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## Pragmatic Moralism and the Politicization of Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines and expands upon Santayana's "foreground-privileging" criticism of Dewey and suggests its use for understanding the politicized character of a certain strand of contemporary, post-Deweyan pragmatism. First, the author identifies a significant point of affinity between Santayana and Dewey that both they and subsequent scholars have overlooked. The affinity is as follows: each thinker diagnoses, with different conceptual approaches and uniquely distinct contributions to the problem, the key mistake of traditional philosophy to be its confused account of nature, a confusion entailing an idealistic fallacy. Second, the author argues in support of Santayana's rather than Dewey's solution to this mutually diagnosed problem. Santayana's argument that Dewey's philosophy remains too much in the foreground involved his views that philosophy without cosmology is insufficiently naturalistic, and that ontology offers the best means to avoid metaphysical extravagances of the past. The author examines these views as they transact with Dewey's philosophy and in conclusion offers suggestions on their use and application to a contemporary strand of pragmatism.

### RESUMEN

El artículo examina y desarrolla la crítica de Santayana a Dewey en el sentido de que éste "privilegia el primer plano" y sugiere que es relevante

para comprender el carácter político de una corriente del pragmatismo postdeweyano contemporáneo. El autor identifica, en primer lugar, un importante punto de encuentro entre Santayana y Dewey que se les escapó a ellos mismos y a los intérpretes posteriores. Es el siguiente: ambos pensadores, desde acercamientos conceptuales diferentes y con aportaciones específicamente distintas al problema, diagnostican que el error clave de la filosofía tradicional es su confusa descripción de la naturaleza, que implica la falacia idealista. En segundo lugar, el autor apoya la solución de Santayana más que la de Dewey para tal problema. El argumento santayaniano de que la filosofía deweyana se mantiene en exceso en el primer plano incluye su consideración de que la filosofía sin cosmología es insuficientemente naturalista y que la ontología ofrece el mejor medio de evitar las extravagancias metafísicas del pasado. Examinaré tales consideraciones en relación a la filosofía de Dewey y ofreceré, como conclusión, algunas sugerencias sobre su uso y aplicación en una corriente contemporánea del pragmatismo.

...if anyone says that the visible splendor of one moment helps to produce that of another, he does not seem ever to have seen the light.

...the dominance of the foreground is in all Dewey's traditions: it is the soul of transcendentalism and also of empiricism; it is the soul of moralism and of that kind of religion which summons the universe to vindicate human notions of justice or to subserve the interests of mankind or of some special nation or civilization. In America the dominance of the foreground is...emphasized by the prevalent absorption in business life and in home affections, and by a general feeling that anything ancient, foreign, or theoretical cannot be of much consequence. Pragmatism may be regarded as a synthesis of all these ways of making the foreground dominant: the most close-reefed of philosophical craft, most tightly hugging

appearance, use, and relevance to practice today and here, least drawn by the lure of speculative distances.

[Santayana (1925), pp. 678, 679]

I want here to establish two, interrelated things. First, I want to highlight a significant point of affinity between Santayana and Dewey that both they and subsequent scholars have overlooked. The affinity is as follows: each thinker diagnoses, with different conceptual approaches and uniquely distinct contributions to the problem, the key mistake of traditional philosophy to be its confused account of nature, a confusion entailing an idealistic fallacy. Second, I intend to argue in support of Santayana's rather than Dewey's solution to this mutually diagnosed problem. The difference between the two solutions was made obvious in the much discussed "dominance of the foreground" critique Santayana provided in his 1925 review of *Experience and Nature*. Santayana's argument that Dewey's philosophy remains too much in the foreground involved his views that philosophy without cosmology is insufficiently naturalistic, and that ontology offers the best means to avoid metaphysical extravagances of the past. I shall examine these views as they transact with Dewey's philosophy, and in my conclusion offer suggestions on their use and application to a contemporary strand of pragmatism.

