

# Rethinking society

*Individuals, Culture and Migration*

Volume 1

Individuals and Society

# **Individuals and Society**

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This book demonstrates the role of individuals in the formation and development of societies. Forming part of the first volume of the book series *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration*, the principle aim of *Individuals and Society* is to reveal the main peculiarities of an individual thinking and acting in a complex world of human communication.

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# Individuality in the Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset<sup>100</sup>

Gerardo López Sastre

**Abstract:** Our purpose is to defend the relevance of Ortega for current philosophical thought. We start explaining what Ortega claims is a central element of the modern world: the construction of our own identity according to personal criteria. To outline this project, Ortega introduces a vocabulary that forms a central part of his philosophy. These terms include “heroism”, “solitude”, “vocation”, “authenticity”, and “self-absorption” or “being in one’s self” (“ensimismamiento”), as opposed to “being beside one’s self” (“alteración”). Ortega thinks that this personal project constitutes a pivotal component of European culture that must be defended at all costs, because there will always be demagogues, “impresarios of *alteration*”, willing to harass people so they cannot think and doubt by themselves, and trying to ensure “they are kept herded together in crowds so they cannot reconstruct their individuality in the unique place where it can be reconstructed: solitude. They cry down service to truth, and in its place offer us *myths*.” When this opposition to myth and the corresponding defense of reason is translated into a theory of knowledge, the result is a perspectivism that legitimizes liberal democracy. Liberalism (respect for others’ differences) can lead to democracy, because we want other people to speak their points of view. And, in turn, democracy allows those differences to flourish.

**Keywords:** Individuality, Liberalism, Democracy, Perspectivism.

Philosophy can be considered from two standpoints: as an academic specialty studied in some universities, or as a human dimension, and, therefore, everyone’s business.<sup>101</sup> Academic philosophy has reached an incredible level of specialization with some scholars dedicating their lives to studying Hume’s, Kant’s or Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Many are

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<sup>100</sup> This essay is part of my contribution to a research project entitled “El desván de la razón: cultivo de las pasiones, identidades éticas y sociedades digitales” (FFI2017.82272-P: PAIDESOC), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

<sup>101</sup> Mosterín, 1994, p. 20.

forever entangled in a research we should rightly call a scholastic project, and there is always the danger that their concentration on these thinkers can detract them from contributing to the other, larger philosophy, which would seem desirable. Rather than helping, as it should, this approach instead becomes an obstacle. Reflecting on Ortega's philosophy, or with him, can be an excellent option to avoid this possibility.

Why? In the first place, because these two dimensions of philosophy were always present in his work. He never wanted to separate himself from the general public, since he believed philosophy had a great deal to contribute to them. That is why he chose an adamant clarity of style in his willingness to address truly important issues that can help guide us in our personal and social lives.

Ortega wrote on many issues, but in this essay we will focus on some ideas that seem central to his philosophy and are extremely important from our current standpoint: individuality, liberalism and democracy.<sup>102</sup> We will start with two fundamental elements of Ortega's thought: the social dimension of man and the issue of freedom. We will see how his analysis leads him to a very well-constructed presentation of the ideals of liberal modernity, of the project to construct our own identity, and how he views this project as a characteristic of European culture that must be

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<sup>102</sup> Of course, these terms can mean very different things. I will use this quotation to clarify the first: "To be individual is to be distinctive – an accomplishment or perhaps a happy biological accident. To be the reverse of the individual is to be nondescript. Schoolchildren, for example, are often extremely anxious to be nondescript, not to stand out. But among cultivated adults, to be individual is to stand out felicitously, a less ambivalent judgement, for example, than to be eccentric. It is, in short, to be well on the way towards being enviable. What cultivated person would not prefer being individual to being nondescript?" John Dunn: *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 34. Ortega makes it quite clear: "Individualism is a passion for peculiarity, a heroic cultivation of our very personal physiognomy, of our genuine traits, of our unequaled action." "El cabilismo, teoría conservadora", José Ortega y Gasset: *Obras Completas*, Taurus/Fundación José Ortega y Gasset, Madrid, 2004–2010, vol. I, 173. From now on, we will quote this edition as O.C. and follow it with Roman numerals indicating the volume, and then the page or pages in Arabic numerals. I also want to clarify that I will not discuss the change or evolution of Ortega's ideas, and I recognize that my reading will be quite selective, only choosing the ideas I find more valuable. Should readers wish to discover the evolution of Ortega's liberalism based on its philosophical foundations, I strongly recommend Alejandro de Haro Honrubia: "El liberalismo de Ortega como filosofía. Del neokantismo a la metafísica de la vida humana como realidad radical", *Alpha*, 47, 2018, 191–209; and in general, all the bibliography in footnote 6.

defended at all costs. Finally, when this is translated into a theory of knowledge, we have a perspectivism that legitimizes democracy.

In my understanding, Ortega continuously moves on two different levels in his analysis of individual life: firstly, there is a descriptive plane, and, secondly, a clearly normative level.<sup>103</sup>

