

Life and Technology

Why Ortega y Gasset Matters Today

by

Massimo Vittorio

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Introduction

Human life has never existed apart from technics. Yet never before has technology¹ entered so deeply into the very conditions through which biological existence becomes a human biography. This distinction between biology and biography will be central to this book's argument. Long before the emergence of artificial intelligence, digital platforms or algorithmic environments, human beings distinguished themselves from every other living species by their peculiar relationship with technics. They do not merely adapt to the world they find; they continually transform it, creating tools, institutions, languages and artefacts through which life becomes not merely possible but properly human. Technics is therefore not an external addition to human existence. It belongs to its very structure. Understanding human life requires understanding the technical world through which that life is continually shaped. For Ortega y Gasset, technics is never an autonomous sphere of reality. It is always a function of life itself.

Yet every historical epoch develops a distinctive technological configuration, and each configuration transforms human existence in different ways. The significance of contemporary technology cannot be measured solely by the increasing sophistication of computational systems or by the unprecedented speed of digital communication. More profoundly, today's technologies increasingly participate in activities that have traditionally belonged to the inner architecture of human life itself: remembering, planning, orienting, selecting,

¹ Throughout this book, technics designates the constitutive human activity of transforming circumstance, whereas technology refers to its historically specific forms, systems, and configurations.

recommending, deciding and interpreting. They no longer function merely as external instruments placed at the disposal of an already constituted subject. They increasingly contribute to shaping the circumstances within which that subject comes to understand itself. The issue is then not simply that technology changes what we do, but that it increasingly participates in how we become who we are.

The question raised by this book, therefore, does not concern technology alone. Still less is it confined to artificial intelligence, whose rapid development represents only one manifestation of a much broader transformation. The deeper philosophical question is anthropological. What happens to human life when technology no longer modifies only the environment in which we act, but increasingly participates in the temporal, cognitive and practical conditions through which biography—the unfolding of a life as one's own—takes shape? If technics has always constituted one of the defining characteristics of humanity, what becomes of human existence when technics progressively accompanies, anticipates, and sometimes even prefigures the ways in which persons project themselves towards their own future?

These questions cannot be answered by engineering alone, nor exclusively by ethics, political regulation or legal governance, important though each of these perspectives undoubtedly remains. They require an account of what human life is before asking how technology ought to serve it. In other words, they require a philosophical anthropology. Before asking what technology ought to become, we must first ask what human life is. It is precisely here that the thought of José Ortega y Gasset acquires an unexpected contemporary relevance. It would be tempting to approach Ortega y Gasset simply as a remarkably prescient thinker, someone who anticipated many of the dilemmas generated by contemporary

technologies. Such an approach, however, would underestimate both the originality of his philosophy and the nature of the present inquiry. Ortega did not foresee artificial intelligence, algorithmic recommendation systems or digital platforms. Nor should he be read as if he had. The value of his philosophy lies elsewhere. It resides in the extraordinary explanatory power of the anthropological categories he developed—life, circumstance, vocation, technics, drama, projection, and biography—which continue to illuminate phenomena that belong to a historical horizon he could never have imagined.

This book therefore does not attempt to reconstruct Ortega's philosophy as an object of historical scholarship, nor to update it through superficial analogies with contemporary technological developments. Its ambition is different. It seeks to think with Ortega rather than merely about Ortega. His philosophy is treated not as a closed system requiring faithful repetition, but as a living conceptual framework capable of generating new questions and new interpretations. Fidelity to Ortega, in this sense, consists not in preserving his vocabulary unchanged, but in testing the continuing fertility of his philosophical anthropology when confronted with problems that have emerged only in the twenty-first century.

Such an approach inevitably requires a double movement. On the one hand, it remains grounded in Ortega's own texts, carefully distinguishing between what he explicitly argued and what may legitimately be developed from his insights. On the other hand, it recognises that philosophical concepts retain their vitality precisely insofar as they remain capable of interpreting realities beyond those that originally occasioned them. A philosophy that could speak only to its own historical circumstances would ultimately cease to be philosophy. It would become intellectual history. We continue to read Plato, Augustine or Kant not merely because they illuminate the

worlds in which they lived, but because their concepts continue to illuminate worlds they could never have known. Ortega himself repeatedly resisted such a reduction. His reflections on technics were never intended as a commentary on particular machines; they were an inquiry into the kind of being for whom technics is constitutive. It is this anthropological orientation that makes his work particularly fruitful today.

Hence, the pages that follow are not organised around particular technologies but around transformations in the structure of human life. Artificial intelligence appears throughout the book, but only as one expression—perhaps the most visible, though certainly not the only one—of a broader civilisational transition. The central argument developed in this study is that contemporary technology is transforming not only the circumstances in which human beings live, but also, increasingly, the anthropological conditions through which life becomes a biography. The concern of this book is therefore neither technology in itself nor life in the abstract, but the changing relationship between them: more precisely, how the constitutive relationship between life and technics is being transformed by contemporary technology.