## I. THE PUBLISHED EXCHANGE

The second epigraph passage from Santayana's 1925 review of Dewey's *Experience and Nature* is critically sweeping. Santayana places Dewey and his foreground-hugging pragmatism within a long tradition of human-interest evangelists. Dewey's pragmatism is perceived by Santayana to encapsulate narrow features of the American character; it leaves little to the imagination except action for

its own sake and a distracted insistence on the exclusively practical significance of ideas. Santayana describes the “foreground” as the “immediate experience of things,” and as “only the dream which accompanies our action” [Santayana (1925), p. 684]. Such language could not impress Dewey, who wrote in the first chapter of the very work Santayana was reviewing in his criticism: “...experience... is no infinitesimally thin layer or foreground of nature, but...penetrates into it, reaching down into its depths...” [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 11]. In his second (1939) reply to Santayana’s critique Dewey charged that Santayana’s dream-notion of experience is a mistaken product of “the traditional ‘mentalistic’ view of British psychology,” one wrongly severing the mind from its environing conditions [Dewey (1951), pp. 530-531].

The larger issue regarding which the two famously traded barbs is naturalism. Santayana accused Dewey of being a half-hearted naturalist. He sensed the deficiency in Dewey’s key concepts. Dewey’s talk of “events,” “affairs,” and “situations” conveyed the belief that “human affairs” are “projections, continuations, complications, of the nature which exists in the physical and pre-human world” [Dewey (1927), p. 58]. He used the concepts, in other words, to bridge the alleged gap between human experience and nature. But Dewey’s bridge, to Santayana, was a hedge. Such things as events, affairs, and situations revealed the essentially *ethical* nerve of Dewey’s thinking.<sup>1</sup> Santayana charged that the *experience* of which these concepts are said by Dewey to be constituted turns out, partly due to its intentionally vague character, to be the social world, the world of politics and convention. For Santayana, *affairs* and *situations* reside forever in the moral foreground, human abstractions wholly distinct from deeper natural realities, from the material conditions funding human experience.

The idea that his world was insufficiently naturalistic and restricted to the moral-political foreground bemused Dewey. The misreading on this point was accounted for as coming from Santayana’s mistaken impression that Dewey held nothing but the “immediate” to be real. Dewey conceded to holding that “everything which is *ex-*

*perienced* has immediacy,” and that “natural existences” have immediacy in their “unique and brutal [existential] particularity” [Dewey (1927), p. 60], but added that this is what he thinks of as *traits* of existence, not existence writ whole. Traits of existence, Dewey protested, should not be confused with existence *exclusively*.

In fact, Dewey detects that very confusion in Santayana’s philosophy. To Dewey the purported deeper existential, material realities Santayana insists upon as standing outside of immediacy repeats a tradition of philosophies that estrange humans from nature, that persist in a concept of nature that is wholly “negative and antithetic,” devoid of human traits. If his naturalism is half-hearted, then, Dewey replies, Santayana’s is broken-backed, a “kneeling before the unknowable and an adjuration of all that is human” [Dewey (1927), p. 58].

Those strongly loyal to one or the other naturalist lean of Santayana or Dewey undoubtedly walk away with the confidence that theirs was the victor in the charged exchange. As David Dilworth characterizes the end result: “Each won in his own way by privileging the hermeneutical circle of his own thought” [Dilworth (2003), p. 15]. To add to reader’s frustrations, for all of the difference of opinion displayed, the published exchange seems not to bring to light what scholars have helpfully found to be deeper differences. As Paul Forster has observed, “their impasse is far more intricate and perplexing than either of them suggests in their published contributions...” [Forster (2007), p. 46]. Forster perceives the deeper impasse to consist in an unbridgeable difference on the *starting point* of philosophic criticism: “Santayana rejects Dewey’s naturalism because he thinks transcendental criticism shows that it presumes too much, while Dewey dismisses Santayana’s transcendental criticism as indefensible in light of the very science that Santayana finds philosophically dubitable” [Forster (2007), p. 60]. In similar fashion, John R. Shook has argued that the division can be found in the thinker’s opposed attitudes towards the possibilities of an “empiricist naturalism”. Santayana, Shook shows, rejects immediate empiricism, which is the basis from which Dewey establishes a func-

tionalist, “transactional and ecological theory of meaning” [Shook (2003), p. 6] on which his empiricist-naturalism is founded: once again, never the two shall meet.

Stepping back from these principled points of impasse, there is an important sense in which each thinker can be said to have failed to adequately encounter the other. Certainly credence may be given to each of their broad criticisms. There are respects in which Dewey’s vision of nature is (sometimes cringingly) blind to the significance of extra-human realities, and in which Santayana’s (sometimes gleefully) demeans human perspectives. But each was too-eager to catch the other in a straw-built lie. If, as Santayana suggests, all that Dewey’s careful critical examination of humans, nature, institutions, science, and culture amounts to is little more than a subjectivist fallacy,<sup>2</sup> it is difficult to account for the powerful and pervasive reception of his thinking among scientists and philosophical realists<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, if, as Dewey charges, Santayana’s view of nature is merely typical of a dehumanizing tradition in Western philosophy, one is confounded to discover the praise his work receives as an exemplary instance of appreciation for the human condition and as a source for reconciling humans to their deepest experiences of suffering and loss. It seems to me that the published exchange was as much an evasion as an encounter, and if we wish to understand it more fully we have to consult the larger issues looming.

