

## REASON AND LIFE.

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF DON QUIXOTE

## RAZÓN Y VIDA.

### INTERPRETACIONES FENOMENOLÓGICAS DE DON QUIJOTE

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**Abstract:** *Don Quixote* is not only a novel which represents Spanish culture, but a hero that reveals the relation between life and reason. I will compare two interpretations of *Don Quixote*. The first phenomenological interpretation belongs to Ortega Y Gasset, and the second to Lithuanian philosopher Algis Mickūnas. The interpretations of *Don Quixote* are related to the question about an ideal. What is the role of ideals in culture? Are ideals principles constructed by reason? Do these principles deny the reality of life, or are ideals related to the self life-world rationality? Then what does the idealism of *Don Quixote* mean? Does it represent a utopian rationality or does it seek to show values that are not reduced to circumstance? Ortega criticizes *Don Quixote* as an idealist, who can't find any ideal values in the nearest environment. Mickūnas suggests interpreting *Don Quixote's* idealism as a phenomenological bracketing, which allows one to doubt the blind dependence on this life-world and question its value.

**Key Words:** Ideals, *Don Quixote*, Ortega y Gasset, Mickūnas.

**Resumen:** *Don Quijote* no es únicamente una novela que representa la cultura española, sino también un héroe que revela la relación entre vida y razón. Compararé dos interpretaciones de *Don Quijote*. La primera interpretación fenomenológica pertenece a Ortega y Gasset y la segunda al filósofo lituano Algis Mickūnas. Las interpretaciones de *Don Quijote* se relacionan con la cuestión acerca de los ideales. ¿Cuál es el papel de los ideales en la cultura? ¿Son los ideales principios construidos por la razón? ¿Niegan tales ideales la realidad de la vida o bien se encuentran los ideales relacionados con la racionalidad misma del mundo de la vida? ¿Qué significa entonces el idealismo de *Don Quijote*? ¿Representa acaso una racionalidad utópica o trata más bien de mostrar valores que no se hallan reducidos a la circunstancia? Ortega critica a *Don Quijote* como un idealista, que no es capaz de encontrar valores ideales en su entorno más próximo. Mickūnas propone interpretar el idealismo de *Don Quijote* como un poner entre paréntesis de tipo fenomenológico, que nos permite dudar de la ciega dependencia del mundo vital y cuestionar su valor.

**Palabras clave:** Ideales, *Don Quijote*, Ortega y Gasset, Mickūnas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Don Quixote became one of the most discussed themes among Spanish intellectuals. What is known as the '98 group of writers searched for a way out of the crisis that Spain had experienced after the war it had lost. They needed to rediscover new ideals and new direction. Spanish intellectuals understood Don Quixote as a national symbol. On one hand, it is a book that represents Spanish culture and its achievements, but on the other hand, Don Quixote is a hero that expresses the positive philosophy of the Spanish national tradition. Without going into detail, I would like to mention that the theme of Don Quixote was debated by such intellectuals as Ganivet, Unamuno, Azorin, Baroja, and Menendez Pelayo. All of them provided their diagnosis of Spain through their interpretation of Don Quixote. Ganivet stated that the secret of the Spanish soul was hidden in Cervantes' enormous book<sup>1</sup>. Ramiro de Maeztu interprets Don Quixote as symbol of "the Catholic Spanish monarchy, God's knights fighting against time and against the whole world in order to solidify faith with an ideal"<sup>2</sup>. Ortega's interpretation continues this tradition and raises it to a new philosophical level. The reflections of Don Quixote as a symbolic representation of Spanish culture are linked with the question of an ideal<sup>3</sup>. What is the role of ideals in culture? Are ideals principles constructed by the mind, which refute the reality of life, or are ideals linked with the very rationality of the life world? What does Don Quixote's idealism mean then? Does it represent a utopian rationalism, or does it seek to show the kinds of values that are not reduced to circumstances? I would like to compare the phenomenological interpretations of Don Quixote by Ortega y Gasset and Lithuanian philosopher Algis Mickūnas.

## 2. DEREALIZATION AND SINCERITY

In his commentaries concerning Ortega's early articles, Javier San Martin noted that two motifs were very important, which characterized a shift from a

<sup>1</sup> Ganivet, A., *Obras completas*, vol.1, Madrid, *Idearium español*. Libreria general de Victoriano Suarez, 1944.