Every technological age has altered the relationship between persons and their world. Contemporary technological civilisation, however, introduces a distinctive novelty. Increasingly, technical systems do not merely extend human action; they participate in anticipating it. They recommend before we search, navigate before we choose, predict before we decide, and organise possibilities before they become objects of deliberate reflection. Technology thus begins to accompany human projection towards the future in historically unprecedented ways.

To describe this transformation, the book proposes the notion of the Fourth Phase in the history of technics, conceived as an extension of the three phases identified by Ortega in his historical account of technical development. Where Ortega's three phases describe successive transformations in the human relationship with technical action, the Fourth Phase names a further development that he could not have predicted: the growing extension of technical intervention into the anticipatory structure of human life itself. If the Fourth Phase names the historical-anthropological configuration of this transformation, the technics of *nohacer* names its operative logic: the extension of technical relief from particular *haceres* toward the sphere of *quehacer* itself. This new phase does not abandon the historical trajectory described by Ortega but extends it towards a new domain.

This shift requires a corresponding move in philosophical attention. Debates surrounding contemporary technologies frequently concentrate on questions of efficiency, safety, regulation, transparency or accountability. These are indispensable questions, yet they presuppose a more fundamental one that is seldom made explicit: what conception of human life guides our evaluation of technological progress? Every judgement about what technology ought to do already contains, implicitly or explicitly, a judgement about what human beings are and what they may become. For this reason, philosophy cannot limit itself to evaluating individual technologies. It must also interrogate the anthropological horizon within which those technologies acquire their meaning. The originality of Ortega's philosophy lies precisely in placing life, rather than technology, at the centre of reflection. Technology never possesses, in his work, a sovereign logic of its own; it is always interpreted from within life, understood as the dramatic, biographical, and projective reality that each person must continually realise.

The present book's order deliberately follows this insight. Its concern is not technology first and humanity afterwards. Rather, it asks how technology should be understood once life itself becomes the primary philosophical category. For this reason, the analyses that follow move constantly between contemporary technological phenomena and Ortega's anthropological concepts. The intention is neither to illustrate Ortega through modern examples nor to explain current technologies exclusively through Ortega. It is to allow both to illuminate one another. Contemporary technological civilisation exposes dimensions of Ortega's philosophy that earlier generations had little reason to explore, while Ortega's categories disclose anthropological structures that remain largely invisible within contemporary debates about technology. The dialogue transforms both terms: it offers a renewed reading of Ortega, while simultaneously proposing a richer philosophical understanding of the technological present.

The dialogue that develops throughout these pages gradually leads to four conceptual proposals intended not as departures from Ortega's philosophy but as developments made possible by it. The first is the notion of the Fourth Phase of technics. Rather than identifying a new technological revolution defined by particular devices, the Fourth Phase designates a transformation in the relationship between technology and life. Contemporary technologies increasingly intervene not only in the execution of human action but in the anticipatory horizon from which action emerges.

The second proposal is the notion of the technics of *nohacer*. The term does not describe a simple reduction of human activity, nor the familiar substitution of human effort by technical means. It names a change in the direction of technical relief. Technics has historically rendered particular *haceres* unnecessary, often enlarging the space in

which human beings could devote themselves to the biographical task of *quehacer*. The technics of *nohacer* begins when this logic of relief extends toward *quehacer* itself, increasingly intervening in the processes through which possibilities are encountered, orientations formed, and projects given direction.

The third proposal concerns the anthropological response to this transformation. If the distinctive characteristic of contemporary technology lies in its growing capacity to anticipate, optimise and preconfigure human experience, then the appropriate philosophical response cannot consist in rejecting technological development altogether. The book instead proposes what is here called the “maintenance of rupture”: the deliberate preservation of those interruptions, frictions, uncertainties and spaces of interpretation through which biography remains genuinely one’s own. Rupture is not defended because uncertainty possesses intrinsic value, nor because inefficiency should be celebrated. It matters because human life does not simply unfold through prediction but through encounters, decisions and discoveries whose significance frequently becomes visible only in retrospect.

Finally, the concluding chapter introduces the notion of “biographical risk.” The distinction between biological and biographical risk does not oppose technology to humanity, nor does it romanticise uncertainty. It seeks instead to distinguish between those forms of risk that technical civilisation rightly strives to reduce and those constitutive conditions of openness without which biography itself would cease to retain its specifically human character. The concept is offered not as a reformulation of Ortega’s own vocabulary, but as an attempt to articulate, within a contemporary philosophical framework, an implication that follows from his anthropology of life, circumstance and technics.

Taken together, these proposals pursue a single objective. They seek to show that Ortega's philosophy remains valuable today not because it anticipated the technological present, but because it continues to provide conceptual resources for thinking it. Philosophical traditions remain alive insofar as they generate new intelligibility rather than merely preserving inherited doctrines. The enduring significance of Ortega's thought lies less in the historical accuracy of particular predictions than in the continuing vitality of the anthropological questions he teaches us to ask.

The structure of this book deliberately reflects the philosophical argument it seeks to develop. Rather than beginning with contemporary technologies themselves, it begins with the question of human life. This order is not merely expository but methodological. Technology can only be understood from the perspective of life, for the reason established at the outset: the technical is not a self-standing region of reality but a function of the human condition. Philosophical anthropology precedes technological analysis, and diagnosis precedes philosophical orientation.

