

THE CARTESIANISM OF LIFE

Dezső CSEJTEI

My paper is to be a modest contribution to sketch out the existing connections between the philosophies of René Descartes and José Ortega y Gasset. This enterprise seems to be an attempt doomed to failure from the outset, because it is well-known that whereas Descartes stands for the honorific title of being the founder of philosophical **modernity**, Ortega, as a philosopher of life, can be reckoned among the founders of philosophical **anti-modernity**. Furthermore, it is a known fact, that the Spanish thinker tries to substitute the vetust and respectful category of **pure reason** with that of **vital reason**, which is, on his part, can also be conceived as an endeavour to turn upside down the realm of classical idealism of consciousness.

However, there are clear signs for a possible, opposite approach as well. If, instead of starting our train of thought with the statement that Ortega y Gasset's philosophy is a thorough critique of Cartesianism as such, we try to proceed on the opposite direction, we can find surprising and essential correspondences, which the relevant literature was silent about.¹

To begin with, it is more than surprising that Ortega, from the end of the twenties, has more than once given to his philosophy the name of **cartesianism of life**.² This denomination is of crucial importance; it implies that he considers his mature philosophy to be a version of cartesianism, a further developed and, in a sense, corrected type of cartesianism. The purpose of my paper is to argue for this denomination. For this reason I try to make use of those eminent texts, where he deals with the philosophy of Descartes in a detailed way. There is no lack at all in such texts, which range from *El tema de nuestro tiempo* of 1923 to *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva* of 1947.

My statement is, that it is not by chance that Ortega has called his philosophy to be the cartesianism of life. So, when he writes, e.g. that „the error of Descartes and the

knights of Spirit was not to carry out their reform of philosophy to the very end"³, he thinks to the continuation of this task. Or one can mention the following passage, where the vinculation to Descartes is quite manifest: „Let us turn, I repeat, from myths back to clear and distinct ideas, as they had been called with programatic solemnity by the most acerb mind the West ever had: by René Descartes."⁴ This quotation is from 1939. At this point I should like to call the attention to the fact that the words of appraisal towards Descartes were more frequent at the end of the thirties and at the beginning of the forties than ever, which is, of course, not by chance. It is the time of civil war in Spain, the beginning of the Second World war and the peak of totalitarian systems. That is why Ortega puts more emphasis on reason within his theory of vital (or historical) reason and he could rely on the Cartesian heritage in this respect as well.

As far as the methodical process is concerned, I should like to have recourse to the distinction Ortega has made in connection with philosophy in general: every philosophy, he says, consists of theoretical, **patent** statements (of ideomas), which can even form a system of their own, and, on the other hand, of metatheoretical, **latent** presuppositions (of draomas) which form the subsoil of the philosophy in question. Now I think that in comparing the philosophy of Descartes and Ortega one should not concentrate exclusively on the level of „ideomas", but on the terrain of „draomas" as well; that is to say on the similarities of philosophical life-situations. What is more, on the level of ideomatic philosophy it can even be contradictory, what on the field of draomas is identical, or at least similar.

The first great area, where one can clearly discern the traces of the Cartesian heritage in the cartesianism of life, refers to the **foundation** of a radical, unquestionable philosophical starting-point. The similarity in the **draomatic situation** is very clear, even if the ideomatic consequences are considerably different. What was the reason of their maniac adherence to explore a fundamental, primordial reality, which can bring about a metaphysical certainty for man? The answer is obvious: the experience of a radical lostness, desorientation. Whereas for Descartes it was the **antique**, aristotelian-scholastic philosophy which had vanished into nothing, for Ortega it was just the philosophy of **modernity**, being inaugurated right by Descartes. But the vital situation is common for both, and Ortega develops his argumentation of this similarity, which he applies for Descartes himself.

Now it is well-known that Descartes tried to establish a primordial reality with the help of **methodical doubt** and, at last, he found it in the realm of the acts of consciousness, of the *cogitationes*. Ortega himself makes much use of the process of methodical doubt, but, at the same time, applying it to the Cartesian argumentation itself, tries to think it further. In his study on Leibniz he draws the validity of cartesian doubt as follows: „At this moment we are at the principle and Descartes's principle was to doubt in all principles and make doubt to be the only and sufficient principle."⁵ In Ortega's interpretation Descartes has arrived to the watershed, but he does not make any step further. Where we are now is, that doubt is a principle, but such a principle, which is not a principle any more, for it calls in doubt all principles. We are confronted with a paradox, with a logical