<sup>2</sup> Maeztu, R., *Don Quijote, Don Juan y La Celestina*, Buenos Aires, México, Espasa-Calpe, 1948, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Lasaga, J., *Figuras de la vida buena*, Madrid, Enigma Editores, 2006, p. 62.

neo-Kantian understanding of culture to a phenomenological understanding. First of all, it is literature as an understanding of the process of derealization, and second of all it is a cosmic meaning of sincerity without which a phenomenological return to the things themselves is impossible<sup>4</sup>. In my opinion, both of these motifs are linked with the phenomenological understanding of reduction and both are realized by reflecting on Don Quixote's relationship with reality. The derealization of reality is tied with the understanding of culture as a virtual reality. This theme remains relevant in all of Ortega's later work. Sincerity describes the link of life with the most intimate perceptions and experiences. They describe the closeness of culture and life, and not their opposition. It is interesting that both the themes of virtual reality and sincerity as the intimate experiencing of reality are analyzed while discussing the questions of art and aesthetics. In the appendix of *Meditations on Quixote* (published by Garagorri), which is named "Variations on Circumstances", Ortega analyzes the relationship between the author and his work. He notes that literary works remain autonomous as ideal objects. Poets are just organs of vision through which we can see these works<sup>5</sup>. However it is not enough to perceive aesthetic objects, they must be realized by employing and interpreting concrete material. Each artist must overcome him or herself and must overcome their epoch in realizing this task. In transcending their epoch, artists overcome it, however this overcoming is at the same time the uncovering of the meaning of circumstances. Emerging from concrete circumstances, a work of art erases these circumstances and fills them with a new meaning. Ortega states that "art and poetry are more than life, more than circumstances, it is the overcoming of life and circumstances"<sup>6</sup>. Thus one needs to overcome both circumstances and oneself, one's life. Works of art form the very soul of the artist and that is why he has to remain true to himself if he wants to remain true to art. However what does being true to oneself mean? According to Ortega, it means overcoming yourself and your own sincerity<sup>7</sup>. Ortega, like Sartre later on, considers sincerity to be an aspiration that does not mean the substantialization of identity with oneself. In this sense, Don

<sup>4</sup> San Martín, J., *Fenomenología y cultura en Ortega. Ensayos de interpretación*, Madrid, Tecnos, 1998, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *Meditaciones del Quijote. Con un apéndice inédito*, (eds. P. Garagorri), Madrid, Revista de Occidente, en Alianza Editorial, 2001, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136

Quixote is an ideal image for a person that doesn't reconcile oneself to circumstances, rather he repudiates them. But how does one understand this repudiation? This salvation, according to Ortega, is the uncovering of meaning as the reality of virtual culture. It is the ability to see the beauty within the things themselves, and not apply a predetermined ideal of beauty as a method of measuring them. It is an ability to look at the depth of what is on the surface, to see the whole in what is separate, see the forest through the trees. In his meditations on Don Quixote, Ortega describes the mission of the artist in the following way: "The artist not only produces verses they way an almond tree blooms in March: he rises above himself, above his vital spontaneity, proudly soaring like an eagle above his heart and existence. Behind the harmony of his rhythm, color and contour, feelings and sensations we find a strong power of reflection, of meditation"<sup>8</sup>.

Ortega y Gasset contemplates on the theme of heroes in the prologue to *Meditations on Quixote*. This analysis is multi-layered. Ortega criticizes Don Quixote as an idealist, who is not able to find ideal values in his surrounding environment. This criticism could be taken as an argument both with the irrationalism of Miguel de Unamuno and neo-Kantian rationalism. Unamuno understood Don Quixote as the kind of hero that represents the traditional values of Spain. In this sense, Don Quixote's heroism is the refutation of circumstances, but the circumstances are refuted in a way that rational meaning is not found in them. Thus, according to Unamuno, Don Quixote is a hero that loses his mind and comes out in defense of the irrationality of life. With this gesture, Don Quixote speaks out in favor of religious traditions, and not in favor of the modern rationalism of science and culture. One can assert that in criticizing the idealism of Don Quixote, Ortega is criticizing Unamuno's vision of an irrational life.