## II. ESSENCE, COSMOLOGY, AND *THE PHILOSOPHIC FALLACY*

A further, but underappreciated feature of the Santayana-Dewey exchange is the curious lack of acknowledgement of key points of kinship. For anyone reading, with equal degrees of appreciation and respect, books as rich as Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* and Santayana’s *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, books published within two years of each other, the published exchange displays too little acknowledgment of the closeness of some of the author’s respective

views. Compare the following passages from the two discussing the understanding of “essence” as found in Ancient Greek philosophy:

(Dewey): Greek thinkers...distinguished patterns...of consummatory uses of speech, and the meanings that were discovered to be indispensable to communication were treated as final and ultimate in nature itself. Essences were hypostatized into original and constitutive forms of all existence [Dewey (1961-1991) LW I, p. 145].

(And Santayana): Thus [my notion of] essence, while confirming Platonic logic in the ideal status which it assigns to the terms of discourse...destroys the illusions of Platonism, because it shows that essences, being non-existent and omnimodal, can exercise no domination over matter [i.e., cannot be hypostatized], but themselves come to light in nature or in thought only as material exigencies may call them forth and select them [Santayana (1955), pp. 78-80].

Each thinker recognizes here the tendency of Ancient philosophers to hypostatize essences, to confuse the settled results of discourse and thought for the natural realities from which they arise. They both attribute the Ancient’s cart-before-horse mistake to an insufficient appreciation of the determinations made upon essences by realities of originating existential influence. Though they speak independently of one another on this issue, and in preferred modes of speech and vocabulary, their shared critique can be summarized as an identification of the idealist fallacy: a philosophic privileging of ideal over naturally existing realities.

The crucial difference on this point lies in the respective solutions proposed to the problem, and it is here that the importance of Santayana’s foreground critique of Dewey looms: if Dewey’s philosophy remains in the foreground it begs to be said what *background* it lacks. Dewey’s philosophy, Santayana takes occasion to note in his critique, lacks *cosmology*. This is a point, which deserves more attention than it has received.

To say that Dewey's philosophy lacks cosmology is not to say that it fails to speculate about the character or nature of the world as such. In fact Dewey initiated such speculation when he invoked the phrase Santayana chose to single out as the most problematic: "naturalistic metaphysics" [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 73]. Importantly, the context in which Dewey used the phrase performed the negative work of fending off Platonic or idealistic metaphysics, of avoiding in other words the idealistic fallacy just identified. Dewey characterized the appeal of traditional Platonic metaphysics as one biased by "the esthetic character of logical coherence rather than its tested coherence with fact..." [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 72]. The positive side of Dewey's endorsement of a naturalistic metaphysics entailed its identification of "the generic traits of existence," which he forthrightly claimed turn out to be "evidential of the character of the world" [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 62]. So Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics was an attempt to provide an account of existence that avoids the idealistic fallacy, the Platonic mistake of form-fitting existential realities with essential definitions and meanings.

Moreover, speculating about the character of the world, we find Dewey continually warning, should not succumb to cosmology: that is, giving an account of the world in its alleged totality. Dewey protests cosmology throughout his writings almost pathologically; he speaks of it as an outmoded artifact, an Ancient philosophic penchant for "supreme science" [Dewey (1961-1991) MW 2, p. 192]; cosmology is for Dewey nothing but an "animistic teleology" that has thankfully been "disintegrated" [Dewey (1961-1991) MW 4, p. 34] in modern times; he associates cosmology with theology as twin enemies of the progress of science; with the (again, outmoded Ancient) belief in the superiority of "Ideal being" [Dewey (1961-1991) MW 12, p. 119]; and most strikingly, in *Experience and Nature*, he proclaims the appearance of cosmology as signal of having committed "*the philosophic fallacy*" [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 51].

