

The Origin of Philosophy, tr. Tony Talbot, U of Illinois P, Chicago 2000, 1967, 1943.

Ortega starts by saying that elegance would be a better term for ethics; since ethics is the “science of what has to be done,” and the elegant man is the best example of the practitioner of this science (14). It seems that Ortega’s goal in this book is to render Hegelian dialectics as elegant as possible by crossbreeding it with existentialism (not the only attempt this century, one thinks of Sartre’s later *Critiques*).

With this in mind, Ortega argues that there are two ways for thoughts to progress: one thought may *imply* another, or a thought may *complicate* the other. The latter Ortega calls “synthetic or dialectic thought” (16). For Ortega, a thought is synthetic or dialectic if it is irresistibly imposed on us, and if the first thought cannot be complete without the second. In this sense, *the dialectic stresses continuity and necessary totality because it has to be taken further, through yet another synthesis*. He writes, “The dialectic is the obligation to continue thinking, and this is not merely a manner of speaking, but an actual reality. It is the very fact of the human condition” (17).

Ortega makes no mistake about his Hegelian project, for he predicts that after World War II, “man will probably engage in assimilating the past with unparalleled zeal and urgency, and display astounding scope, vigor, and accuracy. I call this phenomenon, which I have anticipated for years, *the dawn of historical reason*” (31). He then goes on to propose a distinction between *self-perpetuation*, which he finds to be exhausting since it implies spanning all time, and *self-eternalization*, which implies that the future and past are attained in the present. This relies on the importance of remembering and foreseeing, a truly dialectical method of synthesizing events throughout history (31).

Ortega defines the aspect as “the *response* of the thing to being looked at” (41). He goes on to define knowledge as an interpretation of the thing itself, and he stresses that it takes the thing from the “silent language of being” to the “articulate language of knowledge” (44). I think Badiou would argue that there is no linguistic aspect of being and thus no silence—to me silence implies that being can speak to man, and for Ortega, the aspect is a *response*. But I do not think he means to stress the object or thing *speaking* or *reaching out* to man himself, for it is man that has a point of view—and thus it is silence to his point of view, which really means—an absence of significance. But for Ortega, this is a *translation* of languages, from being to knowledge, as though being had a script in and of itself. This is a key point to unravel. We could consider the fact that silence is both on the extreme negative and positive side of communication and signification, insofar as we keeps silent around those that we despise and around the truest of friends for whom no words are necessary to express a genuine thought.

Ortega says that the thing is the sum or integral of its aspects, implying a perspectivism that integrates a little differential calculus (47). He proposes a theory: 1. pause before each aspect, 2. continue thinking or move on to a contiguous aspect, 3. preserve the aspects previously viewed, 4. integrate them sufficiently in a “total” [his quotes] view (48). And no one would have ever told me that early twentieth-century Spanish philosophy would offer me a simplified and ‘elegant’ version of the dialectic!

An example of this dialectic goes as follows: every historical thinker has a soil, a subsoil, and an adversary. The subsoil is the cultural background, the collective unconscious of his region.. The soil is the newly founded ideas accepted by the thinker. And finally, an adversary is needed for differentiation. (73-74) Thus, for Heraclitus and Parmenides, the subsoil was mythology, the soil was natural science and the skepticism that allowed the thinkers to distance themselves from the religion prevailed. Finally, the adversary and the anxiety of influence prods the thinkers to assert radical hypotheses—Being is real, becoming false, and vice versa—that allow for the clearest of distinctions to be made between the two.

Ortega argues that with the modern way of living, there are so many choices that it becomes difficult to make a choice. He argues, “Man is *stranded amid* the various opinions, none of which is able to sustain him firmly—hence he slips about amid the many possible “knowledges” and finds himself failing, falling into a strange liquid medium . . . *he falls into a sea of doubts*” (102). Heraclitus and Parmenides were completely aware that in confronting and opposing the *doxa*, their opinion was constitutively *paradoxa* (110). Therefore, it is my ‘opinion’ that *all revision is inherently paradoxical*.

–Taylor Adkins