paradox of „every Cretan lies”. The solution lies only outside the realm of logic – as has been shown everlastingly by Sancho Panza⁶ – and the same is done by Ortega as well. That is to say, doubt is not only a logical-ideomatic act; it is, at the same time, a dramatic act as well, it leads beyond itself. In his series of lectures about historical reason in Buenos Aires he emphasizes that doubt does not begin in itself; methodical doubt can be traced back to real doubt, as its foundation: „*methodical doubt* – as its name shows – is only a thinking which doubts, it is rather the idea – the theory –, that one has to doubt which is not evident. Now it is *real doubt* ..., previous to philosophy, which precisely leads Descartes to philosophize.”⁷ That is to say, doubting is more than a simple act of thinking: that is what he stresses in his Lectures about metaphysics as well: „Well, what exists, when there occurs doubt in an absolute sense? There is me, who doubts, and there is something else, that is doubtful for me. Both terms are equally unavoidable in order to be doubt as such. And what is doubtful, is not doubt, it is not me, it is not subjectivity ... What is ‘doubtful’ is a feature, how the world is presented to me, when I doubt.”⁸ One hardly can exaggerate the importance of these assertions. The very same act, that is to say, the act of doubting, which had led Descartes to deny the indisputably certain existence of the world and, further, to found the realm of the *cogitatio* as a primordial reality, this very act now turns against Cartesian argumentation and leads to the supposition of an established being of the external world. **There remains the Cartesian heritage, but precisely to surpass cartesianism.** Accordingly, he emphasizes the necessity of reversing the fundamental thesis of Descartes in his lecture held in Granada, in 1932: „You have begun to think ‘because’ previously you had existed and this existence of Your Excellency was to find yourself shipwrecked in something, which is called world without knowing what it is – hence it is doubtful – and, as a result, it is something distinct from Your Excellency, because, as Your Excellency assures us, one can not doubt purely out of himself.”⁹

The result, where *methodical doubt* leads, was the discovery of the inner world of cogitationes in Descartes, where *real doubt* leads, is the discovery of life, as primordial reality in Ortega. Although the realm of *cogitatio* and that of life fundamentally differ from one another, nevertheless there can be found some common elements, where Ortega does not simply deny the Cartesian position, but rather thinks it further.

Such a common element is the requirement of immediacy. Ortega, just like Descartes, does not only search for a new starting-point which is indisputable, absolute certainty, but which is, at the same time, something personal, immediate, something given in the very core of immediacy. The fascinating liveliness of his philosophy, where life really gets the opportunity to speak, is due to the complete validation of immediacy. However, the master, the great archetype to be followed was Descartes in this respect as well. „The brilliant discovery of Descartes consists in taking notice of the fact that ‘there exists something, in which the existence referring to me and absolute existence are identical, or, to put it another way, there is something, whose absolute existence consists in existing for me...’”¹⁰ Precartesian philosophies always set out from some kind of absolute being (Being, idea,

God etc.), which had an indisputable ontological priority in respect to the subject, so they were lacking immediacy. The significance of the turn made by Descartes is not only that in the form of *cogitatio* he has discovered a radically new starting-point, but also that the new starting-point is something **immediate** at the same time. It is not that which is for me, is absolute (because it would mean solipsism), but the point under discussion is that there is something, whose existence for me is something absolute at the same time. In this respect, that is in emphasizing immediacy, Ortega has remained a follower of Cartesian philosophy all the time.

This is, however, only one side of the coin; at this point he breaks out from the spell of Descartes and goes his own way further on: „It is necessary to divide the Cartesian reasoning in two directions of very different value: one, which concludes with the assertion that radical reality is immediacy as such. ... The other direction contains a different assertion, which adds something new to it saying: this immediate reality, this existence for me is thinking.”¹¹ The Spanish thinker draws the lines clearly and unambiguously, what he accepts and refuses. His endeavour is, however, not only the refusal of cartesianism, but its continuation and deepening as well. What we shall get as a result is – **Cartesianism of life**.

To begin with: the breaking through of the walls of *cogitationes* happens in the intuition of life. I should like to emphasize that the breakthrough of the world of *ego cogito* does not mean that external world is simply added to it. To conceive the new starting-point means a fundamentally different view of world; one has only to refer to the fact that Ortega has firmly criticized the static character of the Cartesian subject. Nevertheless, one can clearly discern the traces of Cartesian heritage in the primordial intuition of life: „an essential and primordial attribute of life is to see it-self (el verse a sí mismo). Life is to know our-selves. It is evidential.”¹² That is to say, those very means, which had served to conceive the *ego cogito*, now are for the discovery of life, as primordial reality. The world is not radically heterogeneous to consciousness, but is simply presented in it, constituting this way the reality we call life: „Every other reality is given in the occurrence of life for everyone – even those which pretend to transcend it – as presence, announcement. or symptom.”¹³ In brief, it is not to give a philosophical explanation of the demolition of the wall around the Cartesian subject of consciousness, but rather the other way around: it is precisely the building up of this Chinese wall between the subject and object that needs explanation. And this also is well-known: it is not less than the substantialization, the reification of the *ego cogito*, but at the moment we should not like to make a detailed analysis about it.

