

Doxa and Paradoxa: the concept of public opinion in Ortega and the role of the philosopher¹

Doxa y Paradoxa: el concepto de opinión pública en Ortega y el papel del filósofo

“Wherever there have been powerful societies, governments, religions, public opinions - in short, wherever there has been any kind of tyranny, the philosopher has been hated”
(Nietzsche, 2009: 43).



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Received: 30/01/2020 - Accepted: 17/04/2020

Abstract:

This aim of this article is to approach the nature of the concept of “public opinion” in the political thought of José Ortega y Gasset. There are several types of opinion; Ortega not only speaks of a “public opinion”, but also of an “individual opinion”, and between both we find the “true opinion”. In comparison to doxa, paradoxa will be analysed, which is in other words the concept of counter-opinion raised by the philosopher. If it is essential to have public

Recibido: 30/01/2020 - Aceptado: 17/04/2020

Resumen:

El presente artículo trata de abordar la caracterología del concepto de “opinión pública” en el pensamiento político de José Ortega y Gasset. Hay varios tipos de opinión; Ortega no sólo habla de una “opinión pública”, sino también de la “opinión particular” y entre ambas encontramos la “opinión verdadera”. Frente a la doxa se analizará la paradoxa, es decir, la contra-opinión, suscitada por el filósofo. Si para la convivencia en una sociedad es esencial que haya

1 This study forms part of the following research project: *Intellectual and Political Networks: José Ortega y Gasset and the Liberal Tradition* (FFI2016-76891-C2-2-P), which is funded by the State Research Agency (AEI) (part of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

How to cite this article:

Balaguer García, E. (2020). Doxa and Paradoxa: the concept of public opinion in Ortega and the role of the philosopher. *Doxa Comunicación*, 30, pp. 19-36.

<https://doi.org/10.31921/doxacom.n30a1>

opinion in order for coexistence in a society to take place, it will be indispensable to consider the role of the philosopher in the construction of that coexistence.

Keywords:

Ortega; public opinion; philosopher; validity; usage; public power.

opinión pública, será imprescindible dar cuenta del papel del filósofo en la construcción de esa convivencia.

Palabras clave:

Ortega; opinión pública; filósofo; vigencia; uso; poder público.

1. Introduction

The concept of “public opinion” is a complex one within the work of José Ortega y Gasset. However, it is important that we attempt to elucidate what Ortega meant by this concept, if we wish to understand what the idea of Europe meant for him and what it means today within the context of his philosophy. Public opinion plays a key role in Ortega’s political philosophy, as it the source from which public power flows. From a young age, he explored the concept in a number of publications, including the article “De puerta de tierra” published in the newspaper *El Imparcial* in 1912; the chapter titled “Who Rules the World?” in the second part of the book *The Revolt of the Masses*; and several works he wrote in exile, such as the essay titled “On Pacifism” in his *Epilogue for the English* (1937), the unfinished book *Man and People* (1949-1950), and *A Meditation on Europe* (1949). These last four works, which provide us with an outline of the nature of public opinion, are closely related to one another.

The Revolt of the Masses was highly successful, not only in Spain but also in other countries such as Germany, France and particularly the United States, where it was reprinted on multiple occasions, more than in any other country, in fact. Its enormous success was remarked upon by the Hispanist Thomas Mermall in the introduction to *The Revolt of the Masses* that he wrote for the publisher Castalia. It was one of Ortega’s best-known and most frequently translated works, largely due to the fact that its subject matter was related to the growing unease in Europe and the “terrifying homogeneity of circumstances into which all of the West is falling” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. IV: 352). The “sickness” spreading through Europe was related to the emergence of a new type of man, the so-called “mass-man”. This new man posed a threat to European unity because, to him, all of the continent’s principles and usages were problematic and questionable, and no longer valid. What began as a dissection of the character of the mass-man in the first part of *The Revolt of the Masses* ended by questioning who holds the reins of power in Europe and what characterises a nation. Reflecting on Europe is one of the main themes in the second part of the book and in the *Prologue for the French* and the *Epilogue for the English*, which Ortega wrote nine years later for the French and English translations of the book, respectively. In 1949 he gave a lecture at the Free University of Berlin, titled *A Meditation on Europe*, in which he revisited many of the ideas he had previously explored in “Who Rules the World?”. At times, he even reproduced entire paragraphs verbatim. Perhaps this was due to the argument that Ortega put forward in “The Intellectual and the Other”, among other texts, which held that an intellectual would have had all of his great ideas by the age of 26, after which he would develop and ripen those ideas and see them through to their ultimate conclusions. In his *Prologue for the French*, Ortega remarked that he was at that time writing *Man and People*, in which he conducts a sociological analysis and in-depth exploration of the nature of man. Consequently, at that moment, he had only made a preliminary study of modern man.

The concept of public opinion is present in these three books because it is a concept that enables us to discern the spirit of the time in question. As Ortega states in “De puerta de tierra”, public opinion is the “colour”, or “tone”, of a particular era. It is the clearest manifestation of the spirit of an age, of the type of man that predominates, and the types of opinions, ideas and preferences that are held. If, in these essays, Ortega dissected the man and the society of his time and examined the problems facing Europe, it is clear that he could not ignore a concept as powerful as public opinion. As we will see, public opinion is a system of verbal usages that emanate from the discourse of the collective, and are imposed upon the individual insofar as they remain valid. If those in power wish to retain their hold on power, they cannot go against public opinion, as it is the true origin of public power.

The aim of this article is to produce an in-depth analysis of public opinion. It is a concept that gives rise to many questions: who is the subject of public opinion? What is it based on? What does its power consist of? How long does it last? Or in other words: what does its validity depend on? A public opinion, regardless of its specifics, may be contrary to personal opinion, although it does not have to be. Ortega, taking the analysis to its ultimate conclusion, holds that personal opinion is filtered through the spirit of the age, and through usage attains the status of public opinion. This is the natural mechanism that leads to the formation of public opinion. It stems from a thought-out personal opinion that is in some way “true”, in the sense that it is the expression of the true nature of things. This shall be explored in full in the second part of this article.

