

Metaphysics: Existence and Human Life

Author(s): Julián Marías

Source: *Yale French Studies*, No. 16, Foray Through Existentialism (1955), pp. 118-126

Published by: [Yale University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2929157>

Accessed: 07-12-2015 01:03 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Yale University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Yale French Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Metaphysics: Existence and Human Life

The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of metaphysics in a very definite context: the achievements of some Spanish philosophers of the present century, in close connection with but independent of recent trends in European and especially continental philosophy. The starting point is of course Ortega's thought; almost everything in Spanish philosophy of our time largely depends on it, and that is true even for positions which more or less contradict or modify his own point of view; one can't imagine a Spanish attempt at framing the problem of philosophy which is not, first of all, a dialogue with Ortega. This does not mean, however, that Spanish philosophy is today a homogeneous school of thought, isolated from the rest of the world. On the contrary, in the present century Spain has been very well and early acquainted with most trends of Western thought; for instance, Kierkegaard was known by Unamuno before 1905;<sup>1</sup> Husserl's phenomenology was discussed as early as 1913,<sup>2</sup> and his *Logische Untersuchungen* were translated and widely read in 1929;<sup>3</sup> the psychoanalysis of Freud was considered in 1911,<sup>4</sup> and his complete works were translated into Spanish more than thirty years ago; Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* was read in Spain in 1928 and you can even read it in Spanish,<sup>5</sup> as well as everything Dilthey wrote; same thing for William James, Bergson, Russell, Max Scheler and many other thinkers of our time. On the other hand, Ortega's influence is by no means a narrowing one: since his own philosophical position is perspectivism, and one of his main theses is that truth is only possible from a concrete and circumstantial standpoint, the only way to be a faithful disciple of Ortega is to be independent of him, to adhere to one's point of view, open one's eyes and try to see for oneself how things happen to be. So the relation between this paper and Ortega's thought is just what I usually call intellectual filiation, a concept that now too often seems somewhat forgotten.

<sup>1</sup> See "Ibsen y Kierkegaard," 1905 (in *Ensayos*). Cf. also "El Alma de Manuel Machado," 1901 (in *De esto y aquello*, I, p. 184).

<sup>2</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset: "Sobre el concepto de sensación" (in *Obras completas*, I).

<sup>3</sup> *Investigaciones lógicas*, translated by M. G. Morente and J. Gaos. *Revista de Occidente*, Madrid 1929.

<sup>4</sup> J. Ortega y Gasset: "Psicoanálisis, ciencia problemática" (in *Obras completas*, I).

<sup>5</sup> *El ser y el tiempo*, translated by José Gaos, México.

## JULIÁN MARÍAS

The name “metaphysics” has a very odd story. It is said to be a Greek word; this is not right: metaphysics is not a Greek word, but *four*: *tà metὰ tà physiká*. I think this should be taken very seriously, because it means that metaphysics is *not* a word in Greek. Andronicus of Rhodes or Nicolas of Damascus don't *denominate* the most important writings of Aristotle, they just *designate* them, as if somebody says: “the fifth successor to Queen Victoria” instead of “Elizabeth II.” The word *metaphysics* is Latin and was composed by fusion of the four Greek words into one: *metaphysica*. Yet is it accurate to say that *metaphysica* is a Latin word? It is not a Latin word, not even a translation, but just a transcription, a simple transliteration.

This is, I think, the most important: “metaphysics” in Latin signifies nothing, and in Greek nothing interesting, the books after the books of physics. Metaphysics is no concept, but a poetical expression; rather, a rhetorical and poetical expression; it is a word which comes from outside, coined, not properly a meaning, but a strange, mysterious sign, and because of this it has got a rhetorical function; yet it has moreover a poetical dimension: the word metaphysics was given a *vague* meaning that it never had in Greek: that which is *beyond* the physics, or that which concerns the supernatural. The wonderful success of this name was due to the fact that the metaphysics was never thought of as a prosaic and dull *postphysica*, but as a brilliant, alluring, mysterious *transphysica*.

This essential *vagueness* of the name metaphysics has been the condition of its everlasting success through the centuries; its double advantage is that, though very promising, it implies no commitment; the same character pertains, of course, to the nearly meaningless word *philosophy*, and this is the reason why we have been using it for two thousand and three hundred years.

