

**SOME ISSUES IN ORTEGA Y GASSET'S
CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER'S
DOCTRINE OF *SEIN****

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The purpose of this paper is to propose a hypothesis to illuminate Ortega's critical response to Heidegger's question of being (*Seinsfrage*). While Ortega integrated the classical requirements for the idea of Being into his idea of human life as radical reality, Heidegger's delineation of human life (*Dasein*) was only preliminary to the final philosophical task of understanding the question of Being itself (*Sein*) as the transcendent horizon for human life. For Ortega human life is not merely a preliminary ontology that points to another transcendent reality, but final reality itself. I shall argue here that: (1) Ortega saw Heidegger's *Seinsfrage* as both empty and dead-ended as a philosophical enterprise; (2) by Heidegger's refusal to understand human life and its circumstances as the final goal of philosophy, he failed to account for the reality of human life in its circumstantial, historical, and methodological dimensions; and (3) Heidegger's philosophical project results in a frozen and metaphysical concept of human nature that transcends the historicity of humanity's actual existence and artificially bifurcates history into opposed metaphysical and empirical dimensions that only Ortega's doctrine of historical reason can synthesize.

While Ortega rightly resisted any suggestion that he was Heidegger's disciple, he admitted "with pleasure" that Heidegger's genius had penetrated the question of human existence to profound depths.¹ Still, Ortega claimed that there were few major Heideggerean themes that had not appeared in Ortega's own work at least in seminal form prior to the publication of *Sein und Zeit* in 1927. Ortega, like Heidegger, devoted critical attention to the problem and application of Being in his own writings. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

After 1929, Ortega began to argue that philosophy must

return to first principles, and one such is Being itself. While Ortega saw much in classical ontology as flawed and while he often treated the idea of Being as humankind's attempt to create a sort of hypothetical-fictional category by which to identify the possibilities of things and circumstances, he also wanted to understand Being as that which is preeminently real without qualifications, as that which really is (*ὄντος ὄν*). He clearly ascribed this classical sense of Being to human life as radical reality because our life is the ground in which all other realities do and must appear.²

With at least this preliminary sketch in mind, I can now advance to Heidegger's conception of the Being question (*Seinsfrage*) and to Ortega's critique of it. While Ortega did not develop at length a theoretical critique of Heidegger's doctrine of Being, I want to propose in this essay that his remarks on Heidegger in *The Idea of Principle in Leibniz and the Evolution of Deductive Theory* reflect Ortega's profound concerns and reservations about the goals and capacities of Heidegger's thought, and especially the problem of Being. For Ortega, Heidegger's Being question remains unclarified, undeveloped, and problematically related to Ortega's own idea of human life as radical reality.³ In order to understand these remarks, it must be remembered that in *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger posed the question of the meaning of Being (*der Sinn des Sein überhaupt*) as his deepest and central concern. The subtitle of his book is "The Interpretation of Dasein in Terms of Temporality, and the Explication of Time as the Transcendental Horizon for the Question of Being." This subtitle indicates that the doctrine of human life (*Dasein*) was only of preliminary importance to his final goal. For Heidegger, the term *Sein* is meant to refer to that transcendent condition that makes entities (*Seiendes*) present and possible. His inquiry into Being, then, belongs to the domain of final ontology, but his explication of the being of humankind (*Dasein*) belongs to preliminary ontology because the analysis of *Dasein* is only the initial means through which Heidegger approaches final Being (*Sein*).

Speaking now to the first of Ortega's reservations about Heidegger's Being question—that it is unfruitful and empty for

the philosophical enterprise—Ortega noted that Heidegger's technical term *Dasein* replaced the more natural expression "human life." Heidegger's understanding of human life as there-being (*Dasein*) indicates that *Dasein* is but a secondary aspect of and prelude to the understanding of Being itself (*Seinsverständnis*). For Ortega, Heidegger's project was but a revival of the medieval *Ens*, a term for Being that he extended into a new typology termed *Dasein*. For Ortega, in addition, any acceptable doctrine of Being as radical reality must refer to human life. But Heidegger strongly rejected the understanding of human life as final ontology, for such a project would never distinguish between preliminary ontology as such and the final ontological quest for Being itself. Life philosophy, he claimed, does not belong to the domain of fundamental ontology, nor is it the proper goal of philosophical thinking.⁴ Thus, in one stroke Heidegger's metaphysics attempted to eliminate the life philosophy project of Wilhelm Dilthey and subsequently Ortega's idea of human life as fundamental reality.