Dewey's identification of "*the philosophic fallacy*" gives explicit understanding of his rejection of cosmology. The fallacy involves

a critique of the problem of universals vexing historical schools of metaphysicians. Larry Hickman nicely summarizes the argument:

Dewey's novel solution of [the] traditional problem [of so-called "universals"] was to relocate generality. Realists located generality in existent things: for Platonists, those things were supernatural; for Aristotelians, they were natural. Nominalists denied generality altogether... Conceptualists located the *grounds* for generality in things, but maintained that the activity of the human intellect is required to construct the classes into which they are sorted on the basis of their naturally occurring essential properties... It was Dewey's radical proposal that generality has to do with productive activities undertaken in inference, not with things or events in terms of the status prior to inquiry and as existential [Hickman (1992), p. 129].

Hickman goes on to summarize that in Dewey's view, those who solve the problem of universals by appeal to "things" or "events" existing independently of or prior to inquiries undertaken, commit "*the philosophic fallacy.*" The fallacy is multiply described by Dewey as "converting" "eventual functions into antecedent existence[s],"<sup>4</sup> a conversion that Hickman, following Dewey, claims opens the way to "gratuitous metaphysical entities and misleading hypostatizing of all sorts" [Hickman (1992), p. 125].

It is this fallacious conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existences that Dewey has in mind as the error of cosmology. *Any* attempt, for Dewey, to give an account of the world in its alleged totality is an instance of the philosophic fallacy<sup>5</sup>. And here is where we find the crucial departure of Santayana from Dewey, because while he shares Dewey's reservations about the *idealistic* fallacy involved in traditional metaphysics, he does not equate it with grandiose cosmological speculation. Santayana does not follow Dewey in equating cosmology with "gratuitous hypostatizing".

If, as Dewey holds, providing an account of the universe in its totality only amounts to "gratuitous hypostatizing" we can easily

see why he was not disposed to Santayana's systematic ontology. Santayana's fourfold realms of being, with matter among them as the existential component of his ontological system, can be said from a certain angle to be a concession to cosmology. The realms are said by Santayana to be "qualities of reality" not to be confused as being "parts of the cosmos" [Santayana (1942), p. 183]. Yet it is clear from the responses Dewey has to his philosophy and criticism that he finds Santayana's ontological propensities objectionable on the same ground that cosmology is objectionable.

To briefly elaborate, I offer an unpublished critique Dewey gives in a 1927 letter he wrote to Herbert Schneider. Schneider had then recently visited Santayana in Rome and was engaged in ongoing exchanges with he and Charles Strong about the doctrine of essence and related issues. After receiving what he describes as "scraps" from Schneider containing overviews of Santayana's views about essence, Dewey replied:

Santayan [sic] seems to be wholly wrapped up in an initial premiss [sic, read: "initial premise"] which he takes to be an unquestioned fact but which seems to be a historical survival. Namely, that there are such things as data of immediate of [sic] or in immediate experience. Its [sic] an inheritance [sic] from subjectivistic psychology. If there were any such things, they would be the kind of things S calls essences; he shows his acumen in that. This isn't [sic] argument of course; simply assertion. But I don't [sic] see how you can argue about facts...<sup>6</sup>

Dewey goes on to list five interesting objections to what he observes of Santayana's views. Among the objections is one that illustrates Dewey's reading of Santayana's ontology as unwarranted cosmology. Dewey objects: "Some descriptive matter of fact statement of the organic conditions under which essences come out of the sky and are present is called for, not just as a desiderated addendum but intrinsically"<sup>7</sup>. Dewey understands Santayana's appeal to essence — the realm of being that constitutes his account of

the foreground — as “coming out of the sky” and as a “desiderated addendum”. In other words, Santayana is guilty in his ontological propensities of committing the very same philosophic fallacy of which cosmologists of old are guilty. One discovers that the shared critique of metaphysicians of the past on the notion of essence observed at the opening of this section ends in the passages excerpted. Dewey groups Santayana among gratuitous metaphysicians of the past and is not convinced by his numerous attempts to establish that his essences, unlike the Ancient’s, are not capable of hypostatization.

This aids in understanding the dissonance between Santayana and Dewey on the troubled controversy over foreground, and more generally provides the opportunity for appreciating what is at stake in their different views of cosmology. It introduces the need for an assessment of their respective readings of historical philosophies on the question of essence (entailing the problem of universals that Dewey diagnosed in his identification of *the* philosophic fallacy), and more particularly their opposed views of the value of or need for cosmology. I propose in the next section that these questions come down to the question of the need for ontology, which for Santayana allows space for the necessary “background” lacking in Dewey’s philosophy. Philosophy that lacks such background leads to the politicization of thought that one finds in contemporary pragmatism.