The first thing to be called by the name metaphysics was the work of Aristotle. How did he name this philosophical science? We have to distinguish between two kinds of denominations: some of them are properly names of the metaphysics, the others rather definitions or determinations of its content. The main names are four: *sophía*, *prôte philosophía*, *zetouménē epistémē*, *tês aletheías theoría*. Wisdom, *sophía*, is a very old name, the traditional one, the highest and foremost form of knowledge, which belongs to the *wise* man. First philosophy is a denomination that shows the rank, the priority of metaphysics. The “sought out” science is questionable, determined as yet merely by its conditions, function and rank; it is not ready-made, but only an enterprise or its aim.

The fourth expression is a little more complicated. *Tês aletheías theoría* does not mean “theory of truth.” Aristotle used to talk of those who “theologized” and of those who “philosophized about the

truth." *Alétheia* means here discovery, uncovering, revelation of reality, of that which *truly there is* (Ortega did explain the meaning of truth as *alétheia* in his first book, in 1914).<sup>6</sup> And what *truly is* is the *arkhé*, the principle that man can reach, because there is a way or *method*; and it is also what things consist of: the two main notions that are to be found inside the concept of *phýsis*, nature.<sup>7</sup>

The old mythical theologians and the new pre-Socratic philosophers, though in sharp opposition, have something essential in common, according to Aristotle. If the theoretical knowledge, afterwards named metaphysics, has a function in human life, its origin has to be discovered in some vital necessity that formerly was satisfied by another "homologous" reality. And now, if we take as our starting point this older reality, metaphysics appears as a substitutive or "vicarious" activity, whose deepest meaning depends upon that basic and maybe long since forgotten situation.

Formerly man was in the situation of waiting for the revelation of latent and ultimate reality by means of oracles, divination, etc. Some years ago I proposed the interpretation of the *moíra*, Fate or Destiny, as "a pretheoretical analogue of *phýsis*." Man had to be passively directed and oriented by the mythical irradiations from the background: now after many historical experiences, failures, trials, he finds out that the old belief is not trustworthy; and in the midst of this insecurity the new belief arises that things are *at bottom* the same, that they have a consistency man himself can ask after. The old necessity has now got a new meaning: man has discovered a way, a path that can be followed not only up, but down. Heraclitus said that the way up and the way down are but one and the same, *hodòs áno kaì káto mía kaì houté*. Truth is now what man *verifies, verum facit*, discovers. This is in my opinion the birthplace of metaphysics.<sup>8</sup>

The question is how to reach a radical certitude. The many insufficient certitudes that man possesses force him to give an account of reality; and that is properly *lógos*, reason, whose deepest and truest meaning, in Herodotus as well as in Plato, is exactly *lógon didónai*, to give an account of something.

Let us now consider the Aristotelian "definitions" of Metaphysics; we see that they are no proper definition. First of all they are three: *epistéme perì toû óntos hê ón*, *epistéme tês ousías*, *epistéme theologiké*. They are rather statements that belong to the contents of metaphysics, attempts to determine its subject *a posteriori*. The identification of metaphysics and ontology is not only highly prob-

<sup>6</sup> *Meditaciones del Quijote* (in *Obras completas*, I).

<sup>7</sup> See J. Marías: *Biografía de la Filosofía* (Buenos Aires 1954).

<sup>8</sup> See J. Marías: *Reason and Life: The Introduction to Philosophy* (Yale University Press), chapter VIII.