In Nietzsche’s view, the philosopher teaches us to oppose our own era, to oppose public opinion. He exists so that we can learn how to live with the tempestuousness of existence and thought, so that the process of shipwreck is mediated by constant swimming; hence, insofar as he explores these ideas, the philosopher’s life is in danger as he becomes –as stated in the quotation at the start of this article– a hated man. This figure of the philosopher resembles that of the prophet who preaches in the desert, a figure that Ortega invokes on several occasions and which is present in the thought of the intellectuals of his era.

We can delineate the profile of Ortega’s prophet through two key ideas: 1. “A ‘pure-blooded’ prophet cannot be content with anything less than turning things upside down” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. V: 614). Or, to put it another way, the philosopher-prophet upends and questions everything. Ortega maintains that a prophet is a prophet *against*, like any thinker. The philosopher-prophet, meanwhile, is a thinker against public opinion. 2. “There is no fate more melancholy and superfluous than that of the prophet. Cassandra, the first prophetess, received from Apollo the gift of being able to see the future, although her foresight was subject to one condition, that nobody believed her” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. VI: 947). The fate of the philosopher-prophet is to preach in the desert, to be ignored and even to be hated; because his task is to provoke everyone who remains unconscious in the face of their own existence. Ortega makes a clear distinction between the prophet and the politician, and between the philosopher and the politician, although he insists that the prophet and the philosopher are synonymous in this context. If the politician governs and directs the masses, then the prophet, in contrast, rules over consciousness and administers divinity (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. III: 901). In *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega once again makes this distinction, in relation to the idea of the prophet as an advisor to the politician; or to put it another way, in order for the politician to govern with rectitude, he needs to pay attention to what the philosopher-prophet is saying.

I shall not specify to which group the prophets belong. Suffice it to say that in the sphere of human fauna, they represent the species most opposed to that of the politician. It should always be the latter who governs, and not the prophet; however, for the sake of humanity's future, the politician must always listen to what the prophet shouts or insinuates. All of the great periods in history were born out of the subtle collaboration between these two types of men, and perhaps one of the deep-lying causes of the current malaise is that, for the last two generations, politicians have declared themselves independent and cancelled this collaboration (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. IV: 510).

We have already encountered this idea in *De Europae dissidiis et Republica*, in which the Valencian philosopher and humanist Juan Luis Vives maintains that the philosopher should become an advisor to the king, if he wishes to survive in human society. Vives became extremely important to Ortega during the latter's exile. In that difficult period of silence and of feeling perpetually foreign (if, indeed, he did not already feel that way owing to his status as a philosopher), he began to identify with his Valencian counterpart.

The politician needs this anticipation of history, this capacity to prophesy, that the philosopher offers, as the latter is able to anticipate and prepare for what is coming. However, if the politician does not pay heed to these prophecies, the philosopher ends up preaching in the desert.

To speak of public opinion is to speak of the *doxa*, and the man who goes against public opinion, the man who generates the *paradoxa*, is the philosopher; or, in the words of Ortega himself, the intellectual. The title of this article incorporates a pair of opposites, which exist in perpetual opposition to one another. As a counterpoint to public opinion, we have a personal opinion. More than a mere opinion, it is the "true opinion", an opinion filled with wisdom, because it has been considered at length and because it demonstrates the true nature of things.

If, as Ortega maintains, coexistence within every society depends on the existence of public opinion, there must be a force outside this opinion that introduces unease into people's everyday lives; an intelligent opinion upheld by the intellectual or the philosopher. We should remember that the word "intelligent" is a derivative of "elegance". The elegant man is the *eligens*, he who knows how to choose his actions well. In this respect, ethics and elegance are synonymous. However, this article goes beyond a simple consideration of public opinion. Our task would be incomplete if we did not also explore the role of the philosopher in the construction of the prevailing public opinion.

2. *Doxa*: the imperative of returning to Plato

Throughout the history of philosophy, many philosophers and intellectuals have reflected on the subject of opinion. This begins with Plato, with his classical distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*, all the way through to Walter Lippmann and Jürgen Habermas, who developed and furthered the concept of public opinion in their respective books *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962.

Thus, it is imperative that we go back to the source of the concept of *doxa*, i.e. analyse its etymology. Words have an etymology not because they are words, but because they are an example of *usage*. For Ortega, man is an etymological animal. We must continually return to Plato if we wish to engage in philosophy, and Ortega was certainly aware of this. Plato was a great creator of language, and gave meaning to words that were already in use. Indeed, many of his dialogues

are attempts to create definitions. In *The Theme of Our Time*, Ortega states, “Thus, in the intellectual order, the individual must suppress his spontaneous convictions, which are only ‘opinion’ –*doxa*– and, in their stead, adopt the thought of pure reason, which is the true ‘knowledge’: *episteme*” (2004-2010, ch. III: 591). Ortega is making a clear distinction, a Platonic distinction; *doxa* and *episteme* are not in any way the same. The *doxa* will never be knowledge. Ortega maintains that opinion is irreflexive and irresponsible. Public opinion is not the object of teaching or academic education precisely because it is *doxa* and not a true knowledge of things. Plato used the concept of *episteme* to distance knowledge or scientific understanding from other, more sensible or phenomenological types of knowledge such as *doxa* and *techne* or art. We should remember that the word *episteme* comes from the verb *epistasthai*, which means “to stand over” something. Thus, to stand over something, and to believe something, is an epistemic act. *Doxa*, however, is a thought, and thoughts or ideas (to adopt Ortega’s term, to which I shall later refer in order to distinguish public opinion from personal opinion) are things that we have, whereas *episteme* or beliefs are things that we inhabit; they sustain us. If an opinion is a thought that we have, we must then ask what roles are played by the concepts of “truth” and “perspective” in Ortega’s work with regard to opinion. In 1916 Ortega wrote that “reality cannot be observed, except from the vantage point that each individual occupies, fatally, within the universe” (2004-2010, ch. II: 163). This does not mean that truth is relative. Because it is singular in nature, an individual can only know it from his own perspective, from the particular and circumstantial position he occupies within the world. All *doxa* is the result of how one positions oneself within the world; however, the fact that it is individual does not make it any less truthful, as it represents a portion of the world’s truth. In contrast, and because he goes against the opinion that prevails in his own era, the opinion of the philosopher perhaps holds more truth than any other, precisely because it is what makes him question everything.