I would hypothesize that the philosophical basis of Ortega's criticism of both Heidegger's Being question and subsequent philosophical enterprise has now been located. The whole status and legitimacy of Ortega's idea of human life was being defended behind his relatively brief critical remarks on Heidegger in his *Leibniz*. Further, Heidegger's search was only a "*furor teutonicus*" that is directed to a concept that transcends the radical reality of human life and disjoins the phenomenal-circumstantial reality of human life as Ortega conceived it from the transcendent reality of Being itself (*Sein*). Heidegger's Being has a tendency to evaporate into a hidden status above human life and its circumstances. This concept adds nothing of phenomenal, methodological, or ontological import to his already completed analysis of *Dasein*. Indeed, human life has been here left with a problematical and undeveloped relation to Heidegger's Being (*Sein*).

The second problem generated by Heidegger's rejection of life philosophy as fundamental ontology is that it forces the neglect of grasping human existence in its explanatory, epistemological, empirical, and methodological dimensions. The

understanding of *Dasein* as merely preliminary to the question of final Being relegates the above dimensions to a merely factual and sub-ontological status below Heidegger's criteria for authentic philosophical endeavor. For example, in *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger treated the historicity of *Dasein* (*Geschichtlichkeit*) as the prime existential foundation for the possibility of the human and historical studies (*Geisteswissenschaften*). By historicity, Heidegger meant to indicate that humanity is *ab initio* a historical being, that is, a temporal existence that arises from a past and projects its possibilities into the future. This historicity is a primarily historical form of human being because it is the ontological condition or basis for the historical sciences (*Historie*). But the factual-phenomenal sciences of history, along with their empirical methods, records, and artifacts, Heidegger designated as only "secondarily historical" because they take their significance only from the primary historicity of *Dasein*, to whose world they meaningfully belong and for whom they are "to hand" (*Zuhandensein*). In this sense, empirical history is not founded upon facts and their relation to an isolated knower, but on a hermeneutical situation, that is, on a world of previously existing significance for *Dasein*. Heidegger's analysis has then revealed the ontological ground of the historical sciences through his analysis of human being, but his thought fails to address the question of how the methods, materials, and questions of the historical sciences are formulated into a generally valid empirical enterprise. This *lacuna* occurs, I believe, because his philosophical project understands *Dasein* only as a species of ontology that is subsidiary to the final question of Being. Consequently, the merely factual, explanatory status of the methods and materials of the historical sciences are only "secondary." Subsequently, these issues are not deemed relevant to fundamental philosophy, and they are mentioned in connection with the analysis of *Dasein* only in so far as *Dasein* is the metaphysical ground of the phenomenal-empirical sciences of humankind.⁵ The question of *Dasein* is not developed in a phenomenal, empirical, or methodological direction, but as a subordinate prelude to the

final metaphysical question of Being (*Sein*).

From the perspective of Ortega's idea of life as radical reality, however, such a subordination and misdirection of the philosophical enterprise misunderstands the fundamentality of human life and disjoins its profound fusion with its actual methodological, empirical, and historical circumstances; and the radical reality of human life is etherealized away from phenomenal circumstances to transcendent Being. The result is that methodological-epistemological questions, the explanatory status of collectives, laws and institutions, and causal-empirical questions are demoted by Heidegger to a sort of sub-ontological "naturalism" appropriate only to life philosophy. This is the case even though he had accepted from Dilthey's thought the historicity of humanity. Heidegger's ontological project excluded consideration of the logical-empirical status of history and the *Naturwissenschaften* and the *Geisteswissenschaften* generally, of systems theory, ideal types, and the *Verstehen* method.⁶ I believe that Heidegger here has anticipated Gadamer's later claim that such issues are only "naturalistic," "secondary," and prone to the evils of historicism, an issue to which I must now turn as the third and final problem.