On a descriptive level, he insists on the dimension of man as a social being. Other people do not represent an accident that may or may not happen to us, but, on the contrary, they form an original attribute of our constitution. Thus, in *La pedagogía social como programa político*, Ortega writes: “The isolated individual cannot be a man, the individual human being, separate from society — Natorp has said —, does not exist, he is an abstraction.”<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the social nature of human beings is part of the human condition. Concrete human reality is always that of the socialized individual, that of the individual who begins their life by seeing the world through ideas (that work as jail bars) received from others.<sup>105</sup> Ortega is aware that the society we live in already has an interpretation of life, a repertoire of ideas about everything surrounding us. Therefore, he writes that:

what we can call “the thought of our time” becomes part of our circumstance, envelops us, penetrates us, and carries us. One of the constituent factors of our fatality is the set of environmental convictions we find ourselves with. Without realizing it, we find ourselves installed in that network of ready-made solutions to the problems of our life. When one of these squeezes us, we turn to that treasure, we ask our neighbors, our neighbor’s books: What is the world? What is man? What is death? ... But we do not have to ask ourselves such questions: from birth we expend a constant effort of reception, absorption, in family life, at school, reading and social life that transfers those collective convictions into us before ... we have felt the problems that they are or pretend to be solutions.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> In my explanation of these two levels I repeat, with some slight variations, what I first outlined in Spanish in “La modernidad liberal de Ortega en el tema de la constitución de la persona”, in Atilano Domínguez, Jacobo Muñoz, y Jaime de Salas, (Coords.): *El primado de la vida (Cultura, estética y política en Ortega y Gasset)*. Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Cuenca, 1997, pp. 41–51; and later in “La actualidad del pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset. ¿Qué nos cabe reivindicar?”, *Kultura i Wartości*, Nr 28 (2019), 255–275.

<sup>104</sup> O.C., II, 95.

<sup>105</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 206.

<sup>106</sup> *En torno a Galileo*, O.C., IV, 382.

The fact that social influence can be so important does not mean we must accept it. As we will see, people manifest themselves as real human beings when they question this.

Secondly, within this descriptive level, we must mention the central importance of another characteristic of human beings: freedom. According to Ortega, the life given to us is empty when we receive it, and everyone has to fill it and occupy it with their decisions.<sup>107</sup> This differentiates humans from animals. Animals possess an already fixed and resolute being. Humans, however, must choose their own path through life. As we are always surrounded by a variety of possibilities for action, by necessity we must choose and, therefore, exercise our freedom:

our being as “being in the circumstance” is not still and merely passive. To be, that is, to continue being, we must always be doing something. But what we have to do is not imposed or predetermined; we have to choose and decide, in a non-transferable way, by ourselves and before ourselves, under our exclusive responsibility. No one can replace us in deciding what we are going to do, we even have to decide to surrender ourselves to another’s will. This forcedness of having to choose and, therefore, be condemned, whether we want to or not, to be free, to be at our own risk and expense, comes from the fact that the circumstance is never one-sided; it always has several and sometimes many sides. That is, it beckons us towards a variety of possibilities of doing, of being.<sup>108</sup>

Or:

Instead of imposing one path on us, [the world] imposes several and, consequently, it forces us ... to choose. What a surprising condition that is of our lives! To live is to feel *fatally* obliged to exercise our freedom, to decide what we are going to be in this world. Not for one moment is our activity of decision-making allowed to rest. Even when in desperation we abandon ourselves to whatever is going to happen, we have decided not to decide.<sup>109</sup>

This idea of human freedom as a human characteristic leads Ortega to a moral ideal (and thus we enter into the normative level): the urge not to

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<sup>107</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 161.

<sup>108</sup> See *loc. cit.*; “Man is condemned to be free” is a phrase made famous by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a humanism*.

<sup>109</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 401. I have added the words between square brackets.



allow our way of life to be “locked” by the habits provided by tradition. Because this substantial freedom could be steered in two opposite directions: making or building our lives by remaining faithful to the heritage conveyed by our society’s tradition; or, on the contrary, seeking the transcendence of the limits of the world around us. Ortega is highly aware of both possibilities, and that we can classify societies or historical times based on the extent to which acceptance of one option or the other predominates:

There are two kinds of epochs: those in which a “good deed” is the action that repeats a model estimating the effort *not to be individual*, for a person to fully embrace a generic type or concept; and others in which, in contrast, the action’s value is its sincerity, that smell of spontaneity, which we find when we see it emerge from an individual as a tree leaf emerges from a bud. We are pleased with the effort *not to conform to the model*. These are, therefore, two reverse preferences.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, Ortega writes in *Principios de metafísica según la razón vital. Curso de 1932–1933*:

I should warn you that as we go back in historical chronology and approach primitive life, the abandonment of life to the social and collective self is more pronounced. What is “said”, the old established opinion—in short, tradition—completely dominates individual thought. It is not this that discriminates, judges and sentences according to a personal criterion of intimate evidence about the truth or error of the traditional idea, but, in contrast, individuals submit their spontaneous conviction to the court of tradition. When a thought before me bases its truth on what seems evident to me, the principle that moves me to adopt it is called *reason*. When, on the contrary, it bases “its truth” on the fact that it has been “said” by people since time immemorial, therefore, on the gross fact of its repetition, the principle that moves me to adopt it is called *tradition*. Here reason already seems an imperative for everyone to rely on themselves. Tradition, in contrast, as an imperative to hide our “myself” by dissolving it in the collective.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *Sobre la sinceridad triunfante*, O.C., V, 224.

<sup>111</sup> O.C., VIII, 624; and see the continuation of the text for the idea of the ineludible weight of tradition. In *El hombre y la gente* Ortega writes: “There are some who live almost no more than the pseudo-life of conventionality and there are instead extreme cases in which I glimpse others energetically faithful to their authenticity. All the intermediate equations are given between both poles, since it is an equation between the conventional and the authentic, which has different manifestations in each of us ... But, for the record, even in the case of maximum authenticity, human

Within this contrast between reason and tradition, Ortega clearly supports reason, the autonomy of individuals, whose right to base their life on their own criteria or the promptings of their internal self must be recognized. When outlining the descriptive level, we saw that Ortega was highly aware of the importance and influence of the surrounding society on us. This is the aspect on which a whole tradition of thought we can term “collectivist” has insisted, and which Ortega describes remarking that:

The highest and most marvelous qualities, on occasion even divine ones, have been attributed to the collective soul, “Volkgeist” or “national spirit”, to the social conscience. For Durkheim, society is a true God. In the writings by the Catholic De Bonald—the effective inventor of collectivist thought—by the Protestant Hegel, by the materialist Carlos Marx, that collective soul appears as something infinitely superior, infinitely more human than man. For example, wiser.<sup>112</sup>

But in confronting these theories, Ortega makes his position explicit: “The *community* [*colectividad*] is indeed something human; but it is human without the man, human without the spirit, human without the soul, the dehumanized human.”<sup>113</sup> Here we find the meaning of individualism in Ortega: individuality is what makes us real human beings. We would say that the spirit is provided by individuality, implying that we are extremely lucky if we live in an environment of freedom allowing us to become ourselves—what we have decided we want to be—the only way (as we will see) to feel happy.