## JULIAN MARIAS

lematical, but very little Aristotelian. I too believe that this identification, even as a thesis and no more a definition, must be rejected: one can't start from being without further justification; one has to derive and justify being and therefore ontology. Being is just an interpretation of reality, of what "there is." Ortega wrote a long time ago that cognition is founded upon two suppositions: "First, a belief must obtain that behind the confusion and chaos of the world as it appears to us there lies concealed a fixed and stable figure on which all changes depend and which, once revealed, gives a clue to what happens around us. This fixed and stable figure has, since the days of Greece, been called *being*. Cognition is ascertainment of the being of things in this strict sense of a "fixed and stable figure." The second implication without which conceptual pursuit of knowledge would be absurd is the belief that this *being* is of a consistency akin to the natural human gift called intellect. Only when these two conditions are fulfilled does it make sense to hope that our *intellect* may serve to penetrate reality to the point of discovering its latent *being*." "But let us bear in mind that if these propositions result from our cognitive effort, there obtained before, and thus without such effort—without cognition—a preconception that light, and things in general, are endowed with being. Without this *supposition* the intellectual process would not have got under way and would not have arrived at *propositions*. But calling this preconception a supposition must not be understood as conveying that it carries less conviction than the proposition. On the contrary, a man who sets out to know presupposes and supposes beforehand with radical conviction that there is being, and therefore searches for it to see what it is like. But this means that cognition starts out with a perfectly determined opinion about the world—the opinion that things have being. And as this opinion is previous to any proof or reason and the presupposition of all proof or reasoning, we may safely maintain that it is nothing if not a belief and, as such, of the same kind as a religious faith." (*Apuntes sobre el pensamiento* (1941), in *Concord and Liberty*, p. 65-67.)

The question about being—either *Seiendes* or *Sein, ens* or *esse, ón* or *éinai*, if you take in account the very valuable and otherwise important distinction of Heidegger's—that is, to ask what "are" things, has a pretheoretical and, in this sense, unjustified supposition: that things "are," i.e. they have a consistency which we can search after. Being is not simply reality, but an interpretation of it, of what "there is," whatsoever may be its condition. And let's not forget that this, namely reality as such, is a constitutive of myself, since I am *myself* inasmuch as I have something to do with this what "there is."

The traditional universality of being, in Aristotle as well as in

Saint Thomas Aquinas, depends on the fact that the whole reality, if approached from a belief in being, that is from the attitude of intellectual cognition, appears *sub specie entis*, as something that is.<sup>9</sup>

So, if the world is composed of beings, if perhaps the world as a whole is a being, that is just the consequence of this interpretation of reality whose name is *being*. Therefore, since the function of metaphysics is to give an account of reality, the expression *metaphysica sive ontologia* deprives metaphysics of its radicality. The only possible “definition” of metaphysics is the determination of its true function or job: *to seek a radical certitude about radical reality*. Of course metaphysics has something to do with ontology, namely to give an account of it and of being, from the standpoint of radical reality. But now one must ask a question: what does “radical reality” mean?

Radical reality is that in which all others take their root, i.e. in which they appear as realities and therefore I “find” them and have something to do with them. From this point of view, all other realities are “rooted,” they constitute themselves as realities in that “space,” “ambit” or “where” which is the radical reality. On the other hand, radical reality is that which remains when I take away all my ideas, theories and interpretations: that which forces me to make ideas and theories. The radical reality—this is one of the main theses of Ortega’s philosophy—is human life; more accurately, *my life*, every-one’s life.

If I take away everything the thought imposes on the naked reality, I just find this: things and myself, myself among things, i.e., myself, doing something with things. And that is *to live*, that is *my life* in its immediate meaning, the biographical one, according to which we say that life is pleasant or sad or hard or difficult. Every reality *as reality* is found in my life, takes its root in it; even in the case that it in some way goes beyond my life; even if it is impossible at all: in my life occurs the “meeting” with God, which allows me to speak of Him as a reality; I too “meet” in my life the round square or the wooden iron, and that is why I can talk of the reality, irreality or impossibility of anything.<sup>10</sup>

We must now be very careful, if we want to avoid confusion. Life, in the concrete sense of human life, is by no means synonymous with *Dasein*, existence, subjectivity or man. Heidegger, for instance, starts from an existential analytics of *Dasein* as a way which leads

<sup>9</sup> See J. Marías: *Reason and Life*, chapter VIII; *Biografía de la Filosofía*, chapter I; *Idea de la Metafísica* (Buenos Aires 1954). See further the paper “Realidad y ser en la filosofía española” (in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires 1955), with important quotations from Ortega and Zúñiri.

<sup>10</sup> See *Reason and Life*, chapter XI, and *Idea de la Metafísica*.