Accordingly, the opening chapters reconstruct the anthropological foundations of Ortega's philosophy and his account of technics. The central chapters place these categories in dialogue with contemporary technological civilisation, arguing that present developments are best understood not as isolated innovations but as expressions of a broader transformation in the relationship between life and technics. It is within this context that the proposal of the Fourth Phase is developed. The final chapter turns from diagnosis to orientation, asking how biography may continue to flourish in increasingly anticipatory technological environments by preserving the openness that human life requires.

The argument of this book proceeds not only by exegesis of Ortega but by extension of him. Where his categories require a contemporary idiom, one is proposed. Thus the reader will encounter a small set of operative terms—*ensimismamiento light*, the diminished withdrawal into oneself that anticipatory systems make comfortable; *velvet serendipity*, the frictionless environment in which nothing genuinely befalls us; *cognitive friction*, the measurable resistance that marks authentic reasoning under pressure; and *biographical unemployment*, the neutralisation of the human task once prediction pre-empts decision. The analysis will also distinguish between the *yo imagen*, the retrospective trace through which a life becomes representable, and the *yo algorítmico*, the predictive surrogate constructed from that trace and returned to the subject as an anticipation of who they are likely to become. This distinction will prove central to the book's account of ontological substitution. None of these terms is intended as a departure from Ortega. Each is an attempt to think, in the vocabulary of the Fourth Phase, what *circunstancia*, *vocación*, *ensimismamiento*, and *ejecutividad* would demand were their author writing today. The terms are introduced here only as signposts; their full elaboration is reserved for the chapters in which each does its proper work.

The ambition of this study is both intentionally modest and deliberately ambitious. It does not claim to offer definitive answers to the philosophical challenges posed by contemporary technology. Nor does it suggest that Ortega y Gasset provides ready-made solutions to questions he never explicitly addressed. Its more limited—and perhaps more genuinely philosophical—aim is to reopen a conversation. If Ortega's categories continue to illuminate technological realities that emerged long after his death, this is not because his philosophy anticipated the future, but because it succeeded in identifying structures of human life that remain recognisable despite profound historical change.

To ask whether Ortega matters today is therefore not simply to ask whether he still deserves to be read. It is to ask whether his philosophical anthropology continues to generate intelligibility in a technological civilisation whose transformations increasingly concern life itself. The answer proposed in the pages that follow is affirmative. Not because the present resembles Ortega's world, but because the human condition from which his philosophy began has not disappeared. It has merely acquired new technological circumstances.

Hence, the pages that follow are offered not as an attempt to bring Ortega into the twenty-first century, but as an invitation to discover whether his philosophical anthropology still enables us to understand the changing relationship between life and contemporary technology—and, consequently, what we ourselves are becoming within it.

Chapter 1

Life as Biography

1. Life as a Problem, Not as a Fact

Human life, for José Ortega y Gasset, does not present itself as a neutral fact to be described, measured, or explained from the outside. As Ortega famously writes, “Life is given to us, since we don’t give it to ourselves, but rather find ourselves in it suddenly and without knowing how. But the life that is given to us is not given to us ready-made; rather, we need to make it ourselves, each one of us our own. Life is a task” (OC VI, 47)¹. In what follows, I reconstruct this anthropological starting point, which serves as the baseline for the entire book. Only by clarifying what it means for life to be a problem and not a mere fact can we later assess how contemporary technologies—especially anticipatory systems and artificial intelligence—reshape the conditions under which this problem can still be posed.

Life is not something that simply is; it is something that constantly poses itself as a problem. This claim should not be mistaken for a rhetorical intensification of biological life. Ortega does not claim that

¹ “La vida nos es dada, puesto que no nos la damos a nosotros mismos, sino que nos encontramos en ella de pronto y sin saber cómo. Pero la vida que nos es dada no nos es dada hecha, sino que necesitamos hacérsela nosotros, cada cual la suya. La vida es quehacer”. All references to Ortega y Gasset’s works are to the *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Fundación Ortega-Marañón/Taurus, 2004–2010), cited hereafter as OC, followed by volume and, where applicable, page number. Quotations from Ortega are given in English translation in the main text. For longer passages, the original Spanish is provided in the notes. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

human life is purely a more complicated organism. He is marking a categorical shift: between life understood as a process that continues and life understood as a reality that must answer for itself. It is precisely here that any naturalistic reduction becomes insufficient. This intuition—already present in the *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914) and fully theorised in *Historia como sistema* (1935)—marks a decisive rupture. Anthropology cannot be grounded on biological, psychological, or functional premises². To live, in Ortega's sense, is not equivalent to remaining alive. Biological survival is a condition; it is never a reason.