However, in interpreting Don Quixote, Ortega also speaks out against posing neo-Kantian values of ideals and everyday existence against each other. In this respect, Ortega's criticism could be compared with Heidegger's criticism of the concept of neo-Kantian values in his early lectures<sup>9</sup>. Neo-Kantians reject empirical life in the name of pure reason, which is the only thing that can en-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69-70.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger, M., *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie. Frühe Freiburger Vorlesungen Kriegsnotsemester 1919 und Sommersemester 1919*, en: Heidegger, M., *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. 56/57, Frankfurt am Main, 1987.

sure the knowledge of objective values and duty. This elevation of reason above circumstances is the refutation of circumstances, however at the same time it refutes life itself as irrational and contingent. Ortega rejects both the thesis that rationality refutes life as well as reason, which must refute the concept of life. This is why in interpreting the heroism of Don Quixote, he attempts to show that heroes are not those who refute life or reason, but those who are able to find rational meaning in life itself. This appearance of reason in life could be compared with Edmund Husserl's thoughts about phenomenological reason in "Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy—First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology".

### 3. QUIXOTISM AND CERVANTESISM

The discussion with Unamuno has been dealt with in various contexts, however the dualist viewpoint of Ortega concerning Quixotism seems to be an important point. Ortega states that "In *Mediations on Quixote*, I am attempting to research Quixotism. However this word is understood incorrectly. My Quixotism has nothing to do with the product that has spread in the market. Don Quixote can mean two things: Don Quixote is a book and Don Quixote is a character of the book. Normally what is well or poorly understood as 'Quixotism' is the Quixotism of the character. In these essays, on the contrary, the Quixotism of the book will be researched"<sup>10</sup>. These and other statements about Quixotism as a fashion, like the Spanish messiah, are directed first of all against Unamuno's idealization of Don Quixote. Ortega criticizes Quixotism as idealism that has lost its ties with the surrounding circumstances, however the Quixotism of the book itself, or in other words Cervantesism, is assessed as the phenomenological discovery of meaning in the details of life. Unamuno says that Quixotism is a real religion and a national tradition, while Cervantesism is criticized as a distortion of Quixotism. Ortega thought the opposite – he understood Cervantesism as an authentic understanding of the living world, while Quixotism for him was an idealistic withdrawal within tradition and refutation of circumstances.

<sup>10</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *op. cit.*, p. 30.

Ortega's return to Cervantesism is linked with the knowledge of the life world as a surrounding environment. The knowledge of the life world is phenomenological attention to the very expression of phenomena. For Ortega, Cervantes is like a good phenomenologist who is able to catch sight of the meaning of the world surrounding him or herself. What's more, Cervantes describes each person in connection with the landscape that he has experienced. Ortega said in one of his lectures in 1915 that "Thus, gentlemen, the Cervantes-like way of getting closer to things: to take each individual with his landscape, with that which he sees, and not what we see; take each landscape with the individual, who is able to fully feel it"<sup>11</sup>. In this quote, one can notice statement formulated by Ortega himself, saying that "I am I and my circumstance". This phenomenological correlation of the one perceiving and that which is being perceived in Ortega's opinion is fully realized in Cervantes' work. Cervantes provides the details of the living world in a way that the reader becomes a direct observer of their circumstances. In this respect, Ortega understands literary work as a delving into the meaning of the life world as a directly experienced sensual world. One can note that this close link between literary description and phenomenological description was also observed by another phenomenologist, Wilhelm Schapp, whose influence can be clearly felt in *Meditations on Quixote*. In his "Phenomenology of Perception" (1910), he observed that with research on perception, the phenomenologist is like an artist or painter, because he has to dive into the sensual world, which is where perception occurs. The most important is that the expression of sensual data does not have to be overshadowed by theoretical diagrams and formulas, because that would not allow one to observe and research the primordial ways of the sensitivity<sup>12</sup>. It is precisely this delving into the details of the surrounding world which do not overwhelm, but rather open up the meaning that Ortega observed in Cervantes' style. Ortega stated that: "Alas, if we only knew with certainty the secret of Cervantes' style, of his manner of approaching things! An unconquerable solidarity would reign in these spiritual heights, and poetic style would encompass philosophy and morality, science and politics. If

<sup>11</sup> Cerezo Galán, P., "Cervantes y El Quijote en la aurora de la razón vital", en: Lasaga, J., M. Márquez, J. M. Navarro, J. San Martín (eds.), Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 2007, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Schapp, W., *Beiträge zur Phänomenologie der Wahrnehmung*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 2004, p. 12.

someone were to come and reveal the profile of Cervantes' style, it would be enough to extend its lines to other problems of humanity and awake to new life"<sup>13</sup>.