## JULIÁN MARIAS

to the question about the meaning of being (*Sein*). Our way, on the contrary, may start from being as an interpretation in order to reach human life as the radical reality beyond all interpretations. My life is the radical reality, which includes myself and things ("I am myself and my circumstance," wrote Ortega as early as 1914); and both abstract elements of life (myself, things) depend upon the whole, which is prior to them. Their dynamic coexistence is a *quehacer*, a doing: I always have to do something with the circumstance in order to live. Human life is not simply an activity, but a doing, i.e. it is determined by motive and purpose, it means decision and choice, as well as imagination, program or vital project; life, Ortega used to say, is a poetical task, and man is the novelist of his own life, either original or, mostly, a plagiarist.<sup>11</sup>

But man is by no means the radical reality; he is just a reality that I discover inside my life. Even this man that I am, as a man, is just an interpretation of what I am, a theoretical elaboration of a fragment of reality that I, who am living, find. As a matter of fact, "man" is only a theory.

My life, therefore, is not man, or the self, or the way of being of a privileged *Seiendes*, or subjectivity. My life does not reduce itself to the "I," is not a thing, because all things are somewhere and my life is *where* everything appears. My life includes *with me* all things around, all my world with its horizon, its hinterworld, its ultimate perspectives. The theory of human life is no preparation or propaedeutic to metaphysics, no foundation of it, but *metaphysics itself*, i.e. the search for radical certitude about radical reality.

But the question begins here. If one does not take earnestly and accurately these words, they become an enormous triviality. I have used twice the adjective "radical": radical certitude, radical reality; on this adjective is founded this whole conception of metaphysics.

Certitude does not mean simply knowledge or information; it means to *know what to hold by* with regard to something. Certitude, then, has to do with something that it is necessary for me to know. Let's assume that I know exactly the number of hairs on the head of the oldest cousin of the first man who mailed a letter in Clare-

<sup>11</sup> See J. Marías: "Presence and absence of Existentialism in Spain" (in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1954), and *Filosofía actual y existencialismo en España* (new edition, Madrid 1955); partly translated into French (*Philosophes espagnols de notre temps*, Aubier, Paris 1954), English ("Ortega and the Idea of Vital Reason," *The Dublin Review*, 449 & 450, London 1949; "The Novel as a Means of Knowledge," *Confluence*, Harvard University, 1954) and German (*José Ortega y Gasset und die Idee der lebendigen Vernunft*, 2nd ed., Stuttgart 1952). The reader can find in these writings the quotations from both Unamuno and Ortega that enable one to establish the chronology of the philosophical discovery of "human life" in European thought.

mont on March 14, 1955: this is not a certitude. But even among certitudes, most of them are not able to give us a radical certitude; on the contrary, if we are in a radical certitude, we can of course have many questions, but our life *is* not a question.

On the other hand, I said before that my life is not either the self or man, that it includes every reality I can find anyway. But if so, you'd be right in raising an objection: Is not "life" just a name for the whole of reality, for being as a whole? If life is to be identified with the whole of reality, why call it "life?" Is this not to come back once more to the formula of Fichte, "Ich und nicht-Ich," I and non-I, under the pretext that everything real either is *I* or not? That is the question.

We must understand the expression "radical reality" with entire accuracy. My life includes *somehow* every reality, did I not say before. Now, this means that nothing is excluded, not the collection or sum of all real things. I must know the structure of reality *as such*, i.e. as reality; and reality means *that which I can find anyway*; therefore, "reality as such" means *reality as I find it*, otherwise *reality as I find myself in it*. One must at last give up the age-old attempt either to conceal my part in the constitution of reality as such or else to make it something "subjective": I am a *constitutivum* of the *realitas* of everything that is real, but of course I am no part or element of that which is real.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, my meeting with and in reality is no merely theoretical or intentional meeting: I find myself *living*. Reality is the stage of my life, world in the broadest meaning of this word. Any part or aspect of reality presupposes my life. *Life is the actual organization of reality*, unlike any theory such as "universe" or "being as a whole," and therefore the radical reality in the literal meaning of this expression. Life—not being—is the radical meaning of reality. Only the search for the structures of my life discovers the "area" of radical reality, in which every other reality takes root, appears and becomes

