***Some Lessons in Metaphysics* by Jose Ortega y Gasset**

Metaphysics as Orientation

So, what is metaphysics? Ortega preliminarily defines it as something “man does” but this doesn’t say much because we are all doers and we are all engaged in ‘doing’ all the time. What is this specific ‘doing’ that is metaphysics? It is what happens “when [man] seeks a basic orientation in his situation.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

If metaphysics is a search for a basic orientation, then this implies some prior disorientation, which you almost certainly don’t feel. You don’t feel this because you have adopted the norms, beliefs, traditions, etc. of the people around you, without questioning them, *as if* they were certainties. Ortega takes 2+2=4 as an example. It’s quite possible you have never *really* made a question of the truth of this formula. Rather, you have accepted it, and all of the mathematical theory it is built on, because people you have trusted have told you so and everyone else believes it. If one day you do question it, then this state you are in will be one of disorientation with regard to it. And if, after questioning it, you then come to the conclusion that 2+2 does in fact, equal 4, then you will have oriented yourself with regard to it.

So, to truly be oriented always implies a previous disorientation. Such a situation is what Ortega calls *authentic*, whereas accepting without question what others tell you is *unauthentic*.

Being and Knowing

Being and knowing are two terms that have always featured heavily in philosophy. Ortega wishes to take issue with the commonly held assumption that knowledge is the fount of everything (including our being oriented in our situation). Under this schema being ‘oriented’ is essentially a basic ‘knowing’ and ‘knowing’ would, in turn, mean to know the ‘being’ of things. Rather, Ortega wishes to reverse this and emphasise that our ‘being oriented’ is something deeper than knowledge. Indeed, in order to ‘know’, we must first be oriented in our situation.

“My Life”

Metaphysics is an orientation and something we create. But all ‘creating’, all ‘doing’, takes place within the ambit of our lives. This means that this thing we each call “my life” is prior to metaphysics (and religion, science, and anything else we *do*) so we need to outline what this is before we can turn to metaphysics.

In its briefest formulation; “*Life is what we do and what happens to us.*” Ortega lists the attributes that this life has:

1. “All living is one’s own living... knowing oneself to be existing, where knowing does not imply intellectual knowledge… but is that surprising *presence* which one’s life has for every one of us.”
2. All living is finding oneself in a world and occupied with things in that world. It is a “living with”. This living is “finding oneself suddenly – and not knowing how – projected into, fallen into, submerged in a world…” Life is “thrown at us, or we are thrown into it…”

We live by carrying our own lives. It is an “incessant effort to solve the problem posed by life itself.” However, life is “never a solved problem”; it can never be *completed* or *resolved*. Because of this, life always weighs on us.

1. “Life is never felt to be predetermined.” The future is always possibility, never certainty. “To live is to be continually deciding what we are going to be.” This means that we are not so much what we are but what we are *going to be*, what we are *not yet*. The root of our lives is temporal, specifically futural.

Ortega calls this busying occupying ourselves in advance with what we are going to be doing, *preoccupation*.

1. Because life is a continual deciding, and nothing undecided can be considered resolved, life is also a “continual and essential perplexity.”

*Clarification of the first attribute*

Ortega outlines the same structure of consciousness as Sartre does, in order to further explain exactly *how* our lives are present to each of us. We can deliberately reflect on something but we can also be aware of something without making it explicit to ourselves. The latter Ortega calls *contar con* (rely on, depend on) while the former is *reparar*, which is our being conscious of something.

My life is always present to me in this sense that I rely on it but it is also always possible that I can reflect on it explicitly any time I choose. Ortega expresses this by saying that “my life is preconscious, or is preknown to me.”

*Clarification of the second attribute*

We always find ourselves within a world and in fact, our *consciousness* of the world comes *before* our *consciousness* of ourselves. However, what is actually true is that we are always *counting on* ourselves and *counting on* the world simultaneously and inseparably. Only when we are talking of awareness (or *presence to*) do ‘before’ and ‘after’ enter the picture.

This means that neither “I” nor the “world” are independent of each other. In fact, “my life” is made up of both “I” and the “world”; there can be no self without a world and the opposite is also true.

Existence and Essence

To find ourselves *in* a situation (the world), in this room for example, is to *exist* in it. However, the way I exist in this room is different from the way the table exists in it. For the table, existing in the room means to form part of a whole, the room and the table are homogeneous in nature. However, for me to exist in the room is different because I am unique, I am “my life” and everything else is something other than I. So for me to exist in the room is to exist in something other than myself, that is to say, to exist outside of myself, in “strange territory”.

When talking of existence we can talk of two things; “the thing that exists, and the existing of this thing – or, in other words, *what* there is, and the being that is in the *what*.” The former makes up the *essence* of the thing. A horse and a centaur both have essences but only the essence of the horse is *made effectively*. To exist, then, means to be effectively what one is, the “bringing into force of an essence.” Existence as effective achievement tells us something about the thing itself, while existence as *being* tells us only about ourselves; i.e. what happens to us when we encounter it.

For the table to exist in the room is to make its essence effective (exist) in something which has the same essence as it; in other words, the essence of the table is the same as its existence. For me though; to exist in this room is to work out my essence in something foreign to me, something *not me*, something *outside myself*. This means that my existence does not coincide with my essence.

Doing, Thinking and Being

In our relationships with our surroundings we are always *doing* things. One of these *doings* is to think about something. Thinking about things has been assumed to be our first, “primary, primitive action with that something” but this is false. In fact, in order to think about something, we must have first been involved with it in some other capacity. This capacity is precisely that *contar con* awareness we talked about earlier. Things are initially for us what they are when we are not thinking about them, but when we “simply live them.”