Human life is defined not by what it manages to conserve, but by what it is forced to decide. One does not simply inhabit life as one inhabits a physical environment. Instead, one is thrown into a life that demands orientation, interpretation, and response. From the very beginning, life appears as something that must be taken up, assumed, and shaped. Ortega repeatedly describes life as *quehacer*: “We are always forced to do something, but we are never strictly forced to do something specific; this or that task is not imposed on us, as its trajectory is imposed on a star or its gravitation on a stone” (OC VI, 47)³. This *quehacer* is not an assignment to be completed at leisure. It is

² The anti-naturalist thread can be traced from Ortega's early writings to his mature philosophy: in the *Ensayo de estética a manera de prólogo* (1914), where the executive reality of the self already resists reduction to any objectifiable content, and in *Historia como sistema* (1935), where Ortega states explicitly that “man does not have a nature, but rather... history” (OC VI, 73). As Julián Marías has shown, the rupture from both empiricism and neo-Kantian idealism occurs as early as 1913-14, when Ortega “had transcended the notions of reduction and consciousness, to affirm the personal and executive reality of human life” (Marías 1960, 426).

³ The concept of *quehacer* as the defining structure of human life was systematically elaborated by Ortega in his university courses of 1929-1931, particularly in *¿Qué es la vida?* (1930-31), where life is defined as an activity that is continuous occupation: “And there is not, nor can there be, a moment in my

an imposition. Ortega describes life as a drama—action under pressure, not a theatrical spectacle. In *El hombre y la gente*, the tone shifts to urgency: “Life presents many tasks. And the most important of these is to ensure that the chosen course of action in each case is not just any action, but what must be done—here and now—that it is our true calling, our authentic purpose” (OC X, 163). The drama lies exactly here. It is an execution without a script. A mandate without a manual.

This is why Ortega insists that life cannot be understood as an object among others. Objects can be contemplated at a distance and reduced to properties. They can also be inserted into explanatory chains. Life, by contrast, is always lived from within. It is the medium in which all objects appear and acquire significance. To attempt to explain life by treating it as a thing is to miss its most essential feature: its irreducibly personal character.

This is the basis of Ortega’s fundamental claim that life constitutes the “radical reality”⁴—radical not in the colloquial sense, but in the

life that does not consist of doing something with something or, as we said the other day, of occupying myself with the elements of my surroundings, with the world” (OC VIII, 421). José Lasaga Medina has reconstructed this decisive phase in detail, showing how the transition from the early concept of circumstance to the mature notion of life as radical reality passes through the articulation of *quehacer* as an anthropological constant (Lasaga Medina 2013).

⁴ The conceptual core of what Ortega will later call *realidad radical* is already present in his early writings, particularly in his critique of biological conceptions of life. As early as 1920, Ortega distinguishes between a merely “organised” life—understood as the functioning of given organs—and a more primary “organising” life, which he characterises as the truly “radical” form of life (OC II, 407). The expression *realidad radical* itself appears later, in the lectures of 1929–30, *Vida como ejecución (El ser ejecutivo)*, and is subsequently developed in a more systematic way in *El hombre y la gente* (1939–40; 1949–50) and *Historia como sistema* (1935). For a thorough analysis of its phenomenological implications, see San Martín (2012, 127–140), who argues that Ortega’s concept of “radical reality” is

etymological one: the root from which all other realities derive their meaning. “This makes us realise that the radical reality that is my life contains within itself many second-order or presumed realities, which opens up to my life a vast field of realities distinct from itself. [...] Apparently, the attribution of reality allows for, and even imposes, a scale or gradation or hierarchy, and there will be, as in burns, first-degree realities, second-degree realities, and so on, not referring to the content of that reality, but to its pure character of being a reality” (OC X, 200)⁵. Physics, mathematics, theology—all are activities that take place within life. They depend on it; life does not depend on them. This priority is not hierarchical in the traditional metaphysical sense. Ortega is not claiming that life is the highest reality. He is claiming that it is the most basic one: the reality we cannot step behind, because any attempt to do so is itself an act of living.

Yet the capacity to experience life as a problem—rather than merely undergoing it as a sequence of stimuli—is not self-explanatory. It requires a specific anthropological precondition. This precondition is what Ortega, in *Ensimismamiento y alteración* (1939)⁶, identifies as the

not a departure from phenomenology but its most consistent development. See also Morujão et al. (2022, 89-103), on the relationship between *ejecutividad* and the primacy of the pre-reflective.

⁵ Ortega’s full passage reads: “Esto nos hace caer en la cuenta de que a la realidad radical que es mi vida, pertenece contener dentro de sí muchas realidades de segundo orden o presuntas, lo cual abre a mi vida un campo enorme de realidades distintas de ella misma. Pues al llamarlas, grosso modo, presuntas—también podíamos decir «verosímiles»—no les quito el carácter y valor de realidades. Lo único que hago es negarles la calidad de ser realidades radicales o incuestionables. Por lo visto, la atribución de realidad permite y aun impone una escala o graduación o jerarquía y habrá, como en las quemaduras, realidades de primer grado, de segundo grado, etcétera, y ello no refiriéndonos al contenido de esa realidad, sino al puro carácter de ser realidad” (OC X, 200).

