

# Self-absorption and technique: recent contributions for a systematic interpretation of Ortega y Gasset's work

## *Ensimismamiento y tecnicidad: aportaciones recientes para una interpretación sistematizada de la obra de Ortega y Gasset*



**Luis Núñez Ladevéze.** Full Professor at Complutense University (now retired). He is currently Professor Emeritus of CEU San Pablo University and Coordinator of the Doctoral Programme in Social Communication at *CEINDO* as well. Professor Núñez Ladevéze has completed a total of six, 6-year research terms, and has held the position of PI on six R&D projects since the year 2000. Moreover, he currently serves as the honorary president and founder of the International Association of Researchers and is the founder and president of the editorial board of *Doxa Comunicación*, which has an i10 index of 81 and an h-index of 22, according to Google Scholar Metrics. Other posts have included Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Institute of Communication Arts (TRACOR) and Advisor to the Council of Universities. Professor Núñez Ladevéze is a member of the following organisations as well: ANECA, ACAP, ACADEMIA, ANEP, CENAI, AQU, ACSUG, ACSUCYL, and ICMEDIANET. He holds a PhD in Law, a Bachelor's Degree and Doctorate in Philosophy and Arts, and a BA in Information Science. He has also directed 25 doctoral theses. Chair. Emeritus professor.

CEU San Pablo University, Spain

ladeveze@telefonica.net

ORCID: 0000-0002-5684-9885



**Ignacio Álvarez de Mon.** Bachelor's Degree in Law from the Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, *ICADE* (Spain). MBA from Houston University (USA). PhD in Political Science and Sociology from the *Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca* (Spain). Moreover, he is the author of the following books; *De ti depende* (It depends on you), *El desafío de la felicidad* (The challenge of being happy), *Eduardo, estás despedido* (Eduardo, you're fired), *Emprendedores Sociales* (Social Entrepreneurs), and *El trabajo de tu vida* (The job of your life), as well as numerous case studies, articles, and research papers published in scientific journals. Professor of Leadership at the IE Business School. He has worked at the Universidad Antonio de Nebrija as a professor and director of the Department of Economics and Business Administration, as well as holding the post of professor at the Universidad Carlos III and Pontificia de Comillas (ICADE) in Madrid. He has also been a visiting professor at Ashridge Business School (UK), Porto Business School (Portugal), the *Universidad de los Andes* (Colombia), the *Instituto de Estudios de la Empresa* (Uruguay), and the *Instituto de Desarrollo Empresarial* (Ecuador).

Instituto de Empresa, Spain

ignacio.alvarezdemon@ie.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-4014-2180



**Margarita Núñez Canal.** PhD in Communication from CEU San Pablo University (2013), Professor Núñez Canal has also completed a Master's Degree in Economics and Business Administration (MBA) from IESE University of Navarra (1988), and is a research professor at ESIC university and ESIC Business & Marketing School in Spain as well. Moreover, she is also a researcher on the CONVERED project (CSO2016-74980-C2-1-R) which is entitled "From mass culture to social networks: media convergence in the digital society". Professor Núñez Canal is also Director of Excellence in Teaching & Learning at ESIC Business & Marketing School in Spain as well.

ESIC Universidad / ESIC Business & Marketing School, Spain

margarita.nunez@esic.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-5377-1592

### How to cite this article:

Núñez Ladevéze, L.; Álvarez de Mon, I. and Núñez Canal, M. (2022). Self-absorption and technique: recent contributions for a systematic interpretation of Ortega y Gasset's work. *Doxa Comunicación*, 35, pp. 379-393.

<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n35a1680>

### Abstract:

The digitised edition of the Complete Works (*Obras Completas*) of the Centre for Orteguian Studies of the Ortega y Gasset Foundation (*Centro de Estudios Orteguianos de la Fundación José Ortega y Gasset*), in which a meticulous work method has been used to chronologically organise his philosophical and journalistic endeavours, has served as an effective platform for renewed interest in his legacy. Ortega y Gasset forecasted several highly important phenomena, the importance of which can now be verified, such as the accelerated advance of technology, Europe's lower profile as a world leader, transfer of the revolt of the masses to social networks, and the close proximity of the planet due to advances in communication. The fruition of these prognostications and the meticulousness of the edition have created renewed interest in studying his work, which has been reflected in the recent publication of writings that highlight the foresighted originality of Orteguian philosophy. These works concur in emphasising that the core essence that gives meaning to Ortega's work as a whole is to be found in his philosophy of technique. This paper analyses a new approach that updates the validity of the Madrid-born philosopher's vision by focusing on his concept of technology.

### Keywords:

Philosophy of the technique; technology; mass culture; robotics.

### Resumen:

La edición digitalizada de las Obras Completas del Centro de Estudios Orteguianos de la Fundación José Ortega y Gasset, en la que se ha empleado un meticuloso método de trabajo para organizar cronológicamente su labor filosófica y periodística, ha servido de eficaz plataforma para renovar el interés por su labor. Ortega y Gasset pronosticó importantes fenómenos, cuya importancia puede actualmente comprobarse, como la aceleración de la técnica, la pérdida de la presencia europea en el mando del mundo, el traspaso a las redes sociales de la rebelión de las masas y la reducción planetaria por el avance de las comunicaciones. El cumplimiento de estas previsiones y la pulcritud de la edición han renovado el interés por estudiar su obra. Un interés que se muestra en la reciente publicación de trabajos que subrayan la originalidad previsor de la filosofía Orteguiana. Coinciden en destacar que el meollo que da sentido a su conjunto se encuentra en su filosofía de la técnica. Este trabajo analiza el nuevo enfoque que actualiza la vigencia de la visión del filósofo madrileño centrándola en su concepción de la técnica.

### Palabras clave:

Filosofía de la técnica; tecnología; cultura de masas; robótica.

