



An Approach to Ortega's Ratiovitalism

Asperilla Díaz A*

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

***Corresponding author:** Andrea Asperilla Díaz, Ciudad Universitaria, Pl. Menéndez Pelayo, s/n, 28040 Madrid, Spain, Tel: +34628606022; Email: andraspe@ucm.es

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset proposed a new model of rationality through which it could be possible to think the world and approximate to the truth. This rationality surpasses the logical-mathematical reason that ruled Modernity, including life, history and spontaneity: the vital reason. In this research, vital reason's foundation will be explained, as well as the connection that exists between rationalism and revolution.

Keywords: Rationality; Rationalism and revolution, Politics

Ortega y Gasset, in *El tema de nuestro tiempo* establish the close connection that exists between revolution and the application of rationalism to politics, connection that emerges as a consequence of a distance put by the individuals between them and the history – their history. To establish this, Ortega explained previously in the same work how collective feeling has been affecting, along the history, political acts. At this point we should ask ourselves how that connection between revolution and rationalism emerges, and why revolution presupposes indifference to history.

Rationalism seats its basis on a conception of rationality as a perfect thing, leaving below all those issues related to spontaneity, which remains disqualified; in fact, from ancient Greece to the breakdown of Modernity, human's main purpose has consisted on trying to put pure reason in every corner that spontaneity used to take up. "In the intellectual order, individuals must repress their spontaneous convictions, which are only opinion – *doxa* – and adopt instead pure reason's thoughts, which are true «knowledge» – *episteme* –."¹ However, it is necessary to explain that suppressing does not imply eliminating, so individuals will remain possessing that spontaneity but covered by rationality.

Modern sensibility was characterized by a clear rejection of spontaneity and immediacy, and by a consequent research for rational constructions, trying to imbue every world scope with rationality. This way, modern rationalist intellect will try to with all of the past, which has been created not on the basis of pure reason and following strict parameters faithful to rationality, but on the basis of spontaneity, and will try to rebuild the world on the foundations of pure reason, giving rise to a building of concepts that possess an impeccable logic that could endure over time. As a result, pure reason considers life as a fact among the others, ignoring its human constitution, removing any hint of vitality or history from the new building of concepts. But, how is that revolutionary state of the soul reached, according to which individuals hope to break with tradition and history?.

Ortega explains in "*El ocaso de las revoluciones*" the passage of the individual through three different spiritual situations: tradition, rationalism and mysticism –which is quite similar to the hegelian tesis-antithesis-synthesis scheme–. In each of the moments mentioned, individual's feeling and thinking is different. In the first one, its given a possitive thought about the past, in which spontaneity tends to be submit to tradition because antiquity its considered the most important attribute that thigs could possess; not even new needs will be taken into account outside of tradition,

1 Ortega Y Gasset J: El tema de nuestro tiempo. Ed. El Arquero, Madrid (1970). Page 69.

which will be tried to be absorbed and included in its structure.

Culture, which rises only from vitality, subjectivity, spontaneity, is considered tradition, but how is that possible? "Little by little science, ethics, religious faith, and law tend to detach from the subject and acquire their own consistency, independent value, prestige, authority. It comes a time when the same life that creates all of that bows to it, surrenders to its work and places itself at its service."² Culture endures because those who created it maintain it without considering it as their creation, but as part of tradition. Feuerbach explained a similar thesis in relation to God's veneration: we do not recognize God as our product, we mystify him and forget that we have created him with our best attributes so we think that they do not belong to us, but to God; in other words, according to Feuerbach, God does not create humans, but humans do create God attributing all their virtues and then forget that those virtues also correspond to them. In the same way we create culture attending to our spontaneity and then, when we contemplate its creation so far away and rooted in tradition, we forget that it has been created by us, and we venerate it, until the revolutionary process begins and we begin to distrust it.

Under the rule of tradition, individuals reside immersed in the collectivity, but little by little they will begin to feel hostility towards both and will seek to exalt their individualities, leaving aside tradition, because it was not created by them, and will search something new created by them having used their own internal laws, their rationality. "A strange disdain for realities ensues; turned their backs on them, men fall in love with ideas such as them (...) Until then, ideas had been used as mere instruments for the service of vital needs. Now, life is going to be put at the service of ideas. This radical reversal of the relationship between life and idea is the true essence of the revolutionary soul."³ This is precisely how a moment in which a revolutionary feeling inevitably explodes inside hearts is reached, feeling that seeks to destroy all tradition, history and everything that has not been created by those new souls whose aim is to rebuild the world through pure reason.

Taking all these premises into account and having built their building of concepts attending solely to reason during the revolutionary era, those men believed they had discovered the definitive structures that had to rule the world, the *truth*, but when they met again their intimacy and their own feelings, they realized that the world outlined by those philosophies were mere horizons towards which to go that

did not exist, because as they were horizons, they were never reached and became utopias. As a consequence, individuals will try to fit the world into the limits of rationality and will fail again and again until they begin to wonder if the error does not lie in the world, but in the fact of trying to fit it into a conceptual framework created through pure reason. This is how the utopian program will see its internal formalism and its poverty exposed in front of the vital splendor, showing that life should not be subject to reason's ruling, but rather the opposite: reason must serve life.