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individuals live most of their lives in the pseudo-living of their surroundings or social conventionality.” O.C., X, 238. Therefore, in real life, reason works in some sectors of our life, while in others we will live dominated by tradition. However, quite apart from personal differences, it is also evident that there are societies or cultures where one human type predominates and societies where the other is more positively valued.

<sup>112</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 257.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* Nothing could be more contrary to Ortega that these words by the founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke: “You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that ... instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.” Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the revolution in France*. Edited with an Introduction by Conor Cruise O’Brien. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 183.

We must, therefore, resist the tendency to abandon ourselves or dissolve ourselves in the community, and seek, on the contrary, to form our own opinion and our own personal life. To outline this project, Ortega introduces a vocabulary that forms a central part of his philosophy. These terms include “heroism”, “solitude”, “vocation”, “authenticity”, and “self-absorption” or “being in one’s self” (“ensimismamiento”), as opposed to “being beside one’s self” (“alteración”).<sup>114</sup>

Ortega considers people refusing to live by repeating the gestures that custom and tradition have conveyed as *heroes*. They seek to establish the origin of their actions in themselves. As he writes in *Meditaciones del Quijote*: “When the hero wants, it is not ancestors or uses of the present that want, but himself. And this wanting him to be himself is the heroism.”<sup>115</sup>

This heroism requires that we move from the perspective in which we see things only as members of society, to the perspective in which they appear when we retreat to our solitude. “In solitude man is his truth,” Ortega writes, “in society he has the tendency to be a mere conventionality or forgery.”<sup>116</sup> If we want our life to be authentic, we will need that frequent retreat to the inside depths of ourselves. This is where a reflective activity takes place that involves examining all matters we usually term social to see what they actually are.<sup>117</sup> People can suspend their direct concern with

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<sup>114</sup> Williard R. Trask, the English translator of *El hombre y la gente* writes in a footnote: “Literally, ‘otheration’. The Spanish word has, in addition to the meaning of English ‘alteration’, that of ‘state of tumult’, ‘being beside oneself’. Throughout this chapter, the author plays on the root meanings of this and another equally untranslatable word, *ensimismamiento*, literally, ‘within-oneseif-ness’, in ordinary usage ‘being absorbed in thought’, ‘meditation’, ‘contemplation’. The chapter title in Spanish is *Ensimismamiento y Alteración*.” José Ortega y Gasset: *Man and People*. Translated by Williard R. Trask. Norton, New York and London, 1963 (first ed. 1957), p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> O.C., I, 816.

<sup>116</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 202.

<sup>117</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 203. On the next pages we will compare some of Ortega’s ideas with those of John Stuart Mill, and this is a good occasion to begin, because Mill writes: “A world from which solitude is extirpated is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.” John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* (Ashley ed.) [1848], Book IV, chapter 6, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-principles-of-political-economy-ashley-ed> (Accessed 28 October, 2020).

things, turn their back on the world, and “address their own inwardness”. That is “ensimismarse” (be inside oneself). And from this inner world people return to the outer, but as “protagonists”, that is, with a self they did not possess before, and with a project to dominate some things, and to impose their will on them, “molding the planet” after the preferences of their inmost being.<sup>118</sup> Of course, this preliminary solitude does not involve denying that our vocation can be built on dialogue with others’ opinions and remarks. We all know the tension that can occur between our subjective affirmation and this dialogue. But the important thing is that the modern world gives priority to the first dimension, the inner world.

Thus, Ortega offers us this proposal of solitude as an answer to the problem of finding a criterion to create ourselves. Our problem, in effect, once we have decided not to accept common conventions without first subjecting them to a critical examination, is how to justify to ourselves the biographical argument that we propose to follow in our life, how to choose our own being in such a way that we can trust we made the right choice. How, in short, to be the artists of ourselves?<sup>119</sup> Is it based on an arbitrary choice?

Ortega does not think so. He answers these questions by observing that our imagination presents us with many possible types of lives we can choose, but when we have them in front of us, we notice that some of them attract us more, claim us or call us:

This call we feel toward a type of life, this imperative voice or cry rising from our most radical background, is our vocation.

It gives us a proposal—not an imposition—of what we must do. And life thus acquires the character of the realization of an imperative. It is in our power to implement it or not, to be faithful or unfaithful to our vocation. But what we

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<sup>118</sup> See for all this “Ensismamiento y alteración”, O.C., V, 531–550.