## 1. The myth of the monolith and the origin of technique in Ortega y Gasset

After reading Ortega's assertion that "between the pure beast that was the anthropoid and the glimpse of humanity that was early Palaeolithic man, Nature made a qualitative leap forward" (VI, p. 317), the natural reaction for anyone who has seen Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* is to associate this image with those at the beginning of the movie. Arthur Clarke's short story, *The Sentinel*, which inspired Kubrick, is less impressive than the graphic sequence from the film narrative of the latter; those Goyaesque images in which a humanoid primate grabs the bone of a tapir and strikes his rival, as the frenetic pace of the fight becomes a rhythmic ritual in which he wields the bone... In this moment of brilliance, the spectator perceives that the protagonist suddenly becomes humanised when he realises that he can assign a useful function to an instrument... Perhaps, in an Orteguian way, it is thus understood that if *natura non facit saltus* (nature does not make leaps), the one that occurs in the anthropoid might be exactly what historically leads to going in the opposite direction of that of a nature that does not readily accept it.

It is worth recalling this epic moment that links the action of an anthropomorphic being to the origin of a fabulous expansion, whose theme would later represent the history of human progress. It bears returning to it now in order to illustrate a commentary on the occasion of the recent publication of several texts that have dealt with Ortega y Gasset's philosophy, which have highlighted the concept of technique as the main driving force of his work. We are not hindered by being labelled *simplistic* with regard to the

opinion that Kubrick's film condenses the essence of Ortega's explanation of history. In two intense hours, this narrative links the origin of human wanderings to the technological present day, and then projects it into an uncertain, robotic future. If there were any doubts that Kubrick's intention was focused in this direction, one only needs to listen to the spatial solemnity of the chords of Richard Strauss's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

Therefore, let us dwell on the unexpected presence of the monolith that illuminates the mind of the anthropopithecus. It is a mythical explanation for a transformation that must have taken place at one time. Yet it is no more mythical than the "mere hypothesis of malaria" (IX p. 1347; X p. 26), or Fernando Vela's supposition of a change due to a disease, "that produces a hypertrophy of the brain, which in turn leads to its hyper functioning" (2010). Whether mythical or hypothetical, the explanation as an anomaly of the qualitative leap forward is anecdotal, and what is relevant is that the leap, perhaps genetic, introduces a mental activity that links together behaviours to connect a "sketch of humanity" in order to present history and project it toward an uncertain future.

The myth of the monolith weaves a narrative. Humanised by the impregnation of an artefact, perhaps of divine origin, or possibly of a rational, technical source (what else can the monolith represent, whether or not it is a "thing" that appears without reason or cause?), the primate gains an advantage in the struggle for domination over what appear to be his fellow primates when he understands that the bone he wields can be used as a "weapon". There is nothing in the tapir's bone that makes it a weapon other than the function of holding it in order to convert it into a weapon. This is the idea that illuminates the anthropoid from within. To describe this action using Ortega's concept, he "imagines" and "invents" the practical utility of using the ossification to attack, as he understands that he can increase the effectiveness of his claws by grasping the bone. This understanding does not dwell within nor proceed from any characteristic of the bone he wields. It emerges suddenly as an occurrence of the one who holds it. In Orteguian terms, in one way or another, the "intention" to utilise is the act of "making something for a reason" (V p. 368), which proceeds from an internal activity.

Technique provides advantages for "the plan of attack on circumstances" (V p. 537), a plan that modulates historical change. People without history are entrenched in the ritualised randomness of their technique. The primitive struggles against his environment with ideas that he executes to modify it by using tools that project his bodily power outside himself. Man has history, not nature, because this change of circumstances is fuelled by the novation of technical and moral ideas. Ortega assumed that technique is socially ambivalent, an instrument of cooperation or domination that extends the corporeality and ideas of the primitive beyond his organism. He dominates the uncontrollability of nature and strengthens his supremacy by adapting it to the demands that denaturalise his progressive hominization. He can apply his inner strength to promote cooperation with others, or to impose domination of some over others. Because he is a technician, "man lives with the permanent risk of dehumanisation" (V p. 540; X p. 148).

## 2. The pretence of a system

The most recent work on Ortega y Gasset (Alonso 2021) insists that he was a thinker whose variations are explained by the assumption that he modifies his criteria so as to make them coherent with the demands prompted by changes in knowledge. I have written "insists" because this approach has been maintained with varying degrees of success since the first studies

appeared on the Madrid philosopher's work. Alonso's approach finds the cohesive force of ideas that allow the variations of his philosophical work to be woven together, integrating them into a perspective related to quest. It is clear that the intention to offer comprehensive coherence by adapting to the changes in the scientific and philosophical landscape commits the philosopher to going through various phases.

The novelty of Alonso's work is not the result of finding a coherent thread in the profusion of Ortega's texts, but rather in establishing within the philosophy of technique the understanding of the modulations of the thread. Many exegetes have started from the assumption that Ortega's work involves continuous re-drafting that allows for overall understanding, yet only recently has the focus been on the fact that Ortega finds what he is looking for in his concept of technique. Alonso's note gives an account of how this substratum of systemisation underlying the adaptations has been centralised in the philosophy of technique. However, contrary to what Alonso believes, it is not "the first work that deals with Ortega's reflections on technique in a comprehensive manner" (p. 12). "For Ortega, technique is a constituent element of human life [...] the possibility for the human being to execute diverse, vital projects", writes García Madalena in his doctoral thesis (p. 19). Furthermore, in the thesis offered by Gutiérrez Simón (2020), this researcher examines the practical inspiration that links Ortega's philosophy to pragmatism.

The interpretation of Ortega's philosophy as a search for coherence goes back a long way. This endeavour has been difficult due to the boldness of his evocative style and the all too often journalistic way in which it is presented in different textual formats (cf. Blanco 2003)<sup>1</sup> The philosopher from Madrid has been repeatedly examined under the assumption that his manner of cultivating philosophy also concealed the pretence of a system. The basis for this judgment can be found in the words of Ortega himself: "We have to represent the variations of thinking [...] as a change of orientation in man that leads him to see before himself other truths different from those of yesterday. Rather than a change in truths, man is the one who changes, and because he changes he goes through that series of truths" (VIII p. 120). Our commentary arises from the common belief that the systematic background of Ortega's thought offers a range of possibilities open to continuation –a "lode to be exploited" of "enormous potential and completely current relevance" (Alonso, p. 13). Its scope transcends that of so many philosophers who explicitly reveal their desire for a system. Alonso outlines this conviction with precision made possible by the digitisation of the *Obras Completas* [Complete Works]. By organising the Orteguian corpus according to the strict chronology of the texts, the interpretative course of an original thought obscured by a plethora of arbitrary compilations of his publications has become possible.

