Review Essay: “Ortega y Gasset and Jamesian Pragmatism”


*Theory of History in Ortega y Gasset: The Dawn of Historical Reason.*

Students of twentieth century Spanish-philosophical thought have long known of the parallel between Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) and William James (if only from Pelayo Hipolito Fernández's 1961 publication of his doctoral dissertation for the University of Salamanca, *Miguel de Unamuno y William James, Un paralelo pragmático*). The parallel between José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) and William James went virtually undetected until 1994 and the publication of his decade long research-by John T. Graham, Professor of History in the University of Missouri, Kansas City,. Graham, a specialist in European intellectual history with an emphasis on Spain, and a long time student of Ortega, coincidentally had been studying both Ortega and James in 1984. He began to detect parallels that seemed more than coincidental, and this set him on an in-depth search for--evidence in Ortega's voluminous published writings and letters, unpublished materials in the Ortega archives, and books by James with. their underlinings and marginal notes in the extensive private library assembled by Ortega -- to prove that there actually had been an influence of James on the young Ortega (1994: 145-49).

The result is a projected three volume study. As can be seen from the first two published titles, the first volume is on Ortega's metaphysics of human life, while the second is on his philosophy of history. The third volume (being written during the summer of 1997) will show how history can serve other human studies (sociology, politics, aesthetics, pedagogy, and linguistics). Both volumes under review are well written, the very complex material made easier to follow by subtitles within chapters. Each book contains an enormous quantity of high quality research, analysis, and synthesis -- continuing the first class scholarship we have come to expect from Graham's previous publications (especially his *Donoso Cortés: Utopian Romanticist and Political Realist*, also published by the University of Missouri Press, of 1974). These studies on Ortega should merit Graham a secure place among the few other Ortega scholar worldwide whose works must be taken into account in any future investigations. There is a wealth of material in the footnotes, and these resources could be used by graduate students and post doctoral scholars as the first steps for numerous future studies. I strongly urge that you order these volumes for the libraries of your academic institutions.

The first study, in summary, narrates in a chronological manner how Ortega synthesized his metaphysics of human life (as radical reality) -- inspired by the pragmatist metaphysics of "radical empiricism" of James, adopting the phenomenological method of Husserl and adapting it to realism, and incorporating a realist historicism that exhibits parallels to Dilthey and anticipating the themes of existentialism. "The chief discovery of this study, in Graham's words, "is Ortega's
Jamesian pragmatism... James was Ortega's first master after he deserted Nietzsche as not properly a philosopher, before he had taken up Husserl in 1912 and before he felt he had fathomed Kant in the 1920s (1944, 42), and long before he discovered Dilthey. Despite all this dependence, there is no doubt about Ortega's "overall originality."

Although James figures prominently throughout the study, the members of SAAP will be interested, especially, in Graham's fourth ("Metaphysics: 'Radicalism' as Pragmatism") and eighth or last ("'General Theory of Life' as Philosophy of Life") chapters. Despite Ortega's unfavorable, public comments on ("the popular notion of") pragmatism, he was -- as with phenomenology -- both repelled by it as a system and attracted to it because of certain ideas of James that he found fruitful: "living" reason, philosophizing to solve life's problems, "belief" as the basis of ideas, ideas as useful hypotheses or instruments, etc. Ortega, when confronted by certain Argentine critics in the 1920s, "denied only that his philosophy was pragmatism, and, in a strict sense, that was true enough about his overall 'system.' Any 'pragmatism' that appeared in him then seemed limited to a vague 'method' of 'viewpoint' or 'perspective' (1994: 154, italics in original)." However, "at bottom, most of Ortega's principles were pragmatic, or quasi-pragmatist (1994: 172). The "main" principles that, to Graham, Ortega "seems to have derived from James" were: the utility of conceptual knowledge; life as self "being with" the world in time and space, that is, the compenetration of the self and the world (as in Ortega's "I am myself and my circumstance"); the denial that consciousness of consciousness is basic; pragmatism as method or instrument; truth (with practical consequences) rather than Truth, along with a unity of truth and reality, a reality known by an "interpenetration" of percepts and concepts; and the one and the many as unity and duality, or plurality, along with-unity as continuity and "concatenation" in diversity (1994: 172-84).

Ortega thought of his position as "going beyond" James, as he did of Husserl, Scheler and Dilthey. As Graham concludes: "He 'borrowed,' it is true, but he was throughout, following his own 'arrow' to his own 'destiny' (1994, 179)." (For Ortega the arrow of an archer speeding towards its target was a metaphor for life, a symbol he used on his bookplates.) "After numerous hints for many years, Ortega barely admitted [publicly] his early debt to James's 'solitary' genius only near the end of his life, after 1960, in an explicitly 'autobiographical' account, "A Half Century of Philosophy," which lay unfinished and unpublished until 1980 [Medio siglo de filosofía. Revista de Occidente, no. 3 (Oct.-Dec. 1980): 5-21], and has not yet been well utilized (1994, 146)," and oddly has not been included in the latest volume (12, 1983) of Ortega's Obras completas.

The second study, in summary, (1) traces the history of Ortega's long and repeatedly promised (from 1933 to 1950) but never discovered Dawn of Historical Reason, that was to attempt for the human sciences what Kant had accomplished for the natural sciences, and (2) tries to reconstruct its contents, offering this study as "itself the closest thing that may ever be seen to his originally intended Dawn of Historical Reason-- but, of course, incomplete (1997: 122-23)." Graham's second volume, on Ortega's pragmatist phenomenology of history, shows history is of central importance to Ortega's triple "system," a philosophy of life, a philosophy of history, and a philosophy of language, with history as mediating between the other humanities and the social sciences (this last to be studied in depth in Graham's proposed third volume). Ortega came to dislike the term "philosophy of history" and his final preference was "theory of history" (as
reflected in the title of Graham's second volume), although he moved from one to the other. Thus, in order to grasp fully Ortega's philosophy of life, one must relate it to history as well as to the other human or social sciences (as will be done in volume three). Ortega began to develop from the 1920s a new "critical" philosophy (or theory) of history that was parallel to and rooted in his pragmatist philosophy of life, yet distinct from it.