That is why the revolutionary soul is usually followed by a disillusioned soul, which has seen the collapse of that concepts' building that with so much effort and enthusiasm it had built up, a soul that not only does not understand how it was possible that during the revolutionary era others risked even their own life for the pursuit of an ideal, finding it ridiculous. "And indeed, modern man has put his chest on the barricades of the revolution, thus demonstrating unequivocally that he expected happiness from politics. When revolution's twilight comes, it seems to people that this fervor of previous generations is an obvious aberration of the sentimental perspective."⁴

Post-revolutionary individual, faced with the incapacity of his soul to "stand by itself, it looks for a table where it can save itself from the shipwreck and scrutinizes around, with a humble look of a dog, someone who protects it (...) His priority is to serve: another man, an emperor, a wizard, an idol. Anything, rather than feeling the terror of facing alone, with one's own chest, the onslaught of existence."⁵ In fact, a crisis like that is precisely the one the West was going through then, finding itself in constant «vital disorientation». This is why it was not surprising that at the beginning of the 20th century, when trying to solve national problems by the shortest route, the State was allowed to take and absorb everything, crushing both the individual and the group, as was seen with the rise of fascism and bolchevism.

That vital disorientation mentioned above arises as a consequence of the breakdown of Modernity, of the impossibility of reaching the *truth* through pure reason, and of the dissatisfaction produced by the adoption of relativism as a solution. So, the great question, and the answer to which will constitute *the theme of our time*, is the following: "How could we place together both truth, which is one and invariable, with human vitality, which is changeable and varies in each individual, race and age?"⁶ The new sensitivity ignores the debate between rationalism and relativism, and

2 Ídem. Page 63.

3 Ídem. Page 131.

4 Ídem. Page 137.

5 Ídem. Page 153-154.

6 Ídem. Page 38.

also the supposed need for pre-eminence of life over reason or viceversa, and seeks a balance between both, because we are no longer able to opt for either of those positions without feeling the painful absence of one of them; now we are characterized by the aim of rescuing spontaneity and by pretending that reason does not repress it, as it has tended to do throughout history hand in hand with rationalism, but staying present while taking a secondary role and working for spontaneity, for life. Ortega affirms that the *theme of our time* will revolve around the attempt to order the world, not on the foundations of pure reason, but from the point of view of life.

That balance will be given by the *vital reason*, which is a narrative reason, in which what the modern abstract physical-mathematical reason had left aside becomes important; we become aware that this reason, while being very important, is not everything, so is not about changing it, but about overcoming it, including life with its corresponding historical dimension. "Freedom requires me to know, it forces me to know, to wonder about the circumstances in which my life is embedded. Reason is vital from its root. And the vital reason is historical reason because my life is given in time; what happens to me now is in connection with what happened before. Human life is not a simple flow. From "everything happens" something remains: a rational structure that occurs in time."⁷

Ortega's purpose is trying to include in the realm of reason the realms that in fact occur in reality, which modern reason has excluded, such as life or history, and that is why we will speak of *vital reason* – which is vital as biographical, and not as biological – and *historical reason*, what does not imply the exclusion of physical-mathematical reason, but only its overcoming. From *vital reason's* point of view, the *truth* is found distributed in the peculiarity of each one, and it will be thanks to the conjunction of all those peculiarities, of those individual perspectives, which, without seeing the same thing, see a part of the same truth, obtaining something very close to what the truth is. Not because they are different should they be labeled as illusory, as rationalism did, but precisely in the difference is where the possibility of approaching the truth resides, since rather than contradicting each other, they complement each other.

In this way, Ortega criticizes Descartes' *moi-même*, which only realizes itself as a floating and uprooted self from its history, and which is an abstraction that ends up becoming utopian: there is not a *moi-même* but to the extent that there are other things, and there are no other things if there are not those things for me. Individuals are not *res cogitans*, but *res dramática* because they do not exist because they think, but,

on the opposite: they think because they exist. That is why Ortega's conception of the subject advocates for taking it as an object that makes and individualize itself in reality and in representation, since we are in relation to others collectively, in front of our circumstances. Just as heideggerian *Dasein* is characterized by creating itself, in relation to Ortega's view we could also speak of a subject that is created, and in both cases they do so by taking reality to represent themselves as being with others, opting for a circumstantial existence. The difference between them lies in the fact that Ortega insists more on the concrete, on the historical issue, since what we are constitutively according to him, is our history.

To sum up and rescuing some lines of Gaos, "the conception of a *vital reason* was imposed on Ortega as necessary to oppose to the conception of pure reason, which was the dominant in European Western philosophy, to overcome the difference of this conception that was the remainder of his history."⁸ Rationalist revolutionary feeling broke up with history, with life, considering them unconnected to the excellence and perfection that could be achieved through pure reason, without realizing that it was wasting a wider and richer scope than the limited and formal one that pure reason provided, and which was precisely a constitutive scope of individuals as such, and in which they found their ideals or vital projects realized: life, history, circumstance.



7 Zambrano M: Escritos sobre Ortega. Ed. Trotta, Madrid (2011). Page 123.

8 Gaos J: Los pasos perdidos. Escritos sobre Ortega y Gasset. Ed. Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid (2013). Page 165.