This commentary is reinforced by the fact that these current resources reproduce a precursor approach devoted to examining his philosophical journey. Only five years after his death, Jean Paul Borel made use of the *Obras Completas* [Complete Works], which the journal *Revista de Occidente* began to publish in 1946 in order to "advance a few steps in the direction in which he did not have time to continue" (p. 41), with the intention of finding a system concealed in the miscellany of compilations by rearranging the references in chronological order. The expository order adheres strictly to the chronology of the texts. It disregards the published groupings that artificially bring together essays presented under the same title, as if they belonged to the same work. The journal *Revista de Occidente* had published nine volumes at the time, of which the last three were compilations of foundational, posthumous writings, such as *El hombre y la gente* [Man and People] and *La idea de principio en Leibniz* [The

---

1 González Galán (2021) has published a laborious commentary on the ordering, classification, and correlation of references on the Spanish reception of Ortega's work that does not directly affect this research.

idea of principle in Leibniz]. For this reason, it is interesting to highlight the similarities between this early chronological view of Ortega, which traces an underlying continuity, and the recent ones that support the same criterion by focusing on his philosophy of technique. Borel is explicit: “We will try to show that Ortega’s work represents a coherent system” (p. 23).

### 3. I am myself and my circumstance

Like the more recent studies by Alonso, Gutiérrez Simón, and García Madalena, Borel’s earlier research also tried to show that it is necessary to interpret the entirety of Ortega’s work as one unit. For Borel, the common thread that runs through his work is an attempt to delimit the differentiating aspect between the human and the animal in order to demarcate where the original human aspect lies. The new approach also shares this criterion, yet specifies that man has an inner world of experiences that is joined to the outer world through technical mediation. The confluence of both worlds determines a circumstance in which the individual becomes more social. According to Borel, what humanises man in Orteguian thought is a reactive intervention by the individual in order to fulfil himself in the previously given circumstance in which he finds himself, and to which he reacts. By patiently following the dates of the philosopher’s texts, and perhaps accepting the outline of Fernando Vela, whom Borel quotes<sup>2</sup>, he shows how the expressive formula, “I am myself and my circumstance”, expounded for the first time in 1914 in *Meditaciones del Quijote* [Meditations on Quixote] (I, 757), led Ortega to apply an exegetical methodology that allows the interpreter to penetrate the system hidden beneath the profusion of his writings. This formula, an apothegm to which the philosopher returns repeatedly on so many occasions, represents a principle that gives meaning to the entirety for the purpose of explaining that “the world is the circumstance experienced by an individual”, and “the circumstance is the place where man’s activity is inserted into the world” (p.26). If Ortega’s philosophy seems dispersed, it is because of the “profound changes that the world in which he lived, and of which he spoke, was undergoing” (p. 42). The perpetual factor that distinguishes hominization from animality in the background of the system comes from the fact that the formula, “I am myself and my circumstance”, articulates the transversal method of historical reason. From this method emerges the system of thought that explains how circumstance engenders historicity. This formula serves as the thread of the system that supports his philosophy. The connection between formula, method of inquiry, and the criterion of systemisation gives meaning to the corpus assembled in the *Obras Completas* [Complete Works]. In his work entitled *Meditación de la técnica* [Meditation on technique], Ortega does not grasp the link between “circumstance” and the anthropological dimension of technique as an explanatory assumption of historical change, yet he has already shown the thread of continuity that allows us to see a system in its entirety.

Our point of view shares the concept that the root of Ortega’s vision lies in the interdependence of the notion of circumstance with his philosophy of technique. To go one step further from Alonso’s understanding that for Ortega, “Technique is an essential dimension of human life” (p.19), we will attempt to verify that technique is not simply “one” aspect, but rather “the crucial aspect”. It could be said that Ortega presents man as a technical being by nature, if not for the fact that the progressive distancing that historically takes place between man, who is an animal characterised by having an inner world, and nature, which is understood

2 Vela anticipates that Ortega’s philosophy constitutes an open system, and he goes ahead to contrast “I am myself and my circumstance” with the Cartesian saying, “*cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am), as opposing principles of each system.

as the outer world in which this being acts, is a consequence of technique. As technique is an action that permeates this external world, what appears to man as natural is already a denaturalisation that distances him from a primordially given nature.

This is the theme of Kubrick's story. The film imagines how a "circumstance" arises that cannot be explained as the result of any evolutionary process. What is most inscrutable is the following distinct aspect: how to explain the emergence of a being that distinguishes itself by opposing the external world through the use of its internal world in assigning functions to things in order to use them. In the abrupt genesis of a consciousness that suddenly intuitively assigns a function in order to attribute it to an object, the Orteguian imprint on the cinematic story is obvious. Kubrick presents the tale that Ortega y Gasset narrates in his *Meditación de la técnica* [Meditation on Technique] by showing that technique is the distinctive feature of the human narrative as opposed to animality, which is devoid of a narrative.

#### 4. Man has no nature, but rather technique

Recent interpretations of Ortega y Gasset, similar to that of Kubrick's epic film, place technique at the centre of his narrative anthropology. The specific theme of "dictations made on the run" (V p. 527), hastily written in the academic lessons related to *Meditación de la técnica* [Meditation on technique], is the link that establishes continuity between his earlier and later work. On this point, Ortega does not conceive technique as a story of the renewal of artisanship, gadgets, and mechanisation that accelerates in the modern age when it becomes an application of empirically-controlled, scientific theory. He sees it as anthropology. From its origins, an active, internal technique spills over into external technique in order to insulate history in the face of mutating circumstances. In contrast to the static nature of the mineral, which seems to be located in a space outside of time, divergent from the alteration that places the animal in a world that does not modify the regimen of its impermanence, the use of fantasy and imagination ideates actions that change the circumstance in time (historicity) and space (*super-nature*). Man is not nature, but history, because from the moment a genetic mutation takes place, he thinks when he acts, and he acts when he thinks. Technique is an anthropological reaction to circumstance. It is the differential condition, or the explanatory assumption that governs coherence in the before and after of his texts.