<sup>119</sup> In *Para un museo romántico* he writes that “the supreme art will be that which makes life itself an art.” O.C., II, 626. I think this idea of defining our identity by the choices we make is extremely important, especially when we currently see a trend in which people’s identity is characterized mainly by the injustices they have been subjected to, how much of a victim they have been. Of course, injustices must be strongly denounced, the problem is when the subject is seen as merely passive.

actually must do is not in our power. It is inexorably proposed to us. Therefore, all human life has a mission. The mission is this: the awareness everyone has of their most authentic being, which they are called on to fulfill.<sup>120</sup>

It is precisely because everyone must behave on the basis of their inner being and fulfill their own vocation that Ortega is decisively opposed to Kantian morality. This presents us with a duty that is unique and generic. But the truth is that everyone has their own duty, as inalienable as it is exclusive.<sup>121</sup> Thus, confronting Kant's criterion that one must always want what anyone else may want, Ortega insists that: "I cannot fully want but what arises in me as the desire of my entire individual person";<sup>122</sup> or, as he also writes in the same place: "Let us not measure, then, anyone but with themselves: what they are as a reality with what they are as a project. 'Become who you are'. Here is the just imperative."<sup>123</sup> The heroic ethics of the ancient Greek poet Pindar therefore contradicts Kant. And with this heroic ethics goes the conviction that "what is good in one man is bad in another."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Misión del bibliotecario*, O.C., V, 350; and see also *En torno a Galileo*, O.C., VI, 481-483. In *Sobre la leyenda de Goya*, Ortega says that self is a task, a project of existence. The self is "the most irrevocable thing in us ... The *self* works in regions much deeper than our will and our intelligence, and it is, of course, not a 'wish or a desire to be such and such', but a 'need to be such'." O.C., IX, 806; and see also the article "No ser hombre de partido", originally published in *La nación*, Buenos Aires, 15-6-1930, O.C., IV, 306-313. We could say that we have here the problem to decide, and this is a complex experience for many of us, if our vocation (what we must be) is invented or merely discovered.

<sup>121</sup> And to differentiate Ortega further from Kant we must add what he said in the course *¿Qué es filosofía?*: "the ethics I will perhaps present to you in a course next year differs from all the traditional ones as it does not consider duty as the primary idea in morality, but illusion. Duty is an important but secondary matter; it is the substitute, the *Ersatz* of illusion." O.C., VIII, 363.

<sup>122</sup> *Estética en el tranvía*, O.C., II, 181.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Conversación en el golf o la idea del dharma*, O.C., II, 526. For the purposes of our subject this is a central text. Answering a proposal to become a member of a golf club, Ortega replies: "If you did not play golf, you would commit the same sin I would do if I played. We would both have rebelled against our *dharma*." "Your *dharma* is to play golf, like mine is a *dharma* of writing and conversation." The philosophical conclusion is that "it is a mistake to consider morality as a system of prohibitions and generic duties, the same for all individuals." "I believe that not only each trade, but each individual, has their non-transferable and personal decency, their ideal repertoire of actions and gestures due." *loc. cit.* I would say—and this is a very important precision—that to defend a legitimate pluralism of lifestyles we do not need to question the possibility of the existence of universal ethical principles, but only to admit that these by themselves do not allow us to choose between varying ideals of life. Many ethical theories have equated both problems, which in turn can lead to the conviction that since the idea of a lifestyle valid for everyone is quite unattractive, so is ethics with claims of universality. See for this problem Hilary Putnam: "The French Revolution

We should, therefore, discover our own good, be faithful to what we are (potentially) and what impels us to a type of life where our perfection or plenitude will be found. That is why solitude is important. But is this enough? No, reflection must be exercised on the experience of life. Life, after all, is a journey endowed, at least often, with a substantive perplexity: man “always finds himself with a latent task, which is his destiny. And yet, he is never sure exactly what it is about, what there is to do.”<sup>125</sup>

The truth is that our inner voice rarely speaks clearly. After all, the conflict between different alternatives, not knowing what our true vocation is, is a well-known experience. That is why a courageous experimentation may be necessary. It is in the implementation, in the energetic clash with the outside world, where, Ortega writes, “the voice of the inside emerges clearly as a program of conduct.”<sup>126</sup> And it is in this contact with the world that we will find pain and unhappiness (that is, mistakes), or satisfaction and enjoyment (a sign of success). These feelings are our instructors about the correctness of the choices that we have been making: “The insistent bad mood is too clear a symptom that man lives against his vocation.”<sup>127</sup> In fact, Ortega is more adamant: “whoever renounces being the person they must be, has already killed themselves in life, they are suicide on foot.”<sup>128</sup> On the contrary: “Happiness is a life dedicated to occupations for which everyone has a unique vocation.”<sup>129</sup> And this has an important consequence: “All evil stems from a radical evil: not fitting into one’s own place. Hence there is no creative evil. Every perverse act is a phenomenon of compensation that is made by a human being that is incapable of creating a spontaneous, authentic act springing from their destiny.”<sup>130</sup>

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and the Holocaust: can Ethics be Ahistorical?” in Eliot Deutsch (Ed.): *Culture and Modernity. East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991, pp. 299–312; and, for the history of this moral ideal of authenticity, Charles Taylor: *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> *A una edición de sus obras*, O.C., V, 95. And in *Sobre la leyenda de Goya* Ortega says that “The self is an entity so secret, so arcane, that it often does not even appear clearly to oneself.” O.C., IX, 810.

<sup>126</sup> *Goethe, el libertador*, O.C., V, 148.

<sup>127</sup> *Pidiendo un Goethe desde dentro*, O.C., V, 133.

<sup>128</sup> “No ser hombre de Partido”, O.C., IV, 309.

<sup>129</sup> “Prólogo a *Veinte años de caza mayor* del conde de Yebes”, O.C., VI, 273.

<sup>130</sup> “No ser hombre de Partido”, O.C., IV, 309.

In our opinion, Ortega's aim with this thesis is to avoid a possible relativist consequence of his idea that developing our vocation is the only way to construct an authentic life. Because what would happen if our vocation were to be a thief? Ortega answers: "The man whose entelechy would be to become a thief *has to be* that, even if his moral ideas oppose it, repress his unchangeable destiny and ensure that his effective life is of a correct civility."<sup>131</sup> As there is a clear contradiction between morality and authenticity, Ortega asks a question in a footnote about whether this desire to be a thief is a manifestation of "authentic humanity".<sup>132</sup> But we could answer that according to his idea of human liberty, why not? If someone considers clearly that their humanity asks them to be a thief, who are we to question this internal call? Now, as we saw in our quotation, we have this optimistic answer: there is no creative evil, so making evil (in our case, being a thief) cannot be a real vocation.<sup>133</sup> Authenticity always creates good.