Ortega understands the style of Cervantes as a phenomenological return to experience, which should be close to all details and small things of the everyday, i.e. the details and small things of the immediate environment.

#### 4. THE SALVATION OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Ortega's philosophy of culture grew from neo-Kantian philosophy of culture. At the beginning Ortega was influenced by his neo-Kantian teachers, but later he moved away from their teachings. The Marburg school of neo-Kantianism stated that philosophy was supposed to research "pure" elements, i.e. a priori elements of scientific knowledge. In this way they attempted to rid the theory of knowledge of the last remnants of empiricism. This meant that sensual expression was not particularly important for the neo-Kantians. Neo-Kantianism limited itself from direct experience, from spontaneous life and subjectivity, which did not go together with Culture and Science. A scientist did use spontaneous life and direct senses as a basis, but rather problems that were raised in earlier theories. At the same time, phenomenology first of all rejects an objective approach toward culture. Culture cannot be approached as pure objectivity, because it is based on a living and creating individual. Ortega stated a number of times that culture is the self-objectification of a spontaneous life, which is why culture cannot refute life.

However the domination of direct experiences does not mean that culture remains as a sphere of possible subjectivity. In the perspective of the individual life, the universal logos or meaning opens up to us. "An individual direct life, and circumstances are different names, that describe one and the same thing: they are the kinds of fields of life from which we have yet to extract the spirit, their logos that lie in them"<sup>14</sup>. Ortega y Gasset does not pose an individual spontaneous life against reason, which is what happened in modern philosophy. Cultural phenomena are understood not by pure intellect, not by an abstract

<sup>13</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *op cit.*, p.75.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

scientist that has isolated himself from circumstances, but by a person who lives within culture. This is why, according to Ortega, in wanting to understand the meaning of cultural objects, one must return to an individual life, from which they have come from, one must restore the creative participation of spontaneous subjectivity.

Culture is art, however a cultural act as a specific act of creation is not *creatio ex nihilo*, but the kind of act that surrounds us in a silent reality, in concrete circumstances and in our own individual life, where we find logos. This means that culture is not just creation but also a discovery of what is always close. Culture is based on creative acts with which one finds and creates the meaning of close surroundings and spontaneous life. Thus it seems insignificant when looking with the eyes of a pure subject, but becomes meaningful in the perspective of the life of an individual. According to San Martin, "a phenomenological analysis of seeing, touching and hearing is the basis of cultural philosophy"<sup>15</sup> in Ortega's philosophy.

Now we can once again return to Ortega's primary thesis, which when torn out of context sounds rather abstract. "I am I and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself. *Benefac loco illi quo natus es*, we read in the Bible. And in the Platonic school the task of all culture is given as 'to save the appearances', the phenomena; that is to say, to look for the meaning of what surrounds us"<sup>16</sup>. Meaning lies not in transcendental things, not in a transcendental world, but in our immediate environment, in ordinary everything things and circumstances. This is why, according to Ortega, one does not need to repudiate them, but ready oneself to see meaning in them. In emphasizing that there are no things in the world in which there is no meaning, Ortega quotes Heraclitus and Goethe: "To strangers who hesitate to go in to the kitchen where Heraclitus is, Heraclitus shouts 'Enter, enter even here divinities are present'. Goethe also wrote to Jacobi about one of his botanical-geological excursions: "There I am on and under the mountains, seeking the divine in *herbis et lapidibus*"<sup>17</sup>.