Ortega believed that what is distinctly human can be understood by contrasting the Aristotelian permanence of the external world with the mutable history of societies. Consequently, the statute of distinctive unity is not rigidly pre-established. Instead, it emanates from the constant mutability of its being, or to state it literally by using another of his most characteristic formulas, "man does not have nature, but history." One does not have to go far to discover the origin of a breach between animality and humanity, expressed in *Meditación de la técnica* [Meditation on technique]: "So, it does not matter that in the circumstance here and now there is no fire. We will make it" (V, 557). Making fire is a task that is already a technical chore. As in the story of the monolith, historicity is the element that connects the primitive action of "two sticks and tinder to make fire" with modern automation and the internet.

Thus, it follows that man is born and becomes socialised in an environment that is presented to him in a natural state, yet is permeated by the cultural function of the instruments devised to modify it. He makes the tools because he conceives them. Making involves thinking, and thinking is the "making" of thoughts in order to use them. This is the kind of activity that animals are never able to do, and which from its most distant, unknown origins, distinguishes intelligent animality from brute animality

Human technical presence is the main determinant of historical change of the circumstance. It is a consequence of inventiveness, imagination, fantasy, and the effort to adapt the external world to a subject who ideates how to use a bone as if it were a mallet. There is nothing in the bone by which its osseous nature inspires a particular use. Using it for a purpose means inventing a use that is not inherent to the bone in order to perceive it as something other than what it naturally is. If knowing how to make something is a technical product, the invention of a function is a technical act. By integrating the adjudication of the function to the fantasy of consciousness in this way, the technical act becomes an intellection in order to discover how to use it. Understanding the use of the allocated function is an act that emerges from profound reflection. Its expansion is inaccessible to animality, which does not need to be understood, and distinguishes humanity, which must be narrated in order to be interpreted: "History has to be right" (VI p. 539), for "the minimum assumption of history is that the subject of which it speaks can be understood" (VIII, p. 121).

### 5. *Homo sapiens* or *homo faber*. Discrepancy with Husserl

Current re-examinations of Ortega's work pinpoint the qualitative leap from animal to human based on the philosophy of technique, which Borel fails to find. They locate it by understanding the narrative anthropology of technique. It is not reduced to the history of inventions or a description of how artefacts historically replace one another. If Ortega believes that man does not have nature, but history, this is because the history of man is the history of his seclusion in himself in order to understand what sense it makes to go outside himself by undertaking actions that manifest themselves in the modification of the surrounding, external world, of the circumstance in which the corrective action taken by oneself unfolds. The reaction to the environment is directly linked to the idea that historicity is based on the fact that it is inherently technical. He does not build because he inhabits. He builds himself in order to inhabit. He does not act because he is. He acts in order to be. He does not exist because he thinks. He thinks in order exist.

Ortega's criticism of the definition of man can be found in this technical capability: "During a long tradition as *homo sapiens* (wise man), a rational animal by nature". The correct definition is *homo faber* (man the maker), or a being who intervenes technically in nature in order to modify it. Rationality manifests itself in this intervention as something practical. Ortega questions the definition of *homo sapiens* because he denies the concept that thought is the guarantee of certainty in the external world, as proposed by Husserl's phenomenology, following the model of the Cartesian *cogito*. Contemplation is "a unique case of man's technical activity" (VIII p. 621). Nevertheless, the expression *homo sapiens* is not rejected. Rather, it is simply questioned by Ortega:

"The Ancients, and those of the Middle Ages, had their minimal definition of man which, strictly speaking and to our shame, has not been surpassed: that of the rational animal. We agree with this definition, yet the struggle for us is that it has become problematic to know clearly what it means to be an animal and what it means to be rational" (VII, p. 121)<sup>3</sup>.

He is not saying that reason is not the differential of the species, but that reason is demonstrated in technique, and that one thing cannot be separated from the other: "We must invert the traditional order by saying that man does not make useful instruments because he thinks and knows how to do so; on the contrary, he is *homo sapiens* because, whether he wants to or not, he is *homo faber* [...]" (VIII pp. 621-623). Ortega had agreed with Bühler in the pragmatic development of the *Cratylus*, according to which:

3 Original Spanish: "Los antiguos y medievales tenían su definición mínima del hombre, en rigor y para nuestra vergüenza, no superada: es el animal racional. Coincidimos con ella, la pena es que para nosotros se ha hecho no poco problemático saber claramente qué es ser animal y qué es ser racional" (VII, p. 121).

“Human language belongs to ‘instruments’ or, stated in Platonic terms, it is an organon [...] Linguistics thus finds in the system of a gestural nature, which is characteristic of language, the mental mode of *homo faber*, a creator and user of instruments” (p.67)<sup>4</sup>.

The soul, and even the body itself, is a tool of life: “It is mine because it is the immediate instrument I use to deal with other things [...] It is the universal instrument, or organon, that I have; that is why my body is the supreme corporality” (X, p.221).

The way in which man generates this organon of making things, symbolised by the influence of the monolith, remains out of reach. According to Ortega's view on this point, “History is narrative reason, a narration that explains, or an explanation that consists of narration” (VI p. 539). He constantly impugns the phenomenological attempt to make deductions about the world based on the Cartesian *cogito*, as established by the idealist programme of his master Husserl: “The consciousness of the existence of ‘I’, separate from and before the environment, is only one thought among others of the man who was, and is, existing in the real world” (IV p. 575). Even though man is not alone with reality in his circumstance (i.e., “the environment”, cf. Núñez Ladevéze and Núñez Canal, 2022), reality is part of his circumstance. Human praxis must contend with the circumstance in which it is socialised, an environment given beforehand that is considered natural, or “interpretations that man gives to what he first encounters” (V p. 571), consisting of a set of beliefs and pre-established technical activities. Husserl calls it “the surrounding world” (1979 § 58 ff.), and he adds “of life” (p. 210), and later, he calls it the “life-world” (1991 § 64 and 66).