<sup>12</sup> "I mean by reality—I have repeatedly said—that which I encounter, or may encounter, and as I encounter it; of course, that encounter includes mere mention, even in the mode of the absolute impossibility of any other form of finding or contact, as happens in the cause of impossibilities. However you may attempt to "define" or explain reality, it will be necessary to introduce—overtly or surreptitiously—my presence. Do I mean by this that reality is something of mine, that it is an idea of mine, or a determination of my being, or a product of mine? Quite the reverse: I give the name of reality to what I encounter, to what is other than I, to that with which, for this very reason, I have to cope; more than that, in so far as anything is less absolutely encountered by me, in so far as it can more easily be reduced to me, I understand it as less real" (*Reason and Life*, p. 309). See further all chapter VIII.



## JULIÁN MARIÁS

*real*. Metaphysics, inasmuch as it tries to fulfill its function, namely to find a radical certitude, appears as *theory of human life*.<sup>13</sup>

I feel that I ought to put an end to the boredom of this paper, but I am afraid that I'll need to explain a few difficulties. I said previously that radical reality is the nude or naked reality, without any theory or interpretation; and maybe you could object: "Human life," well, is not "human life" just a theory?

No doubt. Authentic reality is only *my* life, i.e. I with and among things, I doing something with my circumstance. "Human life" in general is of course already a theory; human life in general is not truly, actually real; truly real is only *my* life, everyone's—by giving "everyone" its proper meaning to this "circumstantial" expression.

My life appears however as life together, *convivencia*, not only coexistence, perhaps "living togetherness." I meet in my world around me certain realities in which I acknowledge other "selves" who in their turn find me as an element in their circumstances. My life—the only immediate and irreducible reality—encloses something that I have to consider as "other lives." And this has two consequences: first, I discover myself as "I" opposite to a "you" (and this furnishes a first meaning to the expression "*my* life"); second, it shows the "disjunctive" character or condition of human life (it is *either this or this or that*, etc.), and it reveals thus the possibility of a new concept, "*the* life," that is not properly a genus or species, but a strange "universal" whose logical theory is still lacking.<sup>14</sup>

My life includes therefore a reference to "human life" as functional and unreal structure. The consequence of this is somewhat amazing: "*the* life" is no true reality, but a theory, this theory however is by no means arbitrary or unnecessary, since it is the condition for self-cognition of *my* life; and this self-cognition, in its turn, belongs to the actual reality of my life itself. In other words, my life is *impossible* without self-cognition, without imaginative projection of its figure, i.e. without the presence of its structure as such "human life." Life possesses a particular "transparency" through which its consistency is manifested. And this is in my opinion the *last* justification of metaphysics: if we just retain of this its vital function, we find out that it unavoidably belongs to human life. In other words, metaphysics is nothing but a concrete historical form to fulfill a basic requisite of human life.

<sup>13</sup> See *Idea de la Metafísica*.

<sup>14</sup> See *Reason and Life*, chapter IV, The Method; chapter V, Reason; chapter VI, The Structure of Human Life; and especially in chapter VII, The Horizon of Vital Problems, the last section, The Problem of Logic.

All this is just the beginning. We should now consider the method of metaphysics, investigate the internal structure of human life, formulate the theory of living reason and examine the possibilities and conditions of a logic of concrete thought. Some of these questions have been carefully studied in the last few years;<sup>15</sup> most of them are luckily still open, fascinating, living problems.

<sup>15</sup> See Ortega: *Meditaciones del Quijote*, 1914; *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (*The Modern Theme*), 1923; *Filosofía pura*, 1929; *En torno a Galileo*, 1933; *Historia como sistema*, 1935 (*History as a System*, in *Toward a Philosophy of History*); *Apuntes sobre el pensamiento*, 1941 (in *Concord and Liberty*). See further X. Zúñiga: *Naturaleza, Historia, Dios*, 1944 (especially "En torno al problema de Dios," 1935). On the internal structure of human life, see my books quoted above and "La vida humana y su estructura empírica" (in *Ensayos de teoría*, Barcelona 1954).