If going against our vocation puts us in a bad mood, we can affirm the opposite: when the continuous effort we immerse ourselves in makes us feel happy, we can be sure we are fulfilling our vocation.<sup>134</sup> It is true that people can renounce their authenticity, because, as we have seen, we are free, but the price of placing themselves outside of their destiny will be a feeling of interior disgust.

Although Ortega has given us a very coherent presentation of this ideal of human development, I would not say that the important aspect is the

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<sup>131</sup> *Pidiendo un Goethe desde dentro*, O.C., V, 130.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Pedro Cerezo Galán makes this clear: "There can be no wicked vocations" in "Páthos, éthos, lógos (en homenaje a Antonio Rodríguez Huéscar)", *Revista de Estudios Orteguianos*, 24, 2012, p. 105. Aside from what Ortega may have thought, I believe this can be disputed. Some would say, for example, that hunting for pleasure is a wicked vocation. Perhaps the ultimate reason for what we could call Ortega's optimism is the idea (which sounds like a biological foundation of morals) that "*Life is the cosmic fact of altruism*", *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, O.C., III, p 601; but this is quite doubtful, although I believe it is the kind of belief that allows Ortega to write that "morality ... is the very being of man when he follows his own mind and life-depending efficiency. A demoralized man is simply a man who is not in possession of himself, who is outside his radical authenticity and, therefore, does not live his life and because of that does not create or inflate his destiny." "Por qué he escrito <<El hombre a la defensiva>>", O.C., IV, 304.

<sup>134</sup> See *Las profesiones liberales*, O.C, X, 428.

original character of these ideas.<sup>135</sup> I want to underline that he is making his own an ideal characteristic of European modernity, a product of the best of Enlightenment and Romanticism, one that insists that each person must discover or create their identity autonomously; and, at the same time, Ortega is very conscious that this fidelity to oneself is achieved by dialoguing with our environment, addressing its requirements (the circumstance), but also having the courage to break with established customs and uses. In fact, this is an extremely important sign of being European, because, as Ortega says in *La rebelión de las masas*, “the European” is “a type that has put all their efforts and energy into the scale of individualism throughout their history.”<sup>136</sup> In fact, in the “Prólogo para franceses” to *La rebelión de las masas* Ortega uses this characteristic to define Europe. Thus, speaking of François Guizot’s *History of Civilization in Europe*, he says that “the man of today can learn there how freedom and pluralism are two reciprocal things and how both form the permanent entrails of Europe.”<sup>137</sup> In this same prologue he writes some words that John Stuart Mill could have made his own: “It was the so-called ‘individualism’ that enriched the world and *everyone* in the world, and it was this wealth that so fabulously proliferated the human plant.”<sup>138</sup> Ortega would have agreed perfectly with Mill when he writes in *On Liberty* that: “There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns. If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode.”<sup>139</sup> And Mill continues on the following page: “different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development ... The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to

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<sup>135</sup> Although I think that one of Ortega’s merits is that he presents them in a very connected fashion.

<sup>136</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 493. It is true that on other occasions Ortega defines Europe as science, saying that everything else is common to the rest of the planet. See *Asamblea para el progreso de las ciencias*, O.C., I, 186.

<sup>137</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 358.

<sup>138</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 366 (the emphasis is Ortega’s).

<sup>139</sup> John Stuart Mill: *Three Essays. On Liberty. Representative Government. The Subjection of Women*. With an introduction by Richard Wollheim. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1975, p. 83.



another. The same mode of life is a healthy excitement to one, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, while to another it is a distracting burthen, which suspends or crushes all internal life.”<sup>140</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that Ortega made clear that “Freedom in Europe has always meant a franchise to be who we truly are.”<sup>141</sup> Many years later, in a lecture delivered in 1953 entitled “¿Hay una conciencia cultural europea?” Ortega highlighted an implication of this commitment to creative individuality, the exceptionally dynamic character of modern European culture:

Suffering crises periodically belongs to the European culture, perhaps as its most characteristic feature. This means that it is not a closed culture, like the others, crystallized once and for all. That is why it would be a mistake to try to define European culture by specific contents. Her glory and her strength lies in the fact that she is always willing to go *beyond* what she was, beyond herself. European culture is a perpetual creation. It is not an inn, but a path that always forces you to walk. Now, Cervantes, who had lived a lot, tells us, as an old man, that the road is better than the inn.<sup>142</sup>

If all of the above represents a correct interpretation of Ortega’s thought, it must be recognized that it contradicts other statements he made

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<sup>140</sup> Loc. Cit. It is a pity that Ortega did not appreciate British philosophy in general. He wrote that “The English, who have done such important things in physics and in all human affairs, have so far shown themselves incapable of this form of *fair play* that is philosophy.” *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva*, IX, 1072. And in a footnote on the same page he affirms that the influence of Locke and Hume was the influence not of a philosophy but “of a series of very sharp objections to all philosophy.” Considering the specific case of Mill, Ortega writes that both Spencer and Stuart Mill “treat individuals with the same socializing cruelty that termites treat certain of their same genre, which they bait and then suck the substance out of. Up to that point the self-evident background on which their ideas danced naively was the primacy of the collective!” *Prólogo para franceses*, O.C., IV, 361. But this is a misunderstanding of Mill, because, quite apart from the fact that liberty can create human progress, Mill thought that the experience of liberty was valuable by itself, as a component of human happiness. See for this critique my article “Autonomía del yo y sociedad liberal”, *Telos. Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios Utilitaristas*, IX, 1, June 2000, 111–121. Some very interesting similarities between Mill and Ortega are mentioned by Andrew Dobson: *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pages 59, 69–70.