The discrepancy with Husserl lies in the fact that this life-world cannot be subordinated to the consciousness of subjectivity. “We do not live in order to think, but on the contrary, we think in order to live (V, 539; X, 147) [...] in order to subsist” (V, 543; X, 151). In order to survive in a given circumstance, we make a flint axe, a cave painting, a stratagem, a rule of conduct, or a sacred rite. We make what we have envisioned to create in order to overcome the external world we inhabit. Ideas are not outside in the external world; they belong to the internal world; they are inside the mind. “Yet the idea of existing while being inside oneself is the opposite of what we call living, which is to be outside oneself, ontologically consigned to the *other*, whether the *other* is called the world or the circumstance” (VI p. 29). To be inside means that ideas are experienced and incorporated without thinking that one has them. Ortega warns that the *cogito* is something we may or may not do when we think: “Reflection, or consciousness, is a possibility that is not an indispensable element of thought” (VIII, 201).

## 6. Common ground with Husserl: technique of the intentional act

To use an object requires thinking, or imagining something within oneself related to how to use something that is outside oneself. Ortega accepts the analysis initiated by Husserl in the Logical Investigations. However, he objects to Husserl's attempt to make deductions about the reality of the world by prioritizing, along with so many others, the phenomenological act of consciousness, or the *cogito*. “Being conscious of something is only an idea [...] life reason does not start from any idea, and that is why it is not idealism” (VI p. 29). Phenomenology presents the ‘I’ of the noetic subject, a theoretical abstraction, as if it were a ‘ruling I’ that creates the existence of the object to which the intentional act refers. Bühler anticipated Ortega's position by indicating the following:

<sup>4</sup> Original Spanish: “El lenguaje humano pertenece a los ‘instrumentos’, o –dicho en términos platónicos que es un *organon* [...]. La lingüística encuentra así en el sistema de la naturaleza de signo propia del lenguaje el modelo mental del *homo faber*, un fabricante y usuario de instrumentos” (p.67).



"Husserl's phenomenology [...] does not accomplish it [his programme] because it constructs the entire world of significations in reference to the subject" (p. 86).

Thought becomes the rendering of life, not the other way round. Living is "an unconstrained event that happens to itself" (VIII, 229 ff.). As such, one must inquire into that which corresponds to this intentional "within", and that which correlates to the rendering of intention. Technique as a craft of bodily expressivity expands the observatory and globalises the pragmatic field of interaction. "Suddenly the world is limited, it is an orchard with walls" (III p. 652). He could have written, "The world is a global village". What Bühler and Ortega accept from Husserl is his analysis of the intentional act: we are conscious of what we ideate, which is something that comes to our mind. What they say in opposition to Husserl is that this awareness that something ideated comes to mind refers to a reality produced by the act of consciousness. If Bühler lurks furtively, Ortega goes to the very core of the issue against the pretension of the Cartesian *cogito*. We do not exist because we doubt, we doubt because we exist. "Descartes doubts the horse that he sees, not that he sees the horse" (IX p. 499). Neither life nor reality can be subordinated to a deduction: "The pain I am thinking about does not truly hurt"; the noetic act of deduction or reflection is one of the ways in which the characteristic of a particular vital force is consummated (Ibid. VIII, p. 201 and 229 ff.). Excogitating is an activity of life that is produced by human living. "Pure reason in its authentic state is vital reason" (IX p.518).

Ortega's analysis separates two dimensions: the external, which corresponds to the reality of life; and the internal, or the act of thinking. The idea of *something*, which is gestated *in*, and emerges *from*, is *cogitatio*. "Every thought, or *cogitatio*, has its object [...]" Thinking is transitive –a thought cannot think about itself– the most it can do is to think another thought different from the one it is" (IX p. 507). Therefore, Ortega accepts from Husserl the idea that the "*from*" of every idea originates from an inner technique of comparison and unfolding (X, p.226): the intentional action of the subject, or noesis, consists of releasing the intention into an object, or noema. Borel's remark is very appropriate: "Reason is a technique of life\*, and it loses all reality by wanting to be only theory; reason does not choose its own problems, but it must solve those that life presents" (p. 38<sup>5</sup>). He observes the point at which Ortega separates himself from Husserl, as the Madrid philosopher accepts, without refuting him, that his analysis of intentionality is a theoretical construction, and that he does not recognise the reality of existence as the correlate of a deductive act. He presents "all thought, even presumably the most contemplative, as a particular case" of historical technique. During the academic course of 1932-1934, he points out that "thought is an instrument, an apparatus, a mechanism that man has in order to leave himself and establish himself in that which is real" (IX 114). In the lessons of the following year, Ortega writes, "Philosophy is not life, but a means of life; an organon; an instrument; in short, a technique [...] it is only a conceptual technique. Nothing more and nothing less" (IX 198). Descartes did not analyse his own doubt: "My thought does not see itself while it is being performed" (IX p. 504). *Intentio*, in an intentional act such as doubt, unfolds as an object in the consciousness, which may or may not refer to something external to it (IX pp. 506-509). What he accepts from Husserl is that the correlate of the deductive act, the *cogito*, is a notion of existing, the "*from*" of the internal reference that determines an inside, an *obiectum*, not the existence of the being that excogitates, nor a reality external to the act of referring. He thus draws a dividing line that separates what is to be conceded to idealism and what is to be recognised from a realism that is not naïve: "The world [...] does not exist by itself, apart from me.

5 The asterisk \* indicates our own emphasis

To believe the contrary was the realist error that we have forever overcome [...] The paradox of idealism is thus overcome without relapsing into naive realism" (VIII p. 657). "Truth signifies [...] a way out of our mere ideas into [...] authentic reality" (IX 113).

It is strange that Alonso does not include Bühler in his copious bibliography, and it is even more unusual that he does not include Husserl, when Ortega himself considered him a master (IX p. 504), as mentioned in *El hombre y la gente* [Man and People], and studies him with more attention and respect than Bergson, Max Scheler, and of course, Heidegger:

"Consciousness is not a thing that refers to another thing, but rather is the act of referring to itself, or carrying within itself that which is other than itself; in short, it means having an object and being aware of something. Resurrecting an evocative scholastic term, this last and first nature of consciousness has been called intentionality. Husserl proposes that whenever we use the term consciousness we understand it as saying: "consciousness of"; all consciousness is consciousness of something" (VII 493)<sup>6</sup>.

Ortega accepted Husserl's analysis of the noetic act after embracing the concept of intentionality of both Brentano and of the scholastic interpretation. His respect for Brentano is explicit and perpetual. He does not rectify this essential point, as he sees both of them as masters. He disassociates himself from Husserl's Cartesian affiliation, but not from Brentano's realism.