Ortega contemplated all of this in his "Prologue to the Readers" of *Meditations on Quixote*. One should note that the prologue was written later

<sup>15</sup> San Martin, J., *Teoría de la cultura*, Ed. Síntesis, Madrid, 1999, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



than the texts of the book. In the prologue, Ortega comments on the content of *Preliminary Meditation*<sup>18</sup>. The prologue and *Preliminary Meditation* is preparation for reflecting on Don Quixote as an expression of Spanish culture and as concrete circumstances of Ortega himself. According to Ortega, one cannot contrast small and big things, close and distance things, everyday and grand things, individual and public things. We are all heroes. Philosophy lies not in the exaltation of transcendental things, not in distinguished persons and events, but in the everyday and its experience. Quixote is that hero who forgets what is close as he dreams about heroic battles. He doesn't see the world around him anymore. This is why the task of the philosopher is to learn to see, hear, and love things that are the closest to us, around us. The universe opens up to us through concrete circumstances. The philosopher should not judge, but rescue circumstances. The salvation of circumstances means that meaning lies in concrete circumstances, because they are a part of the universe and only through them can we then understand the whole.

Concrete circumstances express themselves in our life as everyday and rather minor things, however these small things are the most important. This, according to Ortega, can be understood by reading such Spanish writers as Pio Bajora and Azorin, whose texts provide us an occasion to reflect on the small things in life. "It's a fact that when we dive into the darkest pessimism and find nothing in the universe that would help us save ourselves, we turn to the trifles of everyday life. Then we see that it is not the big things, big pleasure or big ambitions that support us in life, but a few minutes of cozy time together near a fireplace in winter, the pleasure of drinking a glass of wine, the gait of a sweet, unfamiliar girl, a wise thought, which our quick-witted friend utters in an ordinary tone"<sup>19</sup>.

## 5. DON QUIXOTE AS AN EXAMPLE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION

We can state that Ortega rejects two forms of idealism. On one hand he criticizes the repudiation of circumstances in the name of transcendence, which would fit the repudiation of life in the name of reason, however he rejects the

<sup>18</sup> For more on the content and structure of the book, see San Martin, J., *Fenomenología y cultura en Ortega. Ensayos de interpretación*, Madrid, Tecnos, 1998, p. 95-114.

<sup>19</sup> Ortega y Gasset, J., *op. cit.*, p. 26-27.

determinization of circumstances when everything is explained with the influence of circumstances. In interpreting Quixotism, Ortega offers a new way of understanding ideals. Ideals lie not in a supernatural and objective obligation, but they express themselves in the direct task as an imperative inviting one to rescue circumstances. Algis Mickūnas takes another route, interpreting Don Quixote as a symbolic figure that goes beyond a dependence on a separate life world, which can be found in his essay "The Consciousness of Don Quixote"<sup>20</sup>. Don Quixote in his own way embodies the transcendental consciousness, which in maintaining his intrinsic worth, he questions the decline of the living world. Mickūnas offers to interpret Don Quixote's idealism as a kind of phenomenological bracketing, which allows one to call into question blind dependence on this life world and question its worth. This means that the maintenance of intrinsic worth is tied with an ideal that exceeds concrete circumstances. Intrinsic worth here is understood as respect, dignity, honor, sacrifice. Don Quixote, Gandhi, and Socrates all embody a kind of intrinsic value, which becomes an ideal. Each of them were in conflict with their surrounding world, however this conflict is not a sign of their madness, but an assessment of the world's lack of worth. Thus one can state that intrinsic worth is a sensing of this perfect life that is raised up as an ideal, as a regulating idea in the Kantian sense. The objective of life is a perfect life, however it is endless movement. Each achievement is incomplete.

Ortega's concept of Don Quixote is different than that of Mickūnas, because Ortega's Don Quixote is understood as an idealist that refutes his closest circumstances. However one can observe a similar aspect of both of these thinkers. When Ortega speaks about Cervantes' Quixotism as a style, he notes its phenomenological aspect, i.e. the ability to find ideal meanings and values in the surrounding environment, in the little things of life. This gesture is linked with the action of derealization or the sincere tie with circumstances and oneself. Don Quixote becomes a symbolic figure that represents phenomenological reduction itself and the revealing of the world as a virtual reality. Mickūnas ties the reduction of Don Quixote with the bracketing of the world and question about the true worth of the world. Don Quixote questions the pragmatic world

<sup>20</sup> Mickūnas, A., *Don Kichoto sąmonė*, en: Mickūnas, A., *Demokratija šiandien*, Vilnius, Versus Aureus, 2007, p. 395-425.

where everything is tied with values as the pursuit of gain. Both authors also note the importance of the virtualness of the literary world. How does it happen that one can be infected with ideals through literature, how can literature teach us to see ideal things and bracket what we regard as reality?