed spontaneity in human life. According to Ortega, rationalism attempts to construct a rational order that originates in quantitative principles. *The Modern Theme* is riddled with examples of how modern life is stifled by rationalism, relativism and scientific principles. Ortega's examples are plentiful, poignant and telling of postmodernity to come. For this reason, *The Modern Theme* transitions well into the themes that Ortega developed later in *The Revolt of the Masses*.

The struggle for vital–reason to keep itself anchored in life and not become suffocated by rationalism is the mainstay of Ortega's collected work. Vital–reason is amenable to other of his ideas because it is the recognition of conscious life that is endowed with the capacity for self–awareness. Ortega contrasts vital–reason with modernism's encroachment on the lived–experience of individuals. This leads him to offer a social–political view of collective life that demonstrates modern man's exhaustion through appeal to failed, all–consuming rationalism.

The Modern Theme concludes by offering a glimpse into the social–political world that a utopian vision of rationalism and positivism has created for man in the twentieth century. Through offering a metaphysical/existential understanding of man, Ortega establishes subjectivity (interiority) as man's existential condition as extra–natural.

In contrast to man as an extra–natural being, Ortega laments that modern man finds himself in the unprecedented predicament of believing himself the master of human reality. In turn, this misguided belief is the root of a vast number of modern pathologies, to say nothing about postmodernity. Ortega's subtle analysis of man as a metaphysical/ existential being, an aspect of his thought that is ignored or misunderstood by many of his critics, affords him the opportunity to contribute to our understanding of the predicament that Western culture finds itself today.

Just like Ortega's poignant vision of man in *The Revolt of the Masses*, which surpasses tried–and–tired social–political categories, *The Modern Theme* is a foreboding work that enables prescient readers to understand the origin and ominous scope of postmodern man's existential exhaustion and disillusionment.

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Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy of Existence in *The Modern Theme*

The trajectory of Ortega y Gasset's thought demonstrates the foundational importance of *The Modern Theme* to his ideas on philosophy of history, vital-reason and the existential categories in his work. Ortega explores the idea of subjectivity (interiority) in *Meditations on Quixote* (1914). By 1923, the year *The Modern Theme* was published, Ortega y Gasset understood that science and positivism attempt to explain the universe, including human life, in mechanical terms. Ortega y Gasset realized the importance of reining in bloated hyper-rationalism. *The Modern Theme* sets up Ortega y Gasset's idea of life as biographical existence, not merely biological life, especially in light of modernity.

Keywords: *The Modern Theme* · Individuality · Generations · Vita-Reason · Philosophy of Existence.

Filosofía de la Existencia en 'El tema de Nuestro Tiempo' de Ortega y Gasset

La trayectoria del pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset demuestra la importancia fundamental de *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo* para sus ideas sobre la filosofía de la historia, razón vital y las categorías existenciales en su obra. Ortega explora la idea de la subjetividad (interioridad) en *Meditaciones Del Quijote* (1914). En 1923, año en que se publicó *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, Ortega y Gasset propone que la ciencia y el positivismo intentan explicar el universo, incluida la vida humana, en términos mecánicos. Ortega y Gasset conocía la necesidad de frenar el hiperracionalismo hinchado. *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo* plantea la idea de la vida como existencia biográfica, no meramente vida biológica, especialmente a la luz de la modernidad.

Palabras Clave: El tema de Nuestro Tiempo · Individualidad · Generaciones · Razón vital · Filosofía de la existencia.

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