<sup>141</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 357.

<sup>142</sup> *Cultura europea y pueblos europeos*, O.C., VI, 950. and see also “De Europa Meditatio Quaedam” O.C., X, 73–135. Ortega always thought that the true future was the unity of Europe. For him, it was highly unlikely that a community as mature as the one already formed by the European peoples would not come close to creating some type of state organization. See the prologue to the fourth edition of *España invertebrada*, and the “Prólogo para franceses” of *La rebelión de las masas*.

defending the idea of the existence of a national character that controls what a people (which I believe cannot be anything other than a set of individuals) makes of itself: “A people cannot choose between several lifestyles: either it lives according to its own, or it does not live. From an ostrich that cannot [sic] run, it is useless to hope that it will instead fly like an eagle.”<sup>143</sup> Or also: “The individual cannot orient himself in the universe except through his race, because he is immersed in it like a drop in a passing cloud.”<sup>144</sup> In a world characterized by massive migrations, where people seek to establish themselves in new societies offering them a better future or a fuller development of their identity, these expressions shock us. Ortega posited that we should be the owners of ourselves, why should we be the property of a people at the same time?<sup>145</sup>

Nevertheless, notwithstanding a possible contradiction with the general lines of his thought found in some texts, the crucial point is a belief by Ortega which, in our view, remains completely current: the belief that conquering a social situation that respects an individual’s decision to create their lives based on their own criteria is not permanent. It is always threatened, at risk. This is the problem of *La rebelión de las masas*. Julián Marías warns in the Introduction to his edition of this work that by “masses” in Ortega we must not think of a social class or of permanent social groups. Instead, we must think in terms of “functions”: “in principle, everyone belongs to the mass, as they are not particularly qualified, and they only emerge from it to perform a minority function when they have a relevant skill or qualification, after which they reintegrate into the mass.”<sup>146</sup> If things were so simple, there would not be

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<sup>143</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 498. But we could contrast this text with the idea he presents on another occasion that when it comes to ethnic character, nothing is meant to be absolute and definitive: “The character of a people is nothing but the accumulation of its particular past up to now.” *Un rasgo de la vida alemana*, O.C., V, 341. We will see that for nations, future is far more important than past.

<sup>144</sup> *Meditaciones del Quijote*, O.C., I, 791; and see also the next page.

<sup>145</sup> I ask myself this question in relation to the following statement by Ortega: “There is no doubt: everyone belongs to a people, everyone is the property of a nation. Not that it should be like that, but that it is inexorably so, whether we want it or not. And the great question of every life consists of how, being so necessarily owned by a people, a puppet of a community, one also manages to be a person, an individual, an owner of oneself, the author and responsible for one’s own actions.” “La estrangulación de «Don Juan»”, O.C., V, 379.

<sup>146</sup> José Ortega y Gasset: *La rebelión de las masas (Con un prólogo para franceses, un epílogo para ingleses y un apéndice: Dinámica del tiempo)*. Introducción de Julián Marías. Espasa

many problems: medical patients (mass) should listen to their doctors (minority), who (now mass-turned), in turn, should accept architects' recommendations when building a house. But there is also the man-mass, who renounces the attainment of their individuality and seems unwilling to tolerate that project in others. Ortega thought that we had reached a situation in recent years that went against the ideal of individual development that we have seen in this essay; as if, when contemplating large cities and their urban sprawl, he became suspicious of running out of space to move according to our own internal wishes.<sup>147</sup> We would find ourselves in a situation in which people had no corner to retreat to or another place where they could be alone, and this would have been the consequence from many people demonstrating a totalitarian vocation, and, therefore, a willingness to invade those spaces. Ortega observes that there is "an epidemic delight in feeling like a mass, in not having an exclusive destination".<sup>148</sup> As he writes on the next page of the same text:

It seems many are again feeling nostalgia for the flock. They surrender themselves passionately to anything sheeplike within them. They want to march well together for life, on a collective route, wool close to wool and with a bowed head. That is why many peoples of Europe are looking for a shepherd and a mastiff.

The hatred of liberalism does not stem from another source. Because liberalism, instead of being a largely political matter, is a radical idea about life: it is believing that every human must be free to shape their individual and non-transferable destiny.<sup>149</sup>

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Calpe, Madrid, vigésima quinta edición, 1986, p. 25. I am not going to say that Marías is not right, but it is clear that, at least in other texts, the meaning of "masses" is quite different. For example: "I am not now speaking to the masses; I address myself to the new privileged men of this unjust society, to doctors and engineers, teachers and businessmen, industrialist and technologists." *Vieja y nueva política*, O.C., I, 725. They are the ones that could modernize Spain. The "masses" seem to be ordinary people here, in contrast to an elite of well-educated men; the ones that can develop a program to put Spain at the same level as the rest of Europe. And, in relation to the founding of the *Agrupación al servicio de la República*, it is remarkable that the explicit aim was "to mobilize all Spanish intellectuals to form a large band of propagandists for, and defenders of, the Spanish Republic. We call on all teachers of different educational levels, writers and artists, doctors, engineers, architects and technical people of all types, lawyers, solicitors and other men of law." O.C., IV, 662.

<sup>147</sup> See "Prólogo para franceses", *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 366.

<sup>148</sup> "Socialización del hombre", O.C., II, 830.

<sup>149</sup> "Socialización del hombre", O.C., II, 831.