⁶ *Ensimismamiento y alteración* was first delivered as a lecture in Buenos Aires in 1939, as the opening session of a six-part series titled *Seis lecciones sobre el hombre y la gente*, and was eventually published in the posthumous edition of *El hombre y*

human ability to withdraw from the immediate pressure of the environment. Unlike the animal, which remains permanently absorbed (*alterado*) by its surroundings, the human being can retreat into itself (*ensimismarse*)⁷ in order to reflect, project, and plan. This withdrawal is not a luxury or a cultural achievement; it is the anthropological condition without which life could never appear as a task (*quehacer*) rather than as a mere reaction. Without it, biography would be structurally impossible: life would remain permanently reactive—a chain of responses rather than a project.

Life constantly confronts the subject with situations that require taking a stand. Even when no explicit choice is made, life continues to demand a response. Inaction, hesitation, and resignation are themselves forms of response. For this reason, life is never neutral. It is always charged with urgency, relevance, and weight. Ortega's philosophy begins from this fundamental asymmetry: while things simply are, life is always *at stake*.

This understanding of life as a problem has important methodological consequences. It implies that philosophical anthropology cannot

la gente (1957). The text is reproduced in OC V, 529–550. For its relationship to Ortega's philosophy of technics, see Ch. 5 of the present volume.

⁷ Javier San Martín has argued persuasively that *ensimismamiento* should not be understood as a merely psychological capacity for introspection, but as the expression of a deeper phenomenological structure that Ortega derives, with significant transformations, from Husserl. In San Martín's reading, the ability to withdraw from the immediate environment is grounded in the distinction between *ejecutividad*—the executive, pre-reflective layer of consciousness in which one is always already immersed in the world—and the reflective act by which one takes distance from that immersion. See San Martín (2012), esp. Ch. 5. This reading confirms that Ortega's distinction between *ensimismamiento* and *alteración* is not a dualistic separation of mind and world, but a phenomenological description of the conditions under which the world can appear as a field of meaningful possibilities rather than as a set of coercive stimuli.

proceed by accumulating empirical data alone. No amount of biological or sociological information can explain why a life takes one direction rather than another. The difficulty is not empirical incompleteness, but categorical inadequacy: explanation can register behaviour, but it cannot account for the lived weight of a direction. It cannot explain why certain possibilities appear compelling while others remain invisible or irrelevant. What is at issue is not the description of behaviour, but the structure of meaning within which behaviour becomes intelligible.

Ortega captures this structure through the concept of *circumstance*⁸. Life never unfolds in abstraction. It always takes place within a concrete configuration of conditions, limits, and possibilities. Yet circumstance does not determine life mechanically. It is not a causal chain but a field of challenges and resistances. The self does not precede circumstance, nor is it dissolved into it. Rather, the self emerges in the way it confronts, interprets, and responds to its circumstance. This point will become decisive later in the book. For if circumstance is not a neutral container but the field within which life must orient itself, then technologies that increasingly organise that field in advance do not merely assist human action; they intervene in one of the constitutive conditions of biography. This is the sense of Ortega's famous formulation: "I am myself and my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I do not save myself" (OC I, 757). This should not be read as a sociological observation, but as an ontological claim. The self is not an inner substance enclosed within the individual. It is the

⁸ The concept of *circunstancia* undergoes a significant evolution in Ortega's thought. In *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914), it designates the immediate environment that must be "saved" through philosophical attention. By the time of *¿Qué es filosofía?* (1929), it acquires a more systematic function as the objective pole of the *yo-circunstancia* correlation. For the genealogy of this evolution, see Lasaga Medina (2013); for its relationship to Husserl's concept of *Lebenswelt*, see San Martín (2012, 177-186).

dynamic result of an ongoing engagement with the world. Life is therefore not a possession but an activity—something that must be constantly enacted, not merely preserved.

The precise technical content of this ontological reading is supplied by Julián Marías in his close analysis of the formula in Ortega. The word “yo,” Marías observes, functions twice—or three times if one counts the possessive “mi.” The first “yo” designates the total reality of the person, the one that includes circumstance as one of its constitutive ingredients. The second “yo” is the abstract subject-pole—the “yoidad” or pure subjectivity that stands, insufficiently, over against the world. Between the two there is a difference not of degree but of ontological register. As Marías formulates it: “In short, in contrast to the *reality of the self*—its ‘selfhood,’ its ‘subjectivity,’ its ‘polar’ character in relation to things, for the time being—the reality that I am, defined by very different attributes: position, executive power, priority with respect to its ingredients, intrinsic duality” (Marías 1960, 429).

Ortega’s anti-reductionism is therefore not merely a protest against biological naturalism. It is a rejection of any attempt to treat the person as a pole, a substance, or a subject—whether the reduction comes from the direction of naturalism, idealism, or, as Marías will argue, from the bracketing moves of phenomenology itself. Therefore, life appears as a continuous effort to confer form upon an existence that is, in itself, radically indeterminate. There is no predefined script that dictates how a life should unfold. Human beings are not born with a programme that tells them who they must become. This lack of programmatic closure is not a defect. It is the very condition that makes biography possible. To live is to be exposed to the necessity of giving one’s life a shape, even though no final guarantee can ever be provided. In this sense, life is inseparable from risk. Every decision

rules out alternatives and commits the subject to a path. What makes human life dramatically serious is not choice itself, but the irreversibility and formative nature of choices. A life is not just the sum of its options, but the sedimentation of decisions. This, Ortega calls “biography”: the slow, fragile construction of a personal form over time.