"We reserve from all the variety of acts of consciousness [...] only one final aspect they have in common: their nature of always referring to something beyond themselves [...] let us call it 'the contraposed' [...] the object is everything that can be referred to in one way or another. And vice versa: consciousness is referring to an object" (VII, p. 467)<sup>7</sup>.

A psychic act is a mental technique that consists of attributing a function to an *obiectum* to substitute for a thing that may be internal or external, which is not in the object to which the act refers. The *cogito* is only one of many expressions of this technique.

## 7. Technique: intentional unfolding and self-absorption

By pinpointing technique as the focal point of coherence in his philosophy, Ortega's current reviewers refute an instrumentalist interpretation of his position. As Ortega affirms, "Technique is assigned an activity which the former must achieve" (V p. 575); "The vital programme is pre-technical" (V p. 579). García Madalena elaborates on this point (pp. 203 ff.). The new approach focuses attention on the fact that Ortega "sees in self-absorption an absolute novelty", which serves as a prelude to his concept of technique. This leads Alonso to write that "technique is at the very origin of human life, not as a secondary consequence, but as the main actor intertwined with self-absorption, and at the same level as the latter" (pp. 182 and 185). The relationship between "self-absorption" and "technique" is the level at which the autonomy, originality, and systemisation of Ortega's philosophy is manifested, together with the multiple influences it has been receiving and integrating.

According to Husserl's analysis, the noetic act is a "contraposition" of the intention of a subject that unfolds into an object within itself. Noesis is not an act of "making", or an experience; it is an activity whose structure is present in every intentional experience or action. The intentional unfolding of noesis is carried out in all conscious activity. This being so, in our opinion, it is possible to

---

6 Original Spanish: "La conciencia no es una cosa que se refiera a otra, sino que es el referirse mismo, el llevar en sí lo otro que sí mismo, en suma, el tener un objeto, el darse cuenta de algo. Resucitando un sugestivo término escolástico se ha llamado a este carácter último y primero de la conciencia: intencionalidad. Husserl propone que siempre que usemos el término conciencia la entendamos como diciendo: «conciencia de...», toda conciencia es conciencia de algo" (VII 493).

7 Original Spanish: "Reservamos de toda esa variedad de actos de conciencia [...] solo lo que tienen de una última nota común: su carácter de referirse siempre a algo más allá de ellos [...] llamémoslo «lo contrapuesto» [...] objeto es todo aquello a que cabe referirse de un modo o de otro. Y viceversa: conciencia es referirse a un objeto" (VII, p. 467).

apply Ockam's razor in order to condense these two "co-original principles" of self-absorption and technique into one (Alonso p. 111), which differentiates the human from the animal in Orteguian philosophy.

In distinguishing between activity and making, Ortega observes that "activity, whatever it may be, even the most intelligent, is performed mechanically" (IX p. 185). "Action is acting within the setting of material things or of other men [...] Therefore, there is no authentic action if there is no thought, and there is no authentic thought if it is not followed by an action" (V, 543; IX pp. 49 ff. IX185)<sup>8</sup>. In activity, "reason goes from being a humble instrument [...] to becoming an arsenal of instruments"; observation tests them and decides which one is the right one" (III p. 651). Self-absorption is making; it is not an "activity". It is a voluntary action upon oneself to avoid any disturbance of one's focus on the object of attention, or to deliberately suspend the activity and reverse the contemplation onto the inner world of the consciousness preserved in the memory. *Intentio* unfolds its object in internalised images and registers. It is equally intentional to attribute a function to a fishing rod as to attribute a meaning to a signifier. Both are an unfolding of activity. "Suspending its direct preoccupation with things, detaching itself from its surroundings [...] attending to its own privacy [...] and not to the *other*, or to things" (X, p. 142), in order to turn our attention to our intimacy; this is a vital act that performs the same activity of attributing a function to an external object, only for the purpose of knowing how to adapt it to oneself: "Action can only be spoken of insofar as it is to be governed by previous contemplation; and vice versa, as self-absorption is merely a projection of future action" (X 147).

Ortega's "self-absorption" encompasses attitudes, the activity of which consists of a technique of unfolding, or "contra positioning", the consciousness in order to constitute an object using memorised images as a correlate. "The perception of our thought requires, in effect, its inner expression; rudimentary movements of the language [...]. Our body, from its inner part, reveals our own thought to us" (VI p. 219)<sup>10</sup>. Analytically speaking, attitudes such as reflection, contemplation, discouragement, introversion, examining one's conscience, meditation and self-analysis perform an intentional unfolding of activity. If this act of "going inside oneself" is a "virtual or temporary retreat from the world" (X 143), in order to withdraw from the retained images of the inner world, its structure shares the analytical form of all intentional activity of unfolding subjectivity: the contraposition of a memorised object onto the feelings evoked by introversion, such as nostalgia, sadness, or grief. The intentional act of referring to oneself applies the same technique of inner "contraposition" when it assigns a meaning to an external activity; for example, using a bone as a weapon or, when meditating, understanding words by assigning a meaning to a signifier. Another issue is why Ortega did not merge self-absorption and technique beforehand, but instead dealt with them at different times in order to arrive at self-absorption after meditating on technique. "Man is an insider, who must become an outsider" (247 V pp. 148 and 149; VIII p. 613). Every meaningful act becomes an instrument of the activity of life.

By highlighting technique as the core of systemisation of Ortega's discourse, the focus that supports the originality of his work with regard to Heidegger is reinforced. In contrast to the technological pessimism of postmodernity, Ortega highlights the ambivalent

8 Ortega's definition includes the following: "according to a preconceived plan in a previous contemplation or thought." This addition is unnecessary. Man is self-absorbed without the need to preconceive a plan, "preconceive a plan" is an added action (V 544).

9 Original Spanish: En la actividad "la razón pasa a ser humilde instrumento [...]. se convierte en arsenal de instrumentos; la observación prueba éstos y decide sobre cuál es el oportuno" (III p. 651). Ensimismarse es un hacer, no una "actividad".