These words are also relevant:

... people, society, increasingly tends to crush individuals, and the day this happens they will have killed the goose that lays the golden eggs. Instead of deifying the collective, the most important aspect would be for Europe, just as it created such wonderful techniques to dominate material nature, to also know how to treat social nature equally, and create some limits that allowed the collective's elemental forces to be subjected to the responsible man's will.<sup>150</sup>

Ortega's pessimism (which many of his contemporary circumstances make credible and reasonable) allows him to write that: "In our age it is the mass-man who dominates; it is he who decides."<sup>151</sup> Perhaps he was right in his own time. We must consider the triumph of fascism and Nazism. But both have now disappeared. Although this does not mean there are no evil germs in our society willing to impose their majoritarian will without any respect for minorities or the freedoms of others. Albeit in the form of populisms, of gregarious and standardizing nationalisms or of religious fundamentalisms, they are still here.

How can we defend the value of individuality in the face of these threats? Firstly, we would need to make everyone aware of the importance of this ideal summarized on the previous pages. Especially because there will always be demagogues, "impresarios of *alteration*" willing to harass people so they cannot think and doubt by themselves, and trying to ensure "they are kept herded together in crowds so they cannot reconstruct their individuality in the unique place where it can be reconstructed: solitude. They cry down service to truth, and in its place offer us *myths*."<sup>152</sup> In this regard, and with an expression that Ortega would have liked, pedagogy (which here is the unmasking of certain ideas or proposals as mere myths) is a way of doing politics.

Here we can add that Ortega's vision of liberal democracy is the complement of this ideal. We can understand this if we talk about Ortega's perspectivist theory, which means that: "To achieve the

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<sup>150</sup> "Conferencia en Valladolid", O.C., IX, 1436; however, this quotation is not from Ortega but from the press version (*El Sol*) of his lecture.

<sup>151</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 401.

<sup>152</sup> *Ensimismamiento y alteración*, O.C., V, 546.

maximum possible truth, individuals should not, as for centuries has been preached, supplant their spontaneous viewpoint by another exemplary and normative viewpoint, which used to be called '*sub specie aeternitatis* view of things'. Eternity's viewpoint is blind; it sees nothing, it does not exist. Instead, they should seek to be faithful to the personal imperative that their individuality represents."<sup>153</sup> At this level Ortega is quite outright: "The individual viewpoint seems to me the only one the world can be looked at from in its truth." Or, similarly: "Each man has a mission of truth. Where my eye is, there is no other: what my eye sees of reality no other eye sees." And the conclusion is that we (each of us as individuals) are as necessary as we are irreplaceable. There is a lesson to learn here: "Instead of quarreling, let us integrate our visions in a generous spiritual collaboration, and as the independent banks meet in the thick vein of the river, let us compose the torrent of reality."<sup>154</sup> Consequently, each individual, each generation and each epoch turns out to be an instrument of knowledge, and we will obtain an integral truth by joining up or weaving together our partial viewpoints, what my neighbor sees with what I see, and so on. Ortega is so convinced of his theory that, when he discusses bolshevism and fascism, he writes of "the positive aspects of their respective doctrines which, taken separately, evidently represent partial truths. Who in the universe does not possess a tiny portion of the truth?"<sup>155</sup> However, this perhaps too generous concession must be balanced with the idea that there are those who see more than others. Some perspectives are more encompassing than others, and, more importantly, in the specific case of bolshevism and fascism, quite apart from the tiny portion of truth that they could represent, Ortega clarifies that they lack the most important factor, the desire to dialogue with other viewpoints, the will of coexistence: "Undoubtedly, whoever raises

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<sup>153</sup> *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, O.C., III, p. 648. And Ortega continues: "The same thing happens with peoples. Instead of considering non-European cultures barbaric, we will begin to respect them as styles of confrontation with the cosmos equivalent to our own. There is a Chinese perspective as justified as the Western perspective."

<sup>154</sup> These quotations are taken from "Verdad y perspectiva", *Confesiones de «El espectador»*, O.C., II, 162-163. We could refer to this thesis as "epistemological individualism" given that: "Reality gives itself up in individual perspectives."

<sup>155</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 431.

his fist or holds out his hand to the wind means: ‘With this gesture I am making clear my enlistment in a party. I am, above all, a partisan man and, therefore, I am against the other parts of society that are not mine. I am a combatant, and with others I do not seek peace, but, with all clarity, frank struggle. To those who oppose me, those who are not from my party, even if they do not confront me, I do not offer connivance or agreement, but first fight them and defeat them, and then treat them as defeated.’”<sup>156</sup>

The cited texts tell us, firstly, about the importance of the vision or perspective each of us may have, and, secondly, they propose an ethics of collaboration and integration of these viewpoints. If we use them to study the relationships between social groups, we will perceive that, unfortunately, these groups have a kind of natural tendency to create watertight compartments, to become increasingly locked in their own perspective, in their reduced horizon; thus losing all sensitivity to social interdependence.<sup>157</sup> But this tendency must be resisted at all costs. As we have just seen, in Ortega there is an extraordinary conviction of the importance of other viewpoints that must be considered. We must realize the mutual dependence of different groups and the need for coordination. In fact, Ortega writes in *España invertebrada* that “a nation is, ultimately, a huge community of individuals and groups that count on one another.”<sup>158</sup> And as he continues:

In normal states of nationalization, when one class wants something for themselves, they try to attain it by looking for an agreement with others. Instead of immediately satisfying their desire, they believe they are obliged to obtain it through the general will. They, therefore, make their private will follow a long route that passes through other wills in the nation and receives the consecration of legality from them. This effort to convince our neighbors to accept our particular aspiration is called legal action.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, p. 282.

<sup>157</sup> See *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 459.