The next question refers to **method**, where we can find the same relationship between Descartes and Ortega. First of all I have to emphasize that Ortega, in spite of the fact of being an essayist, attached great importance to method. So it is only natural, that he frequently refers to method in connection with Descartes: „Descartes is eminently a man of method. I have already mentioned at the very beginning that all philosophers are men of method, but not all of them set forth it in detail, that is to say, they are not the one titu-

larly. The fact is that Descartes nowhere in his papers had explained formally his method..."¹⁴ The second half of the statement is more than astonishing, because there are several works of Descartes – let us just think on *Discourse of Method* – where he deals with method in a detailed way. The question is, what Ortega means by the term „method”. First, he lays great stress on the fact that in the case of Descartes the matter in question is not theoretical method as such, but the application of a given method. Second and more important, he stresses in his study on Leibniz, that in the case of Descartes there are close links between **life and method**: „Descartes lays great stress on making us see that it is not only his thinking that conforms to method, but his life has been methodical as well. That is why telling us the steps of his life he is to expound his method to us. This is represented in the *Discourse* as a pure sequence of reasonings....”¹⁵ According to this, Cartesian method becomes profoundly absorbed in the conduct of living, in personal behaviour, here is the reason of its gloomy character. Descartes's own life, taken as a text, turns to be the best explanation of his method. Ortega's interpretation tries to set free the Cartesian method from that lifeless prison, where it had been locked by habitual interpretations on Descartes. Furthermore, the supposition of the close link between method and life brings about the possibility of a critique of Descartes-philology, which had exercised only a textual approach towards the *Discourse* and it was unable to take notice of those life-experiences, that can be clearly felt in its background. Last, but not least; the Cartesian pattern of the unity of life and method provides a model to be followed for him; the philosophy of Ortega can be called the **Cartesianism of life** in this respect as well.

We have chosen the category of **intuition** to illustrate in brief the creative possibility of Cartesian method for Cartesianism of life. As it is well-known, Descartes attributed a fundamental role to intuition; he glimpses in it the guarantee of getting such a knowledge, whose certainty is beyond any doubt.¹⁶ Ortega deals with the interpretation of Cartesian intuition briefly in his study on Leibniz. He is impressed, in the first place, by the indisputability contained in intuition and, furthermore, by the fact that intuitiv knowledge is something ultimate, cannot be deduced from anything else. There is, however, a further moment, which endows intuition with a fundamental importance for the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset; it concerns the **relational** character of intuition: „The point in question is the connection of two things – the self and existence, sphere and limitation by a unique surface. Intuition means to see this connection, that is to say, to understand or to notice of it and, at the same time, to see it as something necessary and indisputable. This necessity does not have its foundation outside the simple mental presence of the connection. It is one and the same thing to think it and to perceive that it cannot be in another way. That is what Descartes calls ‘evidence’.”¹⁷ Now I think that precisely this interpretation of Cartesian intuition gives a starting-point for Ortega to apprehend life as a primordial reality. Life is called already at the lectures of 1929 as a most patent, clearly transparent being, an immediate evidence, presence. We are aware of life as a radical reality by means of the same immediate, intuitive certainty, as it had been formulated by Descartes. And here

comes the gist of the matter: if intuition is something relational, then it is just this circumstance, which comes into the foreground in the intuition of life, because it is nothing else, but the coexistence of the self and the world. That is to say, **in the intuition of life as the coexistence of the self and the world Ortega explicitly makes use of the Cartesian intuition**, Cartesianism becomes the promoter of Cartesianism of life. Nevertheless, as far as the direction of thinking is concerned, there is a fundamental opposition; whereas intuition meant for Descartes just the turning away from the external world and the discovery of the indisputable realm of the pure contents of the mind, Ortega, quite the contrary, has surpassed the idealism of consciousness in the philosophy of modernity just by the help of intuition, intuiting life as radical reality.

Finally, I should like to emphasize that it was precisely the Cartesian heritage, which made him possible to stick to the category of life and not to lose the possibility of working out an ontology based on life itself. It is well-known that in *Being and Time* Heidegger refuses the philosophy of life, let alone an ontology of life, on the following basis: „On the other hand, if we understand it rightly, in any serious and scientifically-minded ‘philosophy of life’ ... there lies an unexpressed tendency towards an understanding of Dasein’s Being. What is conspicuous in such a philosophy (and here it is defective in principle) is that here ‘life’ itself as a kind of Being does not become ontologically a problem.”⁸ This statement can be retorted, first, by the fact that a philosophy of life, as a metaphysics of life does not exclude in principle the intuition of ontological problems – and Ortega’s philosophy belongs to this category and, secondly, it is just the starting-point of life, where one can put questions which are **primary ones** even with respect to such categories as „thinking” or „being”. It is not by chance, when he writes in his study on Leibniz the following: „The result is that we have to ask questions in the order of reality not that what kind of things *are*, or what is and how is, what exists, but why is in the universe this X, we call Being”.⁹ And that is the point; how could Being become the subject-matter of any possible investigation, how and when did it get into that privileged position what its status is concerned in the history of philosophy. And, according to my judgement, it was precisely Cartesian philosophy, which helped a lot for Ortega in avoiding the starting-point of Being as such.