Understanding life as biography thus means recognising that human existence is not primarily governed by necessity, but by responsibility. Responsibility here does not yet have a moral or juridical meaning; it names the more fundamental fact that one must answer for one’s life simply by living it. Before any ethical system can be articulated, life already demands an answer. Philosophy, in Ortega’s sense, begins by taking this demand seriously. According to Ortega, life is not only a problem to be solved but a condition of permanent pre-occupation—a forward-oriented engagement with what is not yet but must be anticipated. In this chapter, I treat this demand as an anthropological constant. But in the background lies a question that will orient the entire investigation: what becomes of this fundamental responsibility when predictive systems increasingly anticipate our choices, configure our environments, and pre-empt the very situations in which life must be taken up as a problem rather than received as a solution?

2. From Biology to Biography: Life as a Project

The distinction between biological life and biographical life is one of José Ortega y Gasset’s most original and fertile contributions to philosophical anthropology. Biology accounts for the conditions under which life can continue. Biography concerns the conditions under which a life becomes one’s own. Ortega’s insistence on this distinction is not a rejection of scientific explanation but a recognition of its limits. Biology can explain how living organisms function. It

cannot explain why a human life takes a particular direction or why certain possibilities appear meaningful while others remain irrelevant.

Biological life is governed by necessity. It responds to stimuli, adapts to environments, and seeks equilibrium. Human life, by contrast, is marked by a structural lack of equilibrium. Ortega repeatedly emphasised that human beings are more than merely biological from his 1910 lecture *La pedagogía social como programa político* (OC II, 93), through his insistence on the role of the “ideal” (OC III, 725; Marías 1970, 245-257), to his criticism of Darwin: “Darwin sweeps the heroes across the face of the Earth” (OC I, 825). Unlike animals, humans are not equipped with a fixed set of instincts that would automatically guide their behaviour. This deficiency is not accidental; it is constitutive. It is precisely because human beings lack a predetermined way of living that they are forced to invent one.

A parallel account of this constitutive deficiency was developed, in the German tradition, by Arnold Gehlen. He described the human being as a *Mängelwesen*—a “deficient being” whose biological openness necessitates the compensatory structures of culture and technology (Gehlen 1988, 3-31). Gehlen and Ortega arrived at similar conclusions independently. Their convergence confirms that the anthropological insufficiency of the human is not an idiosyncratic thesis but a foundational insight shared across major twentieth-century traditions of philosophical anthropology. Gehlen’s account, however, follows a specific developmental logic whose endpoint diverges sharply from Ortega’s. The key concept is *Entlastung*—relief, or unburdening. Because humans cannot rely on instinct to guide behaviour automatically, they construct institutions—stable normative structures, customs, and technical systems—that relieve them of the exhausting necessity of having to decide everything from

scratch. Technology, in this framework, is essentially a form of institutional compensation: it reduces the friction of the world and frees the organism from the constant burden of adaptation. The endpoint of technical development, for Gehlen, is a condition of maximal *Entlastung*—a world so organised by compensatory structures that the burden of biological deficiency is effectively managed.

In Ortega, by contrast, the lack of instinctual closure opens a biographical space that cannot be exhausted by compensation alone. The problem is not only how humans survive their insufficiency, but how they give form to a life that cannot be lived by substitution. To treat biographical openness as a deficiency to be compensated is already to misread it. The *Mängelwesen* may require technology to survive; what Ortega insists upon is that the biographical being requires something more: not relief from the burden of decision, but a space in which that burden can be genuinely assumed as one's own. This distinction carries consequences. Gehlen's framework could be interpreted as favouring any technology that reduces the cognitive and practical burden on the human agent—including artificial intelligence. Ortega's framework resists. It imposes a different criterion: does this reduction of burden preserve the biographical space, or does it erode the very condition under which a life can answer for itself? Relief is not always salvation.

"Human beings," Ortega writes, "are never certain that they will be right, that they will make the right choice. Which means nothing less than this tremendous thing: that, unlike all other entities in the universe, man is not, can never be sure that he is, in fact, a man, as the tiger is sure of being a tiger and the fish of being a fish" (OC X, 148). To live is to find oneself without instructions, exposed to a world that lacks inherent meaning. The absence of instinctual closure means that

human beings must orient themselves within a field of possibilities whose significance is never fully given in advance. In this sense, life appears not as a stable condition but as an ongoing problem that must be continuously addressed. The concept of biography emerges even more evidently at this point. Biography does not refer merely to the narrative reconstruction of a life after it has been lived. It designates the internal structure through which life is lived as a sequence of meaningful events. A biography is composed in real time, through decisions that commit the subject to certain paths while excluding others. Each decision shapes a personal trajectory that cannot be reduced to biological causation or external constraint (Gutiérrez Pozo 2012, 83-85).