Consider light, for instance. What is light? Originally, in “my life” it is that which allows me to read, that which warms me, etc. The physical facts of light, that it is electromagnetic radiation, that it is composed of waves of different frequencies which can be separated out, etc. is not an answer to the question, “what is light?” but an answer to the question, “what is the being of light?” This second path takes us to intellectual knowledge.

So the first time light appears in our lives, it is as nothing, it has no ‘being’, it is a “nonbeing”. We don’t even recognise it as light. But then it disappears; night comes. Suddenly the unnamed thing we were counting on (*contar con*) has proven itself to be something I cannot count on. My environment reveals itself as strange and alien to me. It is only when something goes wrong in our environment, when our environment becomes a problem for us that we posit it as something to think about. And so, light becomes a question for us. In fact, this is always the first thought we have about *anything*; namely, a question. This is the proof that our thoughts *about* things are never and can never be our first contact with them.

Thinking about things is not merely contemplation; rather, it is construction, construction of the being of the thing. Once we know the being of the thing, we can then use it for our own ends. Indeed, we do not make tools and instruments because we think and know; rather, we are thoughtful beings because we make things.

The Collectivity

After we pose the question of the thing to ourselves, we tend to find the answer ready-made in our social environments. We find out “what is said” about it by “people”; “the social environment, the collective personage...” This is a turn from the authentic, genuine, individual “I” to the inauthentic, social “I”. Ortega notes the following regarding this shift:

1. My anguish is quietened by the opinions of “people”.
2. I come to believe and have faith that, even if I don’t know something, “people” know.
3. I recognise that I live in a world made up of others like me and a culture. In fact, culture is just the “ambient repertory of replies to the uneasiness of the genuine or individual life.”
4. I then abandon my own authentic life.
5. I either accept the opinion of “people” by re-thinking it for myself which is basically creating it for myself or merely passively receiving it.
6. The question and the answer (if it is simply taken on board from “people”) then lack congruence. The answer fails to allay the personal and individual anguish raised in the question. E.g. when I ask what the Earth is, to receive the reply, “the Earth is a planet”, fails to address my question.

However, Ortega acknowledges that it is practically impossible to re-think everything from scratch for ourselves. We must trust society and tradition at the same time as we recognise that it is keeping us prisoner.

Fatality

We are free but only within certain prescribed situations that we can’t alter. Sartre calls these unchangeable elements facticity; Ortega, following Heidegger, calls them destiny and describes this whole situation as us being “fatefully free”.

Metaphysics 2

In truth, since metaphysics is nothing more than constructing the world – that is to say, interpreting our circumstances and surroundings, attempting to know what things are and what I am in the midst of them in order to solve the problem that is human life – we are all, always doing metaphysics. Indeed, Ortega puts it thus; “man is metaphysics.”

Philosophy is primarily concerned with metaphysics, our basic orientation to our world. In order to be basic, it must encompass everything. This is the primary difference between philosophy and every other discipline. All other disciplines partition off a part of the whole to study, taking certain things for granted, accepting their truth without question… because they don’t pretend to a basic orientation. This is why metaphysics is solitude. Because, the metaphysician has to investigate everything on his or her own, without relying on past opinion, tradition or culture. He doesn’t rely on other people’s convictions, instead he has to *convince himself*.

The first question the metaphysician must ask herself is not “What is there?” (which we already know through engaging or ‘making do’ with them), but “What is what-is-there?” or “What *being* is there?” This is the general question of being that lies behind every individual thing, the feature of reality that allows individual things to appear in the first place, the *truth* of them.

The first answer to this was *realism*. The being of things is independent of me and it is fixed and finished. Being is what it is. This is universal but is not certain. Simply closing my eyes throws the whole world into probability. Since realism is conforming to what is already there, it is *conformity*.

The second answer was *idealism*. The reality of the world is only certain when I am aware of it, hence fundamental reality does not belong to the thing but to me. Since idealism says conforming to the external is insufficient, it is *revolutionary*. Idealism treats thought as basic. The problem is that thought (as we have seen) is never primary. While consciousness is *active*, when we are engaged with the world, there is no thought. Thought appears afterwards, *contar con*, when I reflect on the earlier engagement and make of it an object. So, idealism contradicts itself because it claims exclusive reality to be thought, but in order for thought to exist, a prior reality must already be in place.

For something to be beyond doubt, indubitable, its absolute existence and its existence for me, its “seeming to me”, have to be identical. There is something like this; subjective, human experience. Doubting, seeing, hearing, imagining, etc. All of these things exist for us without intermediary. They are what they appear to be. Their being is fully contained in their appearance and nothing more. Descartes’ error was to infer something not immediate in his doubt; an independent “I”, within which, the doubt was taking place.

When I see a wall, the absolute fact is that I exist with a wall in front of me. I exist absolutely because I exist for myself and the wall exists absolutely for the same reason, because it exists for me, too. Reality, then, is a blend of realism and idealism; it is “my coexistence with the thing.” This new thesis therefore preserves realism’s transcendence (the not-I) and idealism’s immanence (the I). The external, transcendent world is immanent in my life.

1. Ortega, writing in the early half of the 20th century, always uses the word “man” and the male pronoun where a modern writer would use ungendered terms like “human” or “individual”. At times, in order to quote him accurately, I have sometimes had to follow his example. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)