The procedure of exposition employed by Graham is to present Ortega's thought "...in a logical-topical (yet partly sequential-historical) sampling of his more notable works of a historical type. The chapters... follow the growth and elaboration of Ortega's several greater historical themes (besides historical reason), such as crisis and generations as models, including less obvious ones, like a process model of modernization.' which he returned so often, must be deferred [to the third volume], along with social themes of elites and masses and geo-gender types (colonial man and creole women, the last one promoting women's history) (1997: 10; emphasis in original)." Graham argues convincingly that the long promised manuscript of Dawn of Historical Reason was never found because it was more like a project than a single book, and was largely published (for various reasons) piecemeal in such specific works as History as a System (1941, but as an essay in 1936), Man and Crisis (1942, from articles published as early as 1933), and An Interpretation of Universal History (1960, posthumously from lectures on Toynbee in 1948), with an antecedent in "Hegel and Historiology" (1928, with its first English translation by Graham in the Appendix of this: volume)

As in the first study, James figures throughout the book, which also makes references to parallels to Dewey, although members of SAAP will be interested, especially, in Graham's first chapter ("A Pragmatist Phenomenology of History"). For those of us who taught or teach a course on "Philosophy of History," the last two chapters. (7 and 8) are of special interest and benefit: "Spengler, Toynbee and Universal History" and "Influences: Ortega, Historians, Analytical Philosophers." Long interested in world or universal history, Ortega translated Spengler's Decline of the West in 1923, for which he wrote a prologue, a work with which he basically disagreed (rejecting Spengler's biologism) but in which "he found various ideas parallel to his own (1997: 253)." In 1934 Ortega encountered Toynbee's Study of History, which he found more empirical and optimistic than Spengler (and for which he tried to get the rights in Spain for his publishing house, Revista de Occidente). "Thereafter he pondered Toynbee for years before delivering in 1948-49 a mainly negative public critique, which was published only posthumously (1997: 250)." The English translation, Interpretation of Universal History appeared in 1973, by which time interest in both Toynbee and Ortega has waned.

Central to Ortega's own theory was a model of the modernization process, a model used widely by later social scientists and historians without reference to Ortega. It is with the influence of Ortega on historians, almost always unstated, that Graham's final chapter is concerned. It is the first such survey to be published, a survey that could only have been written by a practicing historian. Along with the "Bibliographical Essay: A Brief World History of Ortega Criticism" at the end of Graham's first volume, this chapter is his most valuable contribution to future Ortega scholarship. It is seen that "working historians have shown much more interest in [the] historical ideas of Ortega... than have philosophers who have devoted their careers to the 'new'
philosophy of history that Ortega helped to introduce. Some notable historians have enriched their work by following his lead with regard to theoretical and practical (methodological) insights, but the philosophers of history have almost studiously ignored him -- perhaps to their loss. . . . Those few who denounced Ortega, or abandoned him, generally did not truly understand what he offered them or disliked him for personal or political reasons (1997: 295)."

Of those historians who did read Ortega, most were Dutch (Johan Huizinga and Jan Romein), Spanish (José Maravall and Americo Castro), Spanish American (Leopoldo Zea), and American (Carl Becker, Jacques Barzun, and Crane Brinton). According to Graham, Ortega's pragmatist "flavor of mind" predisposed U.S. historians to his message (1997: 296). Ortega tried in vain to interest French historians (mainly Paul Hazard and Louis Halphen) and, especially, German historians (despite the efforts of his admiring friend Ernst Curtius). Only a few British historians (Alfred Cobban, J.H. Elliot, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Geoffrey Baraclough) were even aware of him. According to Graham, wider knowledge of Ortega's ideas on historical method -- for, the future of historical science was the labor of Ortega's whole life, according to his own words (1997, 303) -- "might have helped us to soften a crisis in Western historiography that was shaping up even before his death. His posthumous influence among European historians has diminished to almost nothing. A much more lasting influence, one affecting many more historians than was the case elsewhere, was the use of his ideas in the United States . . . (1997: 297)." For example, the report (Theory and Practice in Historical Studies, 1946) of the Committee for Historiography for the American Historical Association, which included persons familiar to our membership such as Charles Beard, J.H. Randall, and Signey Hook, cited Ortega's "History as a System" from his Toward a Philosophy of History.

The final chapter ends with a section entitled "Prospects," from which my closing quotes are taken. "Whether or not Ortega's theory of history, with its implicit realist and social pragmatism, will ever interest philosophers of history and social historians much is a moot question (1997: 330)." The earlier contributors to History and Theory, the journal launched in 1960 as the organ of the critical "new" philosophy of history that focused on scientific theory and models, generally regarded historical realism and historical pragmatism as naive and outdated. In turn, pragmatist historians distrusted and disliked this "new" analytic philosophy of history. "Determined not to enter into [those] bitter and labyrinthine controversies, I [Graham] wish only to inform philosophers and historians alike about what seems to me to be unjustified disinterest and lack of information (and misinformation about Ortega's theory of history. Philosophers might find some ideas there that are not naive and passé but still valuable, 'pragmatically' useful to all who 'do' history and to all who theorize on history . . . Perhaps he [Ortega] could still teach us something for the future of historiography, and of society, culture, and education [as will be seen in volume three] (1997: 330, 31, 333; italics in original)."

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