Ortega's notion of life as project (*proyecto vital*) captures this dynamic with clarity: "Man has no nature; what he has is history" (OC VI, 73)⁹. To live is to project oneself into the future, to act in view of possibilities that are not yet actual but already exert a normative pull. Human life, therefore, unfolds as a constant anticipation of what it must become. The future is not just something that will happen; it must be anticipated. Human anticipation is not a technical forecast. It is a biographical exposure to what is not yet. It does not eliminate uncertainty—it inhabits it. Technical systems aim at something else entirely: transforming anticipation into prediction. Replacing exposure with calculation. Reducing the open horizon of projection to a manageable set of probable outcomes. Anticipation risks; prediction

⁹ This formulation, one of Ortega's most paradigmatic, first appears in 1935 *Historia como sistema* (OC VI, 73) and recurs with significant variations across the mature works, notably in the 1944 lectures on *La razón histórica* (OC IX, 180; 361) and in *El hombre y la gente* (OC X, 31). Its reiteration is not merely rhetorical: each context inflects the thesis differently—in *Historia como sistema* as a rejection of Eleatic substance; in the *razón histórica* lectures as a methodological principle; and in *El hombre y la gente* as a foundation for social ontology. Subsequent citations in this book refer to the specific context in which the formulation is deployed.

secures. Yet this anticipation is never total. It always unfolds under conditions of uncertainty, and it is precisely this uncertainty that gives human life its dramatic character. This anticipatory structure corresponds to what Ortega elsewhere calls the “futuribility” of human life: life is always experienced in connection with possibilities that are not yet certain but already influence us. This structure was elaborated with systematic precision by Julián Marías in *Antropología metafísica* (1970). For Marías, the human self is constitutively *futurizo*—oriented toward the future not as one option among others, but as the very mode of its being: “Far from being self-sufficient or autonomous, the person is defined by indigence, neediness, the unreality of anticipation, rooted in a reality that awaits” (Marías 1970, 46). What one is biologically does not determine what one becomes biographically, but the biographical can only take shape by being installed (*instalado*)¹⁰ in a specific corporeal, temporal, and generational situation. Installation is not imprisonment: it is the condition under which projection becomes real rather than abstract.

Ortega makes this structure explicit by defining life as anticipation. As he puts it, “life anticipates itself, constantly and essentially; life is anticipation”—*vida es anticipación* (OC VIII, 435)¹¹, and the self is,

¹⁰ Marías’s concept of *instalación* should be carefully distinguished from Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness), with which it is superficially comparable. Where Heidegger emphasises the mood of *Unheimlichkeit*—the fundamental uncanniness of finding oneself in the world—Marías stresses the biographical *habitability* of the installed situation: one is thrown, but into a situation that is already structured by generational, cultural, and corporeal coordinates that make orientation possible. “Installation” is therefore less a fall than a foundation. On this distinction, also see Russo (2012).

¹¹ The full passage reads: “Dos palabras poseemos que nos sirven admirablemente para expresar ese «yo futuro», ese «yo que tengo que ser»: las palabras anticipación y proyecto. En el fenómeno que llamo «mi vida» me encuentro no sólo instalado en este contorno, sino que —ya lo hemos visto— esa instalación es actuante; me encuentro ocupado con este contorno, y este

before anything else, a “vital programme” that must be realised in the world. What I do in the present does not precede this projection, but follows from it: my action arises from what I already am “in anticipation.” To live is thus to be ahead of oneself, committed to a future that one has yet to realise. This anticipatory structure is inseparable from a more concrete existential condition that Ortega describes as *preocupación*. Life is not only oriented toward the future; it is constantly occupied with it. As he observes, human life is fundamentally “preoccupation,” a being concerned in advance with what is not yet, with a future that is essentially uncertain, plural, and without fixed form (OC X, 359)¹². The future is not a stable domain

ocuparme con él o lo que hago con él lo hago porque tengo que ser filósofo, es decir, porque soy por anticipado algo. De esto que soy en anticipación surge mi hacer actual y mi contorno presente. Mi vida, pues, se anticipa a sí misma, constantemente y esencialmente. Vida es anticipación. Cuando de pronto despierto vitalmente y caigo en la cuenta de que vivo, me encuentro ya, desde luego, obligado a realizar en el mundo el personaje que soy por anticipado. Y todo lo que hago, es decir, mi presente, lo hago para realizar ese proyecto que soy. Vivir es proyectarse, en el doble sentido de la palabra, a saber, como programa y como proyección de ese programa sobre el mundo. Yo soy, ante todo, un cierto programa vital. Veamos ahora con algún cuidado lo que va dicho al decir, con todos esos sinónimos, que «yo soy el que tiene que ser», que soy anticipación, proyecto, programa” (OC VIII, 435).