To sum up: the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset relies on the tenets of Descartes in many respects, and Cartesianism permeates his philosophy much deeper as it had been thought of in the relevant literature. I should like to finish my paper by making a remark about the close relationship of Cartesianism of life and Mediterranean way of living. It is well-known that the Spanish philosopher thought of Mediterranean way of living and the world of Modernity to be two realms, which are rather far from one another. „For our peoples it is very difficult to get accustomed to the peculiar, unique feature ...that constitutes thinking and subjectivity. For Nordic people, on the contrary, it is rather easy and obvious. Since the idea of subjectivity is, as I have already mentioned, the basic principle of the whole Modern Age, one can casually refer to it as one of the reasons, why

Mediterranean people have never been entirely modern ones."²⁰ I think that Ortega, right in his doctrine concerning the Cartesianism of life, could dispense justice to both; to modernity, being able, on one hand, to make the transformed Cartesian subjectivity to be an inalienable part of his doctrine, and, to Mediterranean way of living, on the other hand, in so far as his philosophy – as a philosophy of life – opens infinitely wide ahead of the inexhaustible richness of the world, and gives itself to her in an intoxicating joy. When he, in 1929, called life to be „transparent being”,²¹ he has bowed the head both to Descartes, his master, as far as clearness and distinctness is concerned and to the Mediterranean way of living, of a thousand colours. So his philosophy, the Cartesianism of life, can be characterized as a reflexive restitution of *Mediterraneum*.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the following monographies: Oliver W. Holmes: *Human Reality and the Social World*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst: 1975. pp.72-73., Victor Oumette: José Ortega y Gasset. Twayne Publishers. Boston: 1982. p. 105., Rockwell Gray: *The Imperative of Modernity*. University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: 1989. p. 188. The same approach can be found in the monography of Pedro Cerezo Galán: *La voluntad de aventura. Aproximamiento crítico al pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset*. Editorial Ariel, S.A. Barcelona: 1984. pp. 268-274. However, the author emphasizes the following: „Anyway, before starting his critique, Ortega never misses to underline the excellence and higher historical level of the Cartesian starting point over antique realism.” (p. 268.) One can mention, as an exceptional remark, the work written by Ciriaco Morón Arroyo: *El sistema de Ortega y Gasset*. Ediciones Alcalá, Madrid: 1968., where we can find the following statement „Ortega always admired Descartes.” (p. 326.) In the compilation of Anton Donoso and Harold C. Raley (José Ortega y Gasset: *A Bibliography of Secondary Sources*. Bowling Green, Ohio: 1986.) out of more than 4 thousand entries we can find only four ones (p. 429.), which deal with the connection between Ortega and Descartes, from a fundamentally critical standpoint.

² For example in *Historia como sistema, Obras Completas* (O.C. –Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1983) VI, p.49 and *Sobre la razón histórica*, O.C. XII, p. 194.

³ *Historia como sistema*, (O.C.) VI, p. 37. (All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated. – D. Cs.)

⁴ *El hombre y la gente*, (O.C.) VII, p. 98.

⁵ *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva*, O.C. VIII, p. 263.

⁶ The point under discussion is the so-called „paradox of the bridge”, in chapter LI. of the second part of *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*.

⁷ *Sobre la razón histórica*. O.C. XII. p. 189. and 191.

⁸ *Unas lecciones de metafísica*. O.C. XII. p. 126.

⁹ *En el centenario de una universidad*. O.C. V. p. 472.

¹⁰ *Unas lecciones de metafísica*. O.C. XII. p. 121.

¹¹ *Unas lecciones de metafísica*. O.C. XII. p. 122.

¹² *¿Qué es filosofía?* O.C. VII. 415.

¹³ La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva, O.C. VIII, p. 274.

¹⁴ La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva, O.C. VIII, p. 223.

¹⁵ La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva, O.C. VIII, p. 243.

¹⁶ Cf. Descartes: *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* III.

¹⁷ La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva, O.C. VIII, p. 319.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*. New York: 1962, p. 72.

¹⁹ La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva, O.C. VIII, p. 280.

²⁰ ¿Qué es filosofía? O.C. VII, p. 369.

²¹ ¿Qué es filosofía? O.C. VII, p. 425.