<sup>158</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 465. We could specify that this would be a “healthy nation”, because, unfortunately, there are other (and destructive) ways to be a nation. Civil wars could be an example.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

Where does this function of counting on others take place? In public institutions, in parliament. For Ortega parliament is the place of national coexistence, a place where we have to consider others: “The *Cortes* [the Spanish Parliament] is the national institution par excellence, because in it, the countless particularisms see themselves as compelled to face each other, to limit themselves, to be tamed and nationalized”.<sup>160</sup>

We have here a political ethics of dialogue. Anyone who does not want to do so will resort to what Ortega calls “direct action”, the imposition of their particular will. This is the practice of pronouncements or *coups d'état*, either in its military version or in versions more typical of today's times, where totalitarian visions are gradually imposed.<sup>161</sup> On the contrary, Ortega writes in *La rebelión de las masas* that liberal democracy is the prototype of “indirect action”.<sup>162</sup> Why is the adjective “liberal” important in “liberal democracy”? Because it implies that public power limits itself so that those who do not think or feel like the majority can live in the State. Liberalism, Ortega says, is, at this level, “the supreme generosity”.<sup>163</sup>

We would say that it is a position of supreme respect. It respects opposition because it recognizes the value of plurality and is willing to live with it. This is a central point because what is decisive for a nation to exist is not what happened yesterday, the past, but to have a program

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<sup>160</sup> O.C., III, 388. The square brackets contain my explanatory addition. At this level, deciding to live with others and to respect their public life is very important. See O.C., IV, 758.

<sup>161</sup> Recently Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have written a book, *How Democracies Die* (Penguin Random House, New York, 2018), about the danger of democracies sliding into autocracy when people deny the legitimacy of political adversaries. Authoritarian politicians sell the view that their adversaries are subversive and unpatriotic criminals, or that they form a threat to national security or the existing way of life.

<sup>162</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 420.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Ortega makes it clear that democracy answers the question of who should exercise political power by responding that it corresponds to all citizens. Liberalism, on the other hand, answers the question of the limits of political power, whether exercised by all people or by an autocrat. And its answer is that political power cannot be absolute, “but rather that people have rights prior to any interference by the State. It is, therefore, the tendency to limit the intervention of public power.” *Notas del vago estío*, O.C., II, 541-542. It is interesting to note here that the limits of the power that society or the State can exert over the individual were the main subject of Mill's *On Liberty*.

for tomorrow.<sup>164</sup> The resonance of the past is not enough to live together. We are brought together by what we are going to do tomorrow, the task we propose to do. And because of that, Ortega writes approvingly: “Renan said that a nation is a daily plebiscite.”<sup>165</sup> In *La rebelión de las masas* he speaks of the exceptional fortune of this idea, since it operates as a real liberation in us. Faced with a common blood, language and past that are like prisons, we discover that a nation is not something that exists, but something that is made.<sup>166</sup> It is better to build it together with a desire to respect and enjoy the plurality our neighbors represent and to coexist without a homogenizing will that would impose our way of doing or seeing things on others. This gives us the idea that liberalism (respect for others’ differences) can lead to democracy, because we want other people to speak their points of view. And, in turn, democracy allows those differences to flourish. Of course, this liberal democracy, in which the two elements mutually reinforce each other, would be an enviable situation.

Here we must add something equally important, as sometimes “liberal” has the meaning of opposition to the State’s economic intervention. This is not Ortega’s idea. He recognizes that a certain material standard of living is required to make it possible to participate in the cultural world (we could say to make the individual development discussed here possible). To underline this point, he quotes a French poet (he does not give their name):

When you have enough to pay the rent  
You can start thinking about being virtuous

And he comes to the conclusion that for this reason “the first thing to be done is to make the social economy more just.”<sup>167</sup> In another of his writings, “Miscelanea socialista”, he notes that socialism, by proclaiming

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<sup>164</sup> See *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 442.

<sup>165</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 457.

<sup>166</sup> See *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 486.

<sup>167</sup> *La ciencia y la religión como problemas políticos*, O.C., VII, 135.



the interventionist principle, presents itself with Lasalle as the born enemy of individualist liberalism:

Lasalle launched an incontrovertible objection to it ... The objection is this: liberalism supports the State's abstention in relations between individuals and social groups to remain impartial and to place them on equal terms. But it does not realize the State is an old instrument that has been energetically intervening in social reality for centuries. If it suddenly pretends to abstain from this intervention, it only succeeds in increasing the inequalities it has been introducing for centuries. The State's only equitable position would be to intervene against its past intervention, to destroy privileges, because privilege means a favor done by the State.<sup>168</sup>

Our only comment is that this proposal Ortega seems to agree with does not actually counter "individualist liberalism". On the contrary, it helps make it possible.<sup>169</sup> Consequently, we would like to conclude with one last quotation: "for us liberty must mean two things: concerning the individual, extreme legality of their actions, negative liberty; concerning the State, the obligation to put the individual increasingly in a more perfect condition to make use of that liberty".<sup>170</sup> Rather than being a threat to liberty, democracy would be the mechanism that might improve it. The importance of the circumstance for Ortega can never be overemphasized; and, undoubtedly, anyone living in a democracy that approves its members' desire to be their own novelists is very fortunate.<sup>171</sup> If Ortega helps us to become aware of this and provides us with a vocabulary to vindicate it, we cannot doubt that reading his writings and dialoguing with him is worthwhile.

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<sup>168</sup> O.C., I, 565.

<sup>169</sup> This reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir writing about the project "to set freedom free"; that is, to build situations that allow people to effectively carry out their transcendence. It is clear that having leisure or economic security allows us to exercise our freedom to a greater degree. See Simone de Beauvoir: *The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 549.

<sup>170</sup> "Los problemas nacionales y la juventud", O.C., VII, 129. Of course, the different meanings of liberty have occupied philosophers for a long time, and in this context, we must remember Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" and all the discussions it generated.

<sup>171</sup> Ortega writes that "Man is a novelist of himself" in *Prólogo para alemanes*, O.C., IX, 137–138.

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