It is helpful to recall that passage in *The Republic* where Socrates asks Glaucon to image a line divided into two segments, and each segment further divided into two. The lower segment is the *doxa*, comprised of *eikasia* (imagination) and *pistis* (belief), and corresponds to the interior of the cave, i.e. that which lies further from true knowledge. The *doxa* is a type of knowledge through which we can access the sensible world. The upper segment of the line is *episteme*, comprised of *dianoia* (discursive knowledge) and *noesis* (intelligence), and corresponds to the exterior of the cave, which provides access to the intelligible world and is positioned closer to the sun, i.e. closer to the idea of “good” and knowledge.

All men have opinions and also form part of what Ortega calls public opinion, whose subject of the enunciation we do not yet know. The question we need to ask at this stage is whether all opinions have the same value. This will help us to understand why public opinion has a higher value than personal opinion. This value is not quantitative, and bears no relation to questions of utility; rather, it concerns questions of authority and the power of compulsion over a population. Public opinion dominates its era and is elevated above personal opinion by virtue of the fact that the more its usage goes unquestioned, the more dominant it becomes. This usage exerts a power over people and serves to compel them, which in turn prolongs its validity. In this respect, it becomes more valuable. Consider, for example, our habit or custom of wearing clothes when we go outside; this is a relatively weak usage. Now consider a stronger one, such as a legal regulation (e.g. the LOGSE (General Organisation of the Spanish Education System) Act of 1990, which made primary and secondary education compulsory for children aged from 6 up to 16). In both cases, the “public opinion” that has established itself through usage manages to maintain its validity by compelling people, and thus becomes of greater value than personal opinions).

Although opinion is not knowledge, it is still a very powerful weapon. After all, it was men's opinions that condemned Socrates to death. In this respect, the text of *Crito* is extremely enlightening. In this dialogue, Crito attempts to persuade Socrates to flee the city before the death sentence is carried out. Socrates attempts to determine whether this action would have a positive or negative effect on the city, by distinguishing between the opinion of the majority and the opinion of the minority. He asks Crito why the opinion of the majority is so important, and whether it is true that one should respect the opinions of certain men (specifically, wise men) and not the opinions of others. By invoking the metaphor of an athlete who must take care of his body, and therefore pays more attention to the opinions of his doctor or trainer than to the opinions of the majority, Socrates demonstrates that we should concern ourselves with the opinion of the minority, and not pay so much attention to the opinion of the majority. The opinion of the few (the *aristoi*) is counterposed with the opinion of the many (the *hoi polloi*).² What is interesting about this dialogue is not only this opposition, but also the fact that Socrates begins by talking about the opinion of the majority, and that of the individual who has knowledge of important matters, and ends up talking about the law and his obedience thereto. As such, are laws –the only guarantors of our rights– an expression of the majority, or the expression of those who truly have knowledge? Leo Strauss provides an excellent discussion of this question in his book *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. The opinions of the few, which are useful and sound, must be upheld to the detriment of the opinions of the majority. Importantly, however, “the opinion of the majority must be taken into account with regard to things that are just, noble and good, and their opposites, not because of the intrinsic value of these opinions, but because the majority has the power to kill us” (Strauss, 1985: 90).

Although this is not Ortega's view of public opinion, it is nonetheless related to this idea. Ortega tells us that the value of public opinion does not lie in the fact that it arouses fear in us, or even causes us to fear for our lives; rather, its value lies in the fact that it imposes itself irresistibly upon us. Socrates called this imposition “laws”, and in Ortega's philosophy, these laws came to represent the wider notion of “law”. However, in the background, the identity of the subject who makes the laws remains unresolved.

2 In relation to the opposition of *aristoi* and *hoi polloi*, Ortega's philosophy gives us the opposition of the minority and the masses. In *The Revolt of the Masses* Ortega tells us that the concept of the masses versus the minority is not social, and has no sociological value: rather, it is anthropological. As noted by Ignacio Sánchez Cámara (1986: 49), the dyad of the masses and the minority is a social function, in the sense that they are types of men. The masses are the “average man”, in the words of Ortega: they are the men who feel like everyone else, who wish to impose their stereotypes, who are hostile to culture, who live vulgar and descending lives, and whose central attribute is inertia (Sánchez Cámara, 1986: 56). The minority, according to Ortega, is comprised of groups of highly educated individuals: however, their outstanding qualities are not due to their membership of the upper classes; rather, they are the result of the capacity of this “exemplar” minority to demand more of itself. Thus, Ortega concludes that there are two types of men: “those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be, every moment, what they already are, without imposing upon themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves” (2004-2010, ch. IV: 378). Only those who lead a life of effort and excellence with regard to demands and aspirations shall have the capacity to lead everyone else, and - as a result - to lead public opinion. For Ortega, this is the role of the exemplary minority. He had already defined the role of the minority in a text from 1908, titled *De Re Política*, which was inspired by Cicero and argued in favour of the need to safeguard that which pertains to the public: “As everything must emanate from the people, that which is not of the people - i.e. the “select man” - must also originate therefrom. From the treasury of the people's unconscious there emerge a number of consciousnesses that are charged with holding particular, unique and personal opinions, given that this treasury is the sum of all real and possible opinions, or total opinion (which is also the same thing as non-opinion). Because to opine is to hold “an” opinion; and he who holds all opinions holds none. All opinions are therefore personal in origin, and the only just meaning one can give to “public opinion” is that of a personal opinion that has expanded, that has been injected into a large number of individuals” (2004-2010, ch. I: 195). According to Alejandro de Haro, the people also give rise to that which is not of the people, but is instead *representative* of the people (2009: 139).

3. The character of Public Opinion

“Public opinion is a fog: it is the shade that envelops and modulates all of the opinions of a particular era”
(Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. I: 552).

The entry for the word “opinion” in Ferrater Mora’s *Dictionary of Philosophy* has the following to say on the subject of the Platonic concept of *doxa*:

The concept that corresponds to this intermediate knowledge of intermediate things is opinion. According to Plato, opinion is its own faculty, distinct from that of science. It is a faculty that makes us capable of “judging on appearances” (477 E). As a knowledge of appearances, opinion is a natural means of accessing the world of becoming, and therefore cannot simply be discarded. However, the philosopher is characterised by the fact that he is not a “friend of opinion”; in other words, he is continually focused on knowing the immutable essence. (...) In the world of opinion there is no knowledge, strictly speaking, and nor is there ignorance; rather, there is only a particular form of assertion (1982, ch. I: 2,438).