10 Original Spanish: "La percepción de nuestro pensamiento exige, en efecto, su expresión interior, movimientos embrionarios de la lengua [...] Nuestro cuerpo, desde su faz interna, nos revela nuestro propio pensamiento" (VI p. 219).

nature of technique and its compatibility with different cultural worlds (Vázquez and Núñez Ladevéze, 2020). His insight in foreseeing global phenomena is more evident today than in the past. Alonso illustrates how Ortega's assessment of "the revolt of the masses" ties in with Bauman's revision of Critical Theory (p. 109 note. Cf. Núñez Ladevéze, Vázquez and Núñez Canal, 2020). The cultural ambivalence of scientific technique is demonstrated by its transfer from the West to other life-worlds, yet without westernising them. (Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze (2021). "Instead of considering non-European cultures barbaric, we have begun to respect them as lifestyles equivalent to our own" (III p. 648). The regressive revolt of the Western masses (Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez Canal and Navarro, 2021), promoted by the critical deconstruction of their roots (Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez and Álvarez 2021), emphasises the transfer of Western hegemony to Eastern cultures: the West no longer rules the world (Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez Canal and Álvarez de Mon, 2021).

## 8. Pragmatic realism

The question is to define what is understood by the verb "to make". Also distancing himself from Husserl, Bühler anticipates Austin's notion of the act of speaking when "he decisively describes speaking as an action, which is the entire *praxis* in Aristotelian terms [...] the insertion of speaking into other meaningful conduct deserves a name of its own; these are known as *empractical* sayings [...] for all of us there are situations in which the problem of the moment, the task of the vital circumstance, is resolved by speaking: linguistic actions [...] the point that must be underscored in the concept of "verbal action", and that which we must not forget, is the fact that speaking [is] finished (accomplished) to the extent that it has fulfilled the mission of solving the practical problem of the situation" (p. 72-73).

If *homo practicus* is the one who knows how to take practical action, this is a correct definition. "Things are not originally 'things' [...] and my relation to them is pragmatic [...] a thing, with regard to *pragma*, is not something that exists by itself [...] it is something that I shape for a certain purpose" (X p. 168). For that reason, "The world consists of a system of significances, matters, or *pragmata*" (X 175). Here we find the connection between the philosophy of technique and pragmatism, which has been addressed by the thesis of Gutiérrez Simón (2020). Circumstance "is about dealing with things", yet not an established world of things whose "existence is already given and achieved", similar to that of Aristotelian thought. Instead, it is an environment (also Aristotelian) where we have made *pragmata* of words and things, of our own body and soul, and of the body and soul of others, or of vital *organon*. Hence, we find Ortega's distrust of the "kingdom of ends", his rejection of idealism, and the disaffection with his Eurocentric investment in Heideggerian deconstruction, which eroded the cultural roots that have sustained it in the West. The "paralytic" Heidegger (IX 518) promotes what Ortega is concerned about.

If man cannot establish himself as an objective for himself in the unpredictable, extreme reality of life, the attempt to treat others as an objective will be useless. However, it is indeed possible to create a hierarchy of values in using one's own body and those of others. In contrast to Heidegger's technological pessimism, Ortega's uniqueness lies in seeing technique as the main determining factor in the "plan of attack" that modifies the circumstance, reacts against it, and subdues it. The external world, denaturalised by technique and turned into an environment of affairs, is a pragmatic field of interaction in which one can make logical sense of individual initiatives, social relations, and the course of historicity that denaturalises the human habitat and pits communities against each other in order to achieve or preserve cultural supremacy.

The final aim of this commentary is to find acceptance for the incentive to take advantage of “an untapped lode” (Alonso p. 13), in order to do something that goes beyond what has been expressly stated without departing from the direction set by the philosopher. We propose this contribution as an outline to place Ortega’s pragmatism and realism within his philosophical concept of corporality. Although González Simón warns against the temptation to “limit it to allusions to what he calls pragmatic fields” (p. 70), this is where its “enormous potential” lies. We have applied the communication system of the so-called “illustrious book”, *Teoría del lenguaje* [Theory of language] (VI pp. 598 ff.), to the Orteguian idea of “domain” which, although inspired by the physics of his time, he finds in this work. Bühler distinguishes two domains; the “demonstrative” and the “symbolic” (1979 pp. 95, 98 ff.). Such notions introduce thematically innovative concepts that have been neglected in these reviews. By observing Bühler’s diagram (pp. 44 ff.), as Ortega does, a distinction can be made between the domain of expression, or expressivity, emanating from the speaker, which is the empirical field that determines the observatory for the verification and refutation of theories, and the universal pragmatic field of interrelated matters shared on the Internet (Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez Canal and Álvarez, 2021). In these domains, reality goes hand in hand with a common circumstance, which is understood as an environment of global interaction. They are linked, through Bühler’s psychology, to that of the body as an “expressive field” (X, p. 217), and to the relationship between bodies as “pragmatic fields [...] where vitality and spirituality appear to us in the flesh” (X, p. 230). Perhaps the tension between Aristotelian idealism and realism is expressed in its most intense dialectical clarity in the last lecture of the 1933 academic course (IX pp. 119-122). Ultimately, the conditions of verification and refutation refer to what is within the reach of the organic senses through means that modify that reach.

Understanding the body as a field of expressivity is in line with the Orteguian view of social communication (Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze, 2021). If we give the name “field of observation” to what we can observe, and “empirical field” to what we can test, verify or refute, then our “field of knowledge” is ultimately subordinated to the rationalist-vitalist perspective of realistic corporality. Both external and internal data reach us through the technical linkage to the sensory system that enhances or focuses access to a reality that transcends such data. Knowledge depends on a perspective, but reality is present, as a given, which is closer to what Aristotle thought and what is commonly accepted by people. “Reality is distrusted” (VII p.449), or in other words, naive realism is not trusted because perspective makes the field of observation relative in such a way that reality comprehended directly through the senses is powerless to explain it. Galileo exclaimed, “*Eppur si muove*” [Yet it moves], as he leaned out from his telescope. Our knowledge encompasses what we understand as reality outside of corporality, which is accessible through the observation that instruments and measurements procure for the senses through technical mediation. The continuous broadening of the empirical observatory, and of the field of interaction where the unification of human engagement appears, may enable a re-examination of the notion of “realism”. We are actually living beings in a world of real things, the observation of which has been opened to the senses through apparatuses and theories that disproportionately extend their reach. We invent ideas that we can use for whatever the world offers. They are ours, but the reality of the world we inhabit remains the *other* that we are not, which includes what we are, insofar as we perceive ourselves as observable objects within that world. In order to see more than what is within reach we invent *unreal things* that adjust the theory outside of immediate sensory comprehension. These unreal things coincide with those that are real in becoming objects of an inner unfolding, “in being that to which we refer” (VII, p. 466), Pythagorean mathematics, Euclidean geometry, Mendeleyev’s table, Newtonian or quantum physics, and the theory of relativity. According to Ortega, every act of consciousness engenders the mental instrument of its object:

“The thing we call “consciousness” is the strangest thing in the universe: for as it appears to us, it seems to consist of a combination of the physical and the mental, and the perfect union of two totally distinct things: my act of *referring to* – and *that to which I refer*. Moreover, it is necessary to well observe the total seriousness of the case: it is not that we recognise or discover *a posteriori* the absolute difference between the two things, but rather, the very fact of consciousness means that I find before me something that is *distinct* and *otherly*” (VII, p. 466)<sup>11</sup>.

Technique as the artisanship of bodily expression expands the observatory and globalises the pragmatic field of interaction. “Suddenly the world is limited; it is an orchard with walls” (III p. 652). He could easily have written, “The world is a global village”. It is possible to discern a two-way direction of technical progress that Ortega did not distinguish. On the one hand, the internal incorporation of prostheses to remedy corporeality, which is no different than medical surgery as an ancestral technique that is now being introduced into the body as cyborg technology (Núñez Ladevéze, Vázquez and Torrecillas, 2022). On the other hand, the incorporation of gadgets has lengthened bodily members in order to broaden the empirical field of observation and extend the pragmatic domain of global interaction through the Internet. Ortega can be included in this discourse as a prognosticator of media ecology (Núñez Ladevéze and Núñez Canal, 2021). Without the aid of applied scientific theory as a tool, Aristotle could not understand the extent to which the technical instruments we devise modify the field of observation of the senses, the field of experience of our circumstance, or the pragmatic field of human interaction, which are now globalised on the Internet. McLuhan understood this well when he referred to the fact that technical means prolong the bodily senses and make man's nature a history of technique (Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze, 2021).

## 9. Acknowledgements

This paper has been translated by Charles Edmond Arthur.

## 10. Bibliographic references

- Alonso, M. (2021). *Ortega y la técnica*. CSIC, 2021.
- Borel, J. P. (1959). *Raison et vie chez Ortega y Gasset*. Neuchatel: La Baconnière, Citamos por trad. esp. (1969) *Introducción a Ortega y Gasset*. Madrid: Guadarrama.
- Bühler, K. (1979). *Teoría del lenguaje*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Conill, J. (2013). “La victoria de la técnica”, según Ortega y Gasset (una alternativa a Heidegger). *Revista Internacional de Tecnología, Conocimiento y Sociedad* 2(1), pp. 43-58.
- García Madalena, A. (2019). *El centauro ontológico. Idea y sentido de la técnica en Ortega y Gasset*. Tesis doctoral, UCM.
- González Galán, F. (2021). *La recepción de José Ortega y Gasset en España*. Madrid: Verbum.

---

11 Original Spanish: “Esa cosa que llamamos «conciencia» es la más rara que hay en el universo: pues tal y como se nos presenta parece consistir en la conjunción, complexión o íntima, perfecta unión de dos cosas totalmente distintas: mi acto de *referirme a* –y *aquello a que me refiero*. Y nótese bien toda la gravedad del caso: no es que nosotros *a posteriori* reconozcamos o descubramos la absoluta diferencia entre ambas cosas, sino que el hecho mismo de conciencia consiste en que yo hallo ante mí algo como distinto y otro” (VII, p. 466).

Gutiérrez Simón, R. (2020). *Ortega y Gasset y el pragmatismo norteamericano*. Tesis doctoral, UCM.

Núñez Canal, M. y Núñez Ladevéze, L. (2021). "Understanding the revolt: *Man the technician* in global rhetoric." *Communication & Society*, 34(4), pp. 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.34.4.33-47>

Núñez Ladevéze, L.; Vázquez Barrio, T. y Núñez Canal, M. (2020). El tránsito a la modernidad líquida global: la *rebelión de las masas* en el *vecindario indefinido*. *Arbor*, 196 (797) a568. <https://doi.org/10.3989/arbor.2020.797n3005>

Núñez Ladevéze, L.; M. Núñez Canal, I. Álvarez de Mon, I. (2021). «El anuncio de Ortega y Gasset del progreso regresivo hacia el individualismo en red». *Anàlisi: Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, núm. extraordinari 2021, 65, 87-101. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/analisi.3343>

Núñez Ladevéze, L., M. Núñez Canal y Álvarez de Mon, I. (2021). Límites del campo empírico en el observatorio de la red. Sotelo Joaquín y González Joaquín, *Digital media: El papel de las redes sociales en el ecosistema comunicativo en tiempos de covid 19*. Madrid. McGraw Hill, pp. 963-98.

Núñez Ladevéze, L., Núñez, M. y Navarro, M. (2021). Rescatar la retórica: Del progreso regresivo de las masas a la servidumbre tribal en red. *Doxa Comunicación. Revista Interdisciplinar De Estudios*

Núñez Ladevéze, L., Vázquez Barrio, T. y Torrecillas, T. (2022). Prótesis de la inteligencia aplicadas al periodismo. Sheila Liberal y Marina Rodríguez. *Redes sociales en tiempo de la Covid-19: narrativas, bulos, algoritmos y marcos narrativos III*. pp. 447-463 McGraw Hill.

Núñez Ladevéze, L. y Núñez Canal (2022). "Environment" or "Galaxy": The quotations from Ortega y Gasset that McLuhan cited in *War and Peace*". *Palabra Clave* (en fase editorial: Aceptado 20 de julio 2021).

Ortega y Gasset, J. (2004-2010). *Obras Completas*. "Meditaciones del Quijote", tomo I, pp. 747-825.

Vázquez, T. y Núñez Ladevéze, L. (2020). *Redes fugaces*. Síntesis.

Vela García, F. (2010). La fantasía de la filosofía de Ortega y Gasset y el existencialismo. *Ensayos*, Madrid: Fundación Santander.