### III. ONTOLOGY OR WHY ONE NEEDS TO APPRECIATE THE “BACKGROUND”

Santayana’s foreground-privileging critique of Dewey, David Dilworth has recently claimed, anticipates “the entire gamut of transcendentalist, phenomenological, pragmatic, and historicist styles that flourished in Dewey’s day and continue to flourish in today’s academy” [Dilworth (2003), p. 19]. I think it is appropriate to term the trend Dilworth has in mind here the *politicization* of philosophy, especially as it developed after 1950. If Dilworth is correct, as I think he

is, Santayana's critique of Dewey is much more historically sweeping than sheer attention to opposed philosophic principles appreciates.

Santayana called in his day the politicizing one finds in contemporary philosophy "moralism"<sup>8</sup>. He identified two forms of "moralism". The first, "moralism proper," according to Santayana, is a species of Kantianism, where "the categorical imperative of an absolute reason or duty determining right judgment and conduct" [Santayana (1951), p. 502] is asserted. Kant's philosophy "conceived that duty was something absolute and not a method of securing whatever goods of all sorts are attainable by action" [Santayana (1915), p. 107]. The shortcomings of such absolutism of duty in the philosophy of Kant have been much discussed by a wide variety of philosophers, including Deweyan pragmatists, yet the tendency persists among contemporary ethicists striving for exclusively "normative" moral theories. Such theorists follow the absolutism in Kant in so far as they hold out for the possibility of establishing standardized ethical norms that are capable of guiding conduct, as though conduct is so exclusively and neatly capable, or even in need of, guidance by norms.

But Santayana identifies a second form of moralism, one that implicates Deweyan pragmatists as well. He calls the second form of moralism "a principle of cosmology and religion [asserting] the actual dominance of reason or goodness over the universe at large" [Santayana (1951), p. 502]. It is revealing that the very same cosmology (and religion) that Dewey suspected lurked behind troubled philosophies of old would be invoked by Santayana to implicate pragmatism. This would of course be amusing news both to Dewey and to Deweyan pragmatists, who if nothing else view their position as opposed to any form of cosmic absolutism so described. What can Santayana mean in the charge?

Santayana suspected that Dewey protested cosmic absolutism too much, and failed to admit the commitments made in his consistent appeals to the self-sufficing character of empirical "traits" or appearances. This is a subtle but important aspect of Dewey's thinking that merits deeper consideration. Dewey consistently empha-

sized the creaturely environment, so it is one of the appropriate legacies of his thinking that it is situated among contemporary philosophies of ecology<sup>9</sup>. Dewey's discussion of environment entailed the notion of growth, of an organism's relative desire, need, and ability to adequately adjust to its surroundings<sup>10</sup>. Growth occurs in any organic situation when a phase of equilibrium or harmony comes about, when the desire stemming from inadequate adjustment to the creaturely environment is, for the time being, sated.

Dewey's speculation about the natural scope of the creaturely environment does not stop at the empirical ground-level of biological adjustment and growth, as he writes: "There is in nature, even below the level of life, something more than mere flux and change. Form is arrived at whenever a stable, even though moving equilibrium is reached" [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 10, p. 20]. Form itself is owed to a stage of equilibrium *in* nature, a temporary settlement of previously unsettled and destabilized features of organic life. It is in these modes of speculation that Santayana interpreted a hedge in Dewey's naturalism, a tendency for the erstwhile "natural facts" he spoke of to become "so strangely unseizable and perplexing" [Santayana (1925), p. 678].

To say, as Dewey consistently said, that experience reaches down and down into the depths of nature without necessarily committing individuals to any idea of its total character was for Santayana, if not disingenuous, inconsolable with active animal life. Santayana tries to puzzle out the problem in his own way in a dense section of his critique where he considers Dewey's use of the term "event." He summarizes Dewey's view that events are "natural waves, pulsations of being, each of which, without any interruption in its material inheritance and fertility, forms a unit of higher order" [Santayana (1925), p. 677]. The view commits Dewey, Santayana claims, to the idea that mind in such instances, that is, conceived as a part of what Dewey understands to be events, "possesses a hypostatic spiritual existence". In other words, Dewey's understanding of events commits him to a view of mind that goes beyond behaviorism, one that attributes to mind a being separable from material conditions.