This tells us various things; that *doxa* is an intermediate state between ignorance and knowledge; that it is a form of affirmation that is close to knowledge; that it cannot be discarded, because it provides access to the world of becoming; and finally, that if *doxa* is all of the above, the philosopher cannot be a friend of opinion and must instead be a friend of counter-opinion, i.e. *paradoxa*.

Ferrater continues, “While personal opinion is an intermediate act, public opinion is a state”. This idea pervades all of Ortega’s work. Public opinion is something we *inhabit*; we do not question it because it occupies the entirety of the public space and we become habituated to it. Two things become clear: that public opinion can never become knowledge, and that the philosopher, who must seek out the true opinion, can never be the bearer of public opinion.

The complexity of the concept of public opinion in Ortega’s work will be revealed to us in the answers to the following four questions: What is public opinion? What is the basis of public opinion? Who is the subject of this opinion? And how long does this opinion remain valid?

In response to the first question, with regard to Ortega’s understand of public opinion, in “De puerta de tierra” (one of his earlier texts), Ortega maintained that public opinion is the colour, or tone, of a particular era. Early on in his development as a thinker, Ortega made two affirmations: that public opinion determines the spirit of each era, and that this opinion is formed of the union between the opinion of the majority and that of the minority, given that the “public” contains both groups. Here, Ortega made a clear distinction between personal opinions (which take two forms, those of the majority and those of the minority) and public opinion. Unlike personal opinions, which depend on the number of supporters, public opinion does not need supporters or to be declared, whether by the many or by the few. What is more, public opinion is the latent opinion hidden behind personal opinions, in such a way that “public opinion is the opinion that everyone holds inside them” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. I: 549).

At this juncture, I shall refer to Ortega’s distinction between ideas and beliefs, in order to clarify the concept of both latent and public opinion. It is well known that, for Ortega, beliefs are things that we inhabit, while ideas are things that we have. Ideas are personal, individual opinions. We are aware of them and attempt to uphold them through reasoning and

argument, until they no longer convince us and we exchange them for others. In contrast, beliefs are “collective validities”, which form part of our culture and which we share without realizing. The same linguistic structure conveys these beliefs, which exist in the deepest substratum within each society. And it is these beliefs that constitute public opinion.

There are two types of opinion: personal opinions, which are held, and justified through reasoned argument; and there are “prevailing” opinions, the opinions that “everyone holds”, and from which we draw support, or treat like a shared space. They are not “ideas” as such, in the sense that they are not, essentially, thought out. They are stereotypes that succeed not because of their content, but because they are usage; or in other words, because of the mechanical pressure they exert on every individual (Peris Suay, 2018: 156-157).

Public opinion thus becomes a “usage”. In other words, a customary, habituated action that is different from any personal opinion. Usages are the primary reality we encounter in the society in which we live. For Ángel Peris Suay, “usages do not, therefore, depend on a social consensus or pact that would otherwise represent a high level of consciousness and awareness of current affairs; rather, they emerge from a minority, and infect the majority through their influence as exemplars” (2009: 236). They are social habits that do not depend on the frequency with which they are carried out; instead, their effect stems from their coercive nature and their capacity to exert moral pressure. When we wish to do something (or to stop doing something) but cannot, this is because usage is exerting its power over us. It is a question of social power (later we will examine the origins of this power), which operates in tandem with the coercion of usage. Peris Suay maintains that “because public opinion is coercive and exerts pressure, it “prevails”, or holds power, regardless of the number of its defenders” (2018: 157).

A given number of supporters is not required in order for usage to be created; rather, the usage needs “collective validity”. The nature of this validity can be summarised as follows, “When we do something because it is ‘usage’, we do not do it because it seems like a good idea, or because we deem it reasonable; instead, we do it mechanically, because it is the ‘done thing’, and - to a greater or lesser extent - we do it because there is no other option” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. X: 281). Usages are the rules of behaviour that we cannot prevent ourselves from following.

Ortega identifies two types of usage, whose classification depends on the amount of energy that goes into the process of coercion and its resistance to the movements of historical change. Thus, there are usages that are weak and diffuse, and usages that are strong and rigid. The first type includes everyday usages and customs and people’s speech and thought. This speech manifests itself in two forms, language and public opinion. Consequently, for Ortega, public opinion is a weak usage and operates much like a stereotype, i.e. something that has to become old and non-current in order to become a usage. In contrast, the laws of the state, within which lies the political sphere, are usages of the second type.

To understand “state” usages, which Ortega also calls “public power”, we need to understand the composition of the system of intellectual usages that Ortega calls “public opinion”. In other words, the system of verbal usages contained in language. It is the articulation of these usages that creates society. In “On Pacifism”, Ortega divides the process of lawmaking into three stages: first, a number of enlightened men develop certain ideas or principles of law; second, they promote these principles among the masses (in the final section of this article it will be essential to examine the role of the philosopher in order to understand how these ideas are introduced into society); and third, when these principles have

spread and become predominant, they are consolidated in the form of public opinion. Only once this has happened can we fully consider a law to have become a binding and observed rule. If these ideas truly act as rules of behaviour, then we do indeed have law.

For Ortega, coexistence within society is only possible if intellectual usages are present (or in other words, public opinion), as they direct behaviour and morality. These intellectual usages are law (i.e. rules that are imposed onto individuals) and remain in force as long as the usage is coercive (or in other words, as long as individuals feel themselves subject to the validity or enforcement of certain opinions). That said, when the usage is abused or falls into disuse, it loses its validity and, therefore, all of its coercive effectiveness.

If, as I have already stated, public opinion is a system of verbal usages (or, to put it another way, it emanates from the discourse of the people), we can therefore identify two types of opinion, according to Ortega: one, the prevailing opinions, which are accepted by everyone; and two, personal opinions, which are articulated without being accepted. The clear difference between them is that the prevailing opinions are

Established usages, with “established” meaning they do not need to be supported or upheld by particular individuals or groups; on the contrary, they are imposed upon everyone and exert their pressure upon all. This is what prompts me to call them “validities”. The effectiveness of these validities is abundantly (and often infuriatingly) clear to those who attempt to oppose them. Throughout every minute of normal, collective existence, we are subjected to the force of a vast repertoire of these established opinions, or so-called “stereotypes” (*Ibid*: 319).