¹² Ortega formulates this point as follows in a 1951 speech: “La vida es una operación que se hace hacia adelante. Vivimos originariamente hacia el futuro, disparados hacia él. Pero el futuro es lo esencialmente problemático: no podemos hacer en él pie, no tiene figura fija, perfil decidido. ¿Cómo los va a tener si aún no es? Víctor Hugo—El futuro es siempre plural: consiste en lo que puede acaecer. Y pueden acaecer muchas cosas diversas, incluso contradictorias. Por eso es el futuro lo inseguro por excelencia—es la inseguridad misma. Por lo mismo estamos continuamente ocupándonos de él. Pero este ocuparse por anticipado con algo que aún no es realidad se dice en nuestras lenguas latinas—preocuparse. La vida es constitutivamente preocupación. De aquí la condición paradójica, esencial a nuestra vida, de que el hombre no tenga otro medio de orientarse en el futuro que hacerse cargo de lo que ha sido el pasado, cuya figura es inequívoca, fija e inmutable” (OC X, 359).

into which one can step, but a problematic horizon that resists full determination.

If anticipation defines the structure of life, preoccupation expresses its lived tension: the necessity of projecting oneself toward a future that cannot be secured in advance. It is precisely this tension that gives human existence its distinctive character. One does not simply act, but acts in view of what one must become, navigating a field of possibilities that remains irreducibly open. Consequently, the contemporary transformation introduced by technology must be understood at a deeper level than that of tools or capacities. Technology does not create anticipation; it reorganises its conditions. Increasingly, the horizon within which anticipation and preoccupation unfold is pre-structured by technical systems that filter possibilities, stabilise expectations, and reduce exposure to uncertainty. The subject does not cease to anticipate or to be concerned with the future but does so within a field that is no longer entirely its own.

The projective structure of life introduces a fundamental asymmetry between life and technology. Technical processes are designed precisely to minimise uncertainty, to reduce the gap between planning and execution, and to make outcomes as predictable and controllable as possible. Biographical life, by contrast, cannot eliminate uncertainty without ceasing to be biographical, because it is constituted by the very exposure to a future that cannot be fully scripted in advance. A life in which everything was guaranteed in advance would no longer be a life to be lived, but a process to be managed. This is the point at which Ortega becomes contemporary. The threat is not simply that technology may constrain action, but that it may increasingly transform life from a project into a managed

process. Ortega's anthropology insists on this point: uncertainty is not an obstacle to life, but one of its essential conditions.

This insight has far-reaching ethical implications. Moral responsibility presupposes that actions are not fully determined by prior conditions. One can only be held responsible for decisions that could have been otherwise. If human life were governed entirely by biological necessity or technical optimisation, responsibility would lose its meaning. Ortega's insistence on biography is therefore inseparable from a defence of moral seriousness. The passage from biology to biography also involves a transformation in the way time is experienced. Biological time is cyclical and repetitive; it follows rhythms that recur with relative regularity. Biographical time, by contrast, is linear and irreversible. Decisions mark points of no return. What has been done cannot simply be undone, and what has been missed may never reappear as a real possibility. This irreversibility confers weight upon action and distinguishes biographical existence from mere biological duration. Because biography unfolds in time, it is exposed to failure. Projects may collapse, expectations may be disappointed, and commitments may prove unsustainable. Yet this vulnerability is not a defect of biographical life; it is its defining feature. A life without the possibility of failure would also be a life without significance. Indeed, what we call success is meaningful precisely because its achievement was never guaranteed and because failure remained a genuine possibility. This is why we celebrate success and commemorate victory, raising monuments and triumphal arches to achievements that might not have occurred. Where success is assured in advance, there is ultimately nothing to celebrate.

Ortega's anthropology thus rejects both fatalism and voluntarism. Human beings are neither prisoners of necessity nor sovereign creators of themselves. They inhabit a fragile intermediate space in

which meaning must be continuously negotiated. This intermediate space is structured by decisions, but decisions do not arise in a vacuum. They presuppose a horizon within which some possibilities appear as worthy of pursuit and others as negligible or unthinkable. This horizon is not given biologically; it is gradually constituted through the sedimentation of past choices. Over time, decisions crystallise into orientations, and orientations into relatively stable patterns of conduct. Biography thus acquires a certain coherence, even though it remains open to revision. One may choose between options without fundamentally altering one's preferences, but preferences determine which options appear meaningful in the first place. Ortega's conception of biography presupposes this deeper level of orientation. Human beings do not simply choose among neutral alternatives; they inhabit a world already structured by what they care about, fear, desire, and reject.

The biographical structure of life thus depends on a selective capacity that cannot be reduced to rational calculation. Before any explicit reasoning takes place, life has already been oriented. Certain paths are perceived as viable, while others are seen as impossible or unworthy. This selective process is neither arbitrary nor fully conscious. It unfolds through experience, habit, and affective investment. Biography is therefore inseparable from a pre-reflective layer of life in which meaning is tacitly negotiated. The passage from biology to biography is not a one-time event. Life constantly oscillates between the pressure of biological necessity and the openness of biographical projection. When biological constraints dominate, life collapses into mere survival. When projects lose contact with biological reality—when projection is untethered from the heavy, resistant mass of the body—life dissolves into abstraction and daydreaming.