The problem is, Santayana charges, Dewey only commits himself to this idea of mind begrudgingly, and hastens to cover it up in other parts of his thinking. The idea of a substantial mind apart from material conditions to which Dewey sometimes concedes when speaking of aesthetic contemplation is rejected, Santayana contends, when Dewey turns to what he calls “knowledge of acquaintance”<sup>11</sup>.

What Santayana is getting at in this overlooked prelude to the foreground-privileging charge is that Dewey refuses to admit the undeniable superficiality of such things as “events and affairs”<sup>12</sup>. To so admit of course would be a reversal of Dewey’s overarching aim, which is to vindicate the notion of experience against traditional, historical slurs. For human experience to get its due, Dewey strives to argue, it must not in any respect be viewed as superficial, but, Santayana asks here: what does this do to one’s conception of nature and consciousness? What below or beyond-the-surface character to experience is committed to that does not at the same time risk belittling those vital phenomena of philosophic import? This is the challenge Santayana presents to Dewey when he suggests: “[Dewey’s understanding of] events, situations and histories hold all facts and all persons in solution” [Santayana (1925), p. 675]. In fact, events and situations pass into the empyrean of remembered experience and that ephemeral character cannot (should not) be denied.

Now recall Dewey’s phrase regarding form, that its emergence is due to something “in nature, even below the level of life”. Why risk in this context speculation about extra-human, natural sources of unity in experience but deny it in other contexts? Cosmology, Santayana agrees with Dewey, goes wrong when it follows from hypostatizing existential elements of lived experience, when it becomes a game of identifying *the single* feature of life as met in action as the true root and source of such action; this, he agrees, commits the idealistic fallacy. But cosmology as speculation about the world in its totality, contra Dewey, is not wholly inadmissible. Such speculation is warranted where it aims to establish distinctions in being that parse out for understanding in lived experience an explanatory fra-

mework; not, it is important here to stress, for the purpose of *guiding everyday action* but of edifying the human perspective so that life as reflected upon broadly can be made more luminous and meaningful.

This is especially where Dewey and Santayana part ways; and where Santayana more generally parts with contemporary schools that from his perspective politicize philosophy. Dewey's pragmatism emphasizes the achievement of greater *control over* intelligent action, the scope of which, Santayana was right to criticize, is always in the foreground, or just-around-the-corner of every experiential context. Santayana's ontological categories reflect an appreciation for the role of the background, for the edifying possibilities that emerge as a result of taking a longer view of things, without insisting that any single component of that longer view be taken as exhaustively explanatory of life in the foreground.

#### IV. PRIVILEGE OF THE FOREGROUND IN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

Following the leads of Santayana, and extrapolations from Dilworth, one can relate the move of Dewey in rejecting traditional metaphysics with that of transcendentalists and phenomenologists, who bracket key presumptions of animal, natural existence. In Dewey's case, the bracketing occurs as a result of his overreaching critique of the problem of universals in traditional philosophy. The problem of universals in traditional metaphysics was, it should be remembered, an attempt to explain a very fundamental experience in natural life, the ascription of sameness or likeness to different events and entities across their various encounters. We forget sometimes from our positions of historical privilege that Plato would not have thought of himself as engaging in high metaphysics when in various dialectical modes he made Socrates demand of discussants a definition of a thing not reducible to the example given. To say that there must be something to the idea of "table," "piety" or "justice"

that various appeals to individual cases fail to capture is not gratuitous metaphysics. It is asking a legitimate question about the nature of language, reference, and meaning. Similarly, Aristotle would have found it confusing at best to deem gratuitously metaphysical his speculation that first philosophy must be distinguished from the “so-called special sciences” in its being a “science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature”<sup>13</sup>. Aristotle, like Plato with regard to experiential appeals, did not have as his main intent what Dewey characterizes to be an appeal to “things” or “events” existing independently of or prior to inquiries undertaken. Rather, they were interested in establishing a point at which talk of existences bottoms out, or, to put it in terms of Aristotle’s understanding of essence, becomes “unanalyzable”<sup>14</sup>.

What happened by the time of medieval scholasticism, when the problem of universals as conceived in Plato and Aristotle reached its well-known climax, is that the problem had become a sheer dialectical exercise; it had become a matter of proving or disproving the existence of divine presence. *This* was when the debate became “metaphysical” in the bad sense of the term to which both Santayana and Dewey object (and that William James well parodied in his squirrel anecdote at the