Ortega calls them “prevailing opinions” because the form their presence takes within society resembles that of the government. The prevailing opinion will become so when it is more dominant than the others, and thereby acquires validity. This idea may hark back to the work of Pascal. In fragment 311 of section IV of his *Thoughts*, Pascal states the following, “An empire based on opinion and imagination reigns for a time, and such an empire is mild and voluntary. The empire of force reigns forever. Thus, opinion is like the queen of the world, whereas force is its tyrant”. The “force” to which Pascal refers is not brute force, but rather the force that grants an opinion the status of being above all other opinions, because it is predominant. Ortega uses the term “validity” to describe this elevated status of public opinion.

The radical difference between public and personal opinion is that the former is an established and valid opinion, and while it remains valid it predominates and prevails. In contrast, personal opinion only exists as long as someone makes an effort to uphold it. Usage occurs not because the opinion is supported by individuals, but because it imposed upon everyone. However, there must be conscious support for its imposition: one always has the option of going against its imposition and opposing the spirit of the age.

These prevailing opinions or public opinion form the foundation of the power that is held by society as opposed to the individual. It is a power than emanates from the collective; hence it is public power. Public power is the active intervention of public opinion, and acts on the individuals that make up the collective. This power will act with a greater or lesser degree of violence depending on the importance bestowed by public opinion on the abuse of usage. For Ortega, society needs the mechanism of public power in order to act violently, until the creation of a state body that is capable of wielding power. He

affirms that this state body or political power will thus assume control. In other words, the principle that constitutes the state is that of public or social power, legitimised by public opinion.

This also responds to the second question regarding the basis of public opinion. For Ortega, public opinion legitimises public power and underpins the exercising of control. When Ortega wrote “Who Rules the World?” during the interwar period, Europe was in the grip of a historical crisis that may still persist today. It was –and perhaps still is– a crisis of beliefs, in which all of the European principles, usages, laws and public opinion were brought into question and its commandments had lost their validity.

According to Villacañas, public opinion had become dislocated in Europe, because the old system of the balance of powers could no longer function. In other words, it could no longer exercise control. This was brought about by the masses, given that

European homogeneity had refracted into diversities, and in the heart of each nation a specific elite permitted the emergence of a given form of cosmopolitan public opinion. However, when European homogeneity took the form of the masses, this was also refracted in each nation through “national masses”. These national masses blocked any tendency towards cosmopolitanism and eviscerated European public opinion, in such a way that nobody was able to exercise its unifying power (Villacañas, 2011: 743).

In the face of Europe’s demoralisation (the symptoms of which included the rise of the masses and a lifetime of growth, ideas which Ortega returned to some 19 years later in *A Meditation on Europe*, written after the Second World War and the Spanish Civil War), a greater problem emerged. Europe was not certain to assume control, as it was not known which type of man would dominate public opinion. In the words of Javier Zamora, “it is not always the select minority that proposes or imposes its tastes, tendencies and ideas, as there are periods in which the predominant tastes, tendencies and ideas are vulgar, i.e. they are those of the people, or they are imposed by the mass-man” (2013: 102). It was imperative to know who had control in Europe, in order to know which type of figure would acquire power. This was an idea that Ortega returned to in his essay *On the Roman Empire* (1941). Harmony is only possible if we can clearly identify who will exert control and who will obey. Ortega affirms that every displacement of power implies a displacement of the spirit. It has already been noted that public opinion is the spirit of an era. Therefore, in order to understand the Europe of his era, Ortega knew that the question of control was inevitable.

From the sixteenth century onwards, a process of unification took place. He who had control could exercise his authority over the world. Europe exerted its control in hegemonic fashion throughout the Early Modern Period. It is important at this juncture to take a closer look at the concept of “hegemony”, which is linked to the thought of Gramsci. For him, hegemony means control of the lower classes by the dominant or hegemonic class. Moreover, the dominant class is hegemonic because it imposes upon society a system of usages under which everyday life takes place. Ortega also uses this term, albeit in a different sense:

For him, control (i.e. the normal exercising of authority) is exerted in a hegemonic fashion when it is based on public opinion. This control, or authority, is not underpinned by force, although it may use force as a tool; rather, its hegemony is achieved

through the medium of public opinion. As Ortega contends, control cannot be wielded if it goes against public opinion, because the government is supported and created by public opinion, and as a result the government cannot oppose it.

Sometimes, however, there is no public opinion, or there are disagreements between groups. When the force of public opinion is absent, the door is opened not to control, and therefore public power, but to brute force.³ The state, which constitutes the balance between public opinion and the serene exercising of power by those in control, is ultimately tied to the status of the opinion in question. “‘Control’ means the primacy of an opinion, and therefore of a spirit; ultimately, it is nothing less than spiritual power” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. IV: 457). This spirit, regardless of type, must assume power and exercise it, so that those who lack opinions are able to opine. Most men (mass-men) lack opinions and must acquire them from outside (i.e. from those in control).

The minorities play an essential pedagogical role, as they are charged with directing the masses:

The people do not know what they want; at most, they know what they do *not* want. That is why it is necessary to foment their opinion, and make it sufficiently attractive. However, the people –the shapeless, chaotic mass of the multitude– does not have the ability to direct itself. This function corresponds to that which is not precisely *of* the people, but *representative* of the people (i.e. their betters) (De Haro, 2009: 139).

Opinions are necessary to prevent human society from falling into chaos. Without spiritual power, or without someone in control, chaos reigns. Consequently, in every era control is underpinned by the sovereignty of public opinion, because there is always a system of opinions or usages that predominates.

At this juncture, we should explore the question of what type of politician or ruler can exert the control that is underpinned by public opinion. Ortega makes a distinction between the “politician”, who concerns himself with small-scale, superficial politics, and the “Politician”, with a capital P, who is capable of discerning public opinion and bringing it to light, without prioritising his own personal opinion. For Ortega,

The true opinion is like a heartbeat. It cannot be seen, and one must discover it through its effects. Therein lies the genius of the Politician with a capital P. Small-scale, lower-case politics is merely a superficial game. The politician gives his opinion on things, whereas the Politician does not express his own opinions; rather, he divines public opinion, the real, effective and decisive opinion. Then, having discovered it, he expresses it, brings it into the light, and triumphs (2004-2010, ch. I: 552).