For Heidegger, historicism referred to the denial of the permanence of human nature and to the affirmation that humanity's being is defined by the variety of its differing expressions in historical time. Heidegger's work replaced the concept of human nature as substance or "entity to hand" (*Vorhandensein*) by a metaphysical thesis about the ontological structure of human being (*Dasein*). This structure must be understood prior to the understanding of Being itself. It remains in the timeless mode of metaphysics and constitutes, he believed, a refutation of historicist and life philosophy's attempt to dissolve a fixed, metaphysical human nature. It is an alienation of humanity's authentic historical Being, he claimed, to understand human nature as an aggregate product of history and as changing in historical time.⁷ For Heidegger, human nature as elaborated in the existential structure of *Dasein* remains constant in historical time; otherwise the *Dasein*-

analysis of Sein und Zeit would be undermined as a metaphysical enterprise. In this sense the existential constitution of *Dasein* is transhistorical. But for Ortega nothing in human existence is transhistorical: humanity itself is its history. The reality of human life in history and circumstances—that area addressed by the sub-philosophical sciences in Heidegger's world—must never be separated from a viable understanding of human being in time. Human life is always fused with its phenomenal circumstances, and as such it is a *species temporis* and never a *species aeternitatis* that can be delineated apart from the actuality of vital, phenomenal, and problematic circumstances. These considerations suggest that humanity has no fixed nature. What we have is our history. Humanity as history is the true reality of human experience. The reality of one's life's actual history is not derived from abstract or historically transcendent reality. One's past is all one has.⁸

In the autochthonous human reality of one's actual history, humanity has no transcendent nature. Humankind is a historical "drama" of what each one has done and made of oneself, of what each has constructed and been capable of. The being of human life is an accumulation of being, an absolute presence that cannot be separated from the understanding of one's actual circumstances. Human life and its transformation in time is the formula for reality, and while this formula denies any essentialist thesis, it does not deny a coherent identity to *homo sapiens*. As an identity in difference one's real being is one's life in time and circumstances—nothing more. This, rather than the distinction between a permanent human nature and a nature that has no identifiable being, is the intention of Ortega's thought. Ortega's "new being" is the reconceptualization of human life in phenomenal-temporal circumstances; and humanity's new *órganon* that explicates such a being is one's vital and historical reason. With his theory of vital and historical reason as adjuncts to the idea of life, Ortega avoided the Heideggerean bracketing of the circumstantial, empirical, and methodological realms. Not only do the human studies provide perspectives on human life, but

vital and historical reason are constituents of this reality itself. Thus Heidegger's omission of a viable theory of explanatory reason was rectified in Ortega's work. Historical reason provides a narrative account of human life in historical circumstances by synthesizing the choices, creations, actions, and circumstances of our existence with the radical reality of human life. In this sense human life is never disjoined from the "secondary" empirical, phenomenal, and epistemological elements that are required for any viable theory of human life as final reality. Ortega's thought released the doctrine of final Being from its "dead-end" status in Heidegger. At least I believe that this perspective of his thinking helps to illuminate Ortega's negative reception of Heidegger's doctrine of *Sein*.

Whether we speak of *The Revolt of the Masses*, *Invertebrate Spain*, *Man and People*, *Man and Crises*, *The Mission of the University*, *An Interpretation of Universal History*, or *Historical Reason*, Ortega's mission was to reveal the circumstances and possibilities of the reality of life in its factual historicity. I believe, in summary, that it is this concern that prompted Ortega's critical response to Heidegger's doctrine of Being. I also believe that Heidegger's now-famous interview with *Der Spiegel* in the late 1960s would exemplify the grounds of Ortega's concern. When he was asked about the future of human life with respect to a holocaust, over-population, and the environment, Heidegger replied, "Only a god can save us." This answer was not arbitrary or posed. Rather, it was the statement of the later Heidegger, who too much separated his search for reality from human life and its circumstances. Humanity must wait passively for the revelation of Being (*Sein*) in Heidegger's late philosophy. Here Ortega's emphasis on the responsibility for the making of humanity and history seems entirely forgotten, and the actuality of historical drift is more or less accepted. But, for Ortega, "man is the sight of Divinity." Humankind is the Being who is responsible for the future of the radical reality of human life. The adequate understanding of this demanding condition is for Ortega "the dawn of historical reason."

NOTES

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¹*El Sol*, 15 de mayo 1929, quoted by Hernan Larrain Acune in *La Genesis del Pensamiento de Ortega* (Buenos Aires: Compania Fabril Editora, 1962) 107-8.

²Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *Obras Completas*, 1st ed., 12 vols. (Madrid: Alianza Editorial-Revista de Occidente, 1983) 7: 36-37, 103-5.

³It is to Ortega's *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva* (1958) (*Obras* 8: 270-92) to which I refer regarding his critical remarks about Heidegger's project and ontology.

⁴Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979) 46.

⁵Heidegger 394-95.

⁶Heidegger 398.

⁷Heidegger 396.

⁸*Obras* 6: 49-50.