The subject that formulates public opinion (and here we will respond to the third question, regarding the author of public opinion) is an impersonal entity. It is both everybody and nobody in particular. Every individual lives under a given system of usages. They do what they do because it is customary to do so. But who, exactly, does the doing? The answer is “the people”, the indeterminate subject that represents the collective. The people are what is referred to by the impersonal *se* form in Spanish, *man* in German, or *on* in French. We quickly realize that in many areas of our lives, we do “the done thing” and we say what “everyone is saying”. Moreover, we base most of our ideas and opinions on the fact that they are what “people are thinking” and what “people are saying”. When we do what “people are doing” and say “what people are

³ The fundamental political danger “is a schism between public power and public opinion, which will manifest itself in continued loss of authority on the part of institutions and, as a result, the disintegration of political power” (Peris Suay, 2018: 168).

saying”, we internalise this impersonal sense of “people” and become part of said people. Many of my actions are not born out of my own will; I do them because it is customary. Ortega gives the example of a greeting. Although I perform the act of greeting someone, I do not do it voluntarily, and I do not even understand the reason for doing it; rather, I do it because it is customary, and otherwise people will think I am impolite. It is an act that people repeat, and so that is why I do it. A greeting is an action that is forced by usage, and that usage is language. Language, which is a system of verbal usages, is imposed upon us when we hear people speak. “What people say is, at the same time, a system of opinions that people hold, i.e. ‘public opinions’. It is an immense set of public opinions that penetrate us and thrive within us; they virtually saturate us from within and relentlessly press on us from outside” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. X: 268).⁴

To answer our final question, public opinion will remain valid as long as it exercises its coercive power and is imposed upon everyone. For Ortega, “our personal opinion may go against social opinion, but that will not affect the latter one jot. What defines collective opinion is that its existence does not depend on whether or not it is accepted by any one individual” (2004-2010, ch. V: 318). Because it is a usage, public opinion does not depend on my adherence to it; rather, its validity depends on its normative or coercive nature.

According to Ortega, social validity possesses two characteristics: first, it is something that is *there*, and which we must accept whether we wish to or not, because it is imposed upon us; and second, it is an expression of power that we can turn to for support. He notes that the word *vigencia* (translated herein as “validity”) has its origins in legal terminology, where there is a distinction between laws that are valid, or in force, and laws that have been abolished. “Validities are the authentic, anonymous and impersonal social power, standing independent of any group or individual” (2004-2010, ch. X: 126).⁵

Thus, we have completed our profile of the nature of public opinion.⁶ Now we shall discuss the mission of the man who goes against this opinion.

4 In this respect we should highlight, in accordance with the argument put forward by Ignacio Blanco, the role played by the mass media in the formulation of public opinion. He maintains that “this phenomenon of the internationalisation or globalisation of the life of the average man is closely related to the irruption of the mass media in the contemporary sphere”. Drawing inspiration from Walter Lippmann, who also observed the same phenomenon that Ortega outlines in *The Revolt of the Masses* (namely, the ascent of the historical level and the consequent descent in the vital level of the mass-man), Blanco affirms that the media has an overriding need to influence the formulation of public opinion, and therefore the need to assume this pedagogical function (Blanco, 2018: 195, 196). We must therefore ask whether the media should be led by those intellectuals who know how to bring the truth of things within reach of the rest of the public, and who are capable of going against the prevailing opinion.

5 For Ortega, history is the discovery or *aletheia* of reality and the life that has passed: consequently, through the medium of historical reason we can trace the world of validities imposed by public opinion over time. Ortega’s preoccupation with history is a constant presence in his writing, and the development of historical reason is the central theme in his *deuteroplous*, or “second voyage”. His philosophical exploration of historical reason can be found in *History as a System*. For a study on historical reason, see the article by JAVIER ZAMORA BONILLA titled “Historical Reason” in the *Guía Comares de Ortega y Gasset*, ed. Javier Zamora Bonilla, Comares, Granada, 2013.

6 For a more detailed study on public opinion and its relationship to the dialectic of the masses versus the minority, see *Liberalismo y democracia en la obra de Ortega y Gasset* by ÁNGEL PERIS SUAY, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2018. In the chapter titled “The Concept of ‘Public Opinion’”, the author argues that the notion of public opinion is present in four major questions that Ortega poses: 1. public opinion in relation to the pedagogical function of politics; 2. the relationship between political power and public opinion with regard to the legitimacy of power; 3. the relationship between public opinion and the political concept of nationalisation; and 4. the problem generated by the imposition of the opinion of the masses.

4. Paradoxa: the Philosopher's mission

"To be surprised, to be shocked, is to begin to understand. It is the specific privilege and sport of the intellectual"
(2004-2010, ch. IV: 376).

In *The Misery and Splendour of Translation* (1940) Ortega writes the following:

Doxa means public opinion, and it does not seem just that there should exist a class of men whose specific role consists of opining, if their opinion must coincide with that of the public. Is this not superfoetation? Or, as the saying goes in Spanish (in a phrase that owes more to muleteers than it does to chamberlains), is this not the equivalent of putting two saddles on one horse? Does it not seem more plausible that the intellectual exists in order to oppose public opinion, to oppose the *doxa*, and to thereby discover the *paradoxa*, the true opinion, and uphold it in the face of the commons? It may indeed be the case that the mission of the intellectual is essentially unpopular (2004-2010, ch. V: 714).

We must go back to the very beginnings of philosophy in order to understand this quotation in its entirety. The philosophical movement starts with being surprised and shocked by things, and is then followed by the most important step, *aporein*, i.e. to problematise oneself and others. It is for this reason that Socrates referred to himself as a "nuisance" in *The Apology*. For Ortega, the intellectual has the thankless and unpopular task of bringing the *paradoxa* to light and presenting it to his fellow men. His mission is to shape the rules and principles that structure society. Consequently, his role "is to express an opinion on all important matters, but when doing so he must go against public opinion. The intellectual speaks out against the prevailing *doxa*, and therefore opposes the people". His mission, which entails a grave danger (and to which I will later refer), is "to correct public opinion and guide those who are in error towards the truth they inexorably require" (De Haro, 2009: 223).

Philosophy always requires us to stand before an abyss, to fight against endless perplexities; it is precisely for this reason that philosophy is tempestuous in nature and shakes even the most solid of foundations. This was the Cartesian task, to start entirely afresh, to rebuild the foundations of knowledge from scratch, without accepting anything that had not previously been questioned. When high-school students are introduced to philosophy for the first time, they are told that it evokes astonishment. However, this is not entirely correct. Instead of evoking pleasure in what we are contemplating, it evokes discomfort. Philosophy presents us with paradoxes and perplexities, and the role of the philosopher should be to bring them into the light, while at the same time offering certain ideas that will allow the rest of society to carry on living their lives in the face of these uncertainties. In *Man and People*, Ortega notes that perhaps the most appropriate title of any book is Maimonides's *The Guide for the Perplexed*, given that, for Ortega, life is dilemma and perplexity. I might even go so far as to say that life itself, in Ortega's sense of radical reality, is the first "perplexity" of philosophy. For Plato, perplexity was the very origin of philosophy.

Our aim here is to explore the proper sport of the intellectual, namely, the *paradoxa*. However, the *paradoxa* does not exist on a linear plane; rather, it involves descending and ascending. In his writing, Ortega places great importance on the role of the intellectual. An intellectual should be committed to the public; or, to put it another way, an intellectual should descend to the cave. Ortega himself was a public intellectual, who criticised the politics and society of his time and was strongly committed to all of the endeavours he had begun since his younger years (including journalistic undertakings

and publications such as *Faro, España, El Espectador, El Sol* and *Revista de Occidente*), as well as to his political activities. He was a philosopher who fully understood that the role of the true philosopher does not consist of remaining in the world of ideas, and that it is necessary to descend. Philosophy is a round trip, a withdrawal designed to reveal (*aletheia*) the true nature of things.

His time in exile, which was marked by silence, allowed Ortega to meditate at length on the mission of the intellectual. It is a mission that is to be carried out alone and in perpetual struggle against those who do not wish to see, those who do not wish to be freed from their chains. Ortega dubbed such people “the Other”. “The Intellectual and the Other” (1940), “The Intellectual Before the Modern World” in *Historical Reason* (a lecture that Ortega gave in 1944) and “The Specialist and the Philosopher” in his writings on the Darmstadt Conference (1951) are all reflections on the role of the philosopher that Ortega produced during his time in exile. Professor Javier Zamora states that, for Ortega, “the intellectual’s mission is to elevate things to the fullness of their meaning. In his book *Meditations on Quixote* (1914) Ortega calls this process ‘salvation’ ” (2004: 357). Ortega states that the intellectual questions things and makes an effort to “save” them, while the “Other”, who is not an intellectual, does not question the reality of things and is not even capable of understanding the fact that all of the conveniences that underpin his existence within the cave did not simply appear by accident; rather, it has taken thousands of years of effort to bring them there.

Ortega, who is concerned with distinguishing the intellectual from the “Other”, the mass-man, also goes to great lengths to differentiate the mission of the intellectual from that of the politician. The politician is a type of specialist. He is a hemiplegic individual, because his discipline is only partial (in the prologue to *The Revolt of the Masses* Ortega states that being right-wing or left-wing are both forms of moral hemiplegia) and he strives to confuse things. As such, the mission of the philosopher is diametrically opposed to that of the politician, “The work of the intellectual aspires, frequently in vain, to clarify things a little, while the work of the politician tends to consist of making things more confused than they already are” (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. IV: 364). In short, the philosopher attempts to define and clarify things.

For Ortega, the philosopher is not a specialist, and much less a professional. He is a *Denker*, or more specifically, as Ortega states in his writings on the Darmstadt Conference in defence of Heidegger, he is a *Zerdenker*. The philosopher is an “un-thinker”, brought into being in order to prevent the rest of the animals from falling asleep (here we have a clear reference to Plato’s “city of pigs”).

If the philosopher’s task is to generate paradoxes that run counter to the prevailing public opinion, then where is this task performed? I have used the term “to descend” or “to go down” (i) on several occasions; indeed, it marks the beginning of Plato’s *The Republic*. “I went down to the Piraeus”, says Socrates: in other words, he descended to the city. Given that, for Ortega, philosophy involves exploring the depths, descent is imperative.

Philosophy is always an invitation to embark on a vertical excursion in a downward direction. It is an ever-present that lies behind everything and beneath everything. The process of science is to progress and advance; however, philosophy is the famous “*Anabasis*”, a strategic withdrawal on the part of man, a perpetual retreat. The philosopher walks backwards (Ortega, 2004-2010, ch. VI: 802).

Consequently, philosophy is a round trip, a descent into and an ascent from the cave, because it is a task that involves depths as well as surfaces. The philosopher is obliged to descend into the depths and bring the profound back up towards the surface, in order to make it patent, or clear. However, this clarity does not imply liberation from the paradox. On the contrary, it means seeing with our own eyes the true perplexity that is life itself, without hiding ourselves behind the shadows. Earlier, I stated that this process entails danger, moreover, a danger that we are all aware of in advance. The unpopular nature of the philosopher's task brings with it the threat of persecution. This persecution can manifest itself in different forms: Socrates's hemlock, the persecution of Descartes, Ortega's exile, and so on. The aim is to silence those who are disturbing the soil that serves as the foundation on which the life of every individual is constructed. The intellectual, the philosopher, who is capable of withdrawing inside himself and exploring his inner world when placed in radical isolation, is also capable of listening to the speech created by the things around him. The things themselves cannot reveal their true existence; they can only speak it. This is the meaning that the Greeks attributed to *logos*, *legein*. Things speak through the philosopher, and this, for Ortega, is an act of intelligence; intelligence, in turn, is an opinion that kicks out against public opinion. For this reason, the philosopher is destined to be unpopular. He must correct public opinion, lift people out of their mistakes and bring them closer to the truth. His fate, Ortega says, is harsh, cruel and terrible. *Paradoxa* is counter-opinion, which raises the question, why is the intellectual's opinion valid, and not any other opinion? The intellectual's opinion is valid precisely because it is not a personal opinion; rather, it is the Personal Opinion *par excellence*, and its validity resides in the act of withdrawing into oneself in order to allow things to speak for themselves. This act is the philosopher's first step towards performing his key function, i.e. that of going against the current of his time and casting doubt on things, even the most deeply rooted aspects of our culture. The philosopher, who has undertaken the voyage of learning that is necessary in order to reach *episteme*, must provoke counter-opinion. It is this that legitimises the intellectual's every attempt to go against public opinion. Ortega states that "the intellectual begins by making himself empty, in order to allow the truth to inhabit him and manifest itself. This is what gives meaning to the intellectual's revolt against public opinion" (2004-2010, ch. IX: 651). Because the philosopher must question the principles that underpin the comfort of the bourgeoisie, he must be moderate and prudent, otherwise he runs the risk of persecution and death. Ortega also defines the nature of this moderation. The task of the intellectual is to oppose and seduce. To this end, the key lies in developing a form of opposition that is imbued with seduction. Philosophy is, therefore, an inherently erotic exercise.

Soon, the spirit, or the intelligence, understood that precisely because opposing colossal and incoercible forces lay at the heart of its mission, it could not oppose said forces by fighting them in hand-to-hand combat. On the contrary, it had to attract them, charm them, and seduce them. As intelligence does not have strength, let it have grace. And so effectively, throughout history, intelligence has been the *o homenzinho da flauta* that has charmed the cobras and dragons of impulsiveness. After all, in doing this, intelligence is doing nothing less than imitating God. *O theos*, the god of Aristotle, is the supreme entity and the prime mover of the universe. However, he does not move the world with his finger, or by pushing it like a labourer does a cart. The prime mover moves the world, but he himself remains immobile. He moves it by attracting it with his perfection, by fascinating it with his splendour; and to clarify this difficult idea for us, Aristotle uses one of the sharpest and most illustrious metaphors in the history of thought, when he says that God moves the world "like the beloved moves the lover (*Ibid*: 652).

The intellectual cannot fight against the passions, appetites or interests that the rest of the people have inside them. He infiltrates their opinions by seducing and attracting these forces. In other words, he filters the ideas so that, over time and through usage, these ideas become the beliefs that provide the foundations of existence, in the same way that Aristotle's god sets everything in motion without moving himself, by being *energeia*.

5. Conclusion

If, for Ortega, society is the coexistence of individuals under the pressure exerted by a system of valid usages (or in other words, shared locations in the collective ideology), then it follows that perhaps, today, Europe remains problematic precisely because its strong usages, those related to law (and laws) and the rules of coexistence, do not exercise all of their coercive and compulsive power. These usages must be valid and imposed with all of their force and legitimacy upon the population, in order to be considered true usages. To achieve this, it is vital to create public opinion. Without it, the exercising of public power becomes empty. Public opinion of a normative and collectively validated nature is required, and this will come from the philosopher's capacity to infiltrate true opinions into the collective. *Doxa* and *paradoxa* are two poles that attract each other and need each other. The intellectual must always fight against the prevailing opinions in order to introduce the true opinion into the people's system of usages, until said opinion forms part of the constellation of public opinion; at which point the intellectual will have to fight it again. However, in the face of the tempestuous nature of existence, people look for salvation, and this is provided by public opinion and the usages, rules and validities that govern our lives.⁷

To illuminate this idea, let us consider this excerpt from Nietzsche's introductory study of the Platonic Dialogues:

There are two types of knowledge: rational knowledge (*νοῦς*) and correct opinion (*δόξα ἀληθής*). They are distinct, given that they have different origins. The first arises through teaching, while the second arises through persuasion; the first is grounded, while the second is not; the first is not moved by persuasion, while the second is modified through it; the first is only accessible to the gods and a small number of men, while the second is accessible to all (2013: 537).

I would like to draw particular attention to those last two lines. Access to rational knowledge is restricted to a select few, i.e. philosophers. Nietzsche almost goes so far as to compare philosophers to gods, as though a philosopher were almost a god by virtue of attempting to reach the truth that inhabits the heavens. The other type of knowledge, opinion, is accessible to all. Moreover, public opinion is not only a type of knowledge that lies within everyone's reach. Whether we like it or not, it exerts pressure on our aspirations and ideas. We are able to access the knowledge offered by public opinion because it is already there, and requires no effort to reach it. In contrast, knowledge originating in *nous* does require effort, meditation, a withdrawal within oneself, solitary reflection, and the predisposition towards learning and dialogue that only the philosopher is able to possess.

⁷ With the concept of "salvation" I am referring to the individual's need to root themselves in certain "truths", which enable them to carry on living their lives in the face of uncertainty and the tempestuousness of existence. People require a certain number of beliefs in order to be able to live their lives and which lend them a sense of security. People need certainties, and public opinion is one of those certainties that allows them to live their lives free of the sense of unease, to use Pessoa's highly appropriate term.

If, as has been argued, Ortega views public opinion as a verbal usage (in other words, the outcome of the act of discourse, of speech and linguistic exercise), the philosopher must therefore descend into the depths of language in order to find the *etymon* of things and oppose the discourse of the collective, i.e. public opinion.

However, this presents us with a paradox. Perhaps the most ideal weapon in the armoury of philosophy, and which the philosopher can use to seduce, to attract and to infiltrate his ideas, is that of dialogue. Dialogue is a conversation between two or more people; it is an act of discourse that makes use of the language that already exists, i.e. the language that is present in society, was brought into being by the people, comprises a manifestation of public opinion and is learned from the discourse of the people themselves. Nor is the philosopher exempt from falling into perplexity. Language is a usage that is imposed upon us and coerces us and the philosopher must abuse this usage, he must violate language so that, through this same usage, he is able to go in search of public opinion, which is ultimately a verbal usage. In this respect, “violating” the language means using it merely as an instrument and abusing it in order to express something more profound, i.e. the true nature of things. Ortega refers to this as “New Philology”. However, abuse brings with it the threat of persecution and death, because it is public opinion - in which the common man is immersed - that will decide how much abuse of the usage is considered legitimate. For this reason, the philosopher’s task will always be an unpopular one.

Ortega affirms that the soil in which people are rooted is philosophy, although they do not realize it. Those philosophers or intellectuals who are committed to their era must fight against the prevailing public opinion in order to change the hue of their time, and in order to make the people –who lie asleep within a system of usages that they do not question and which they accept as reality– question these usages. Ultimately, the philosopher is a *Zerdenker* and his task is to awaken the masses, who lie sleeping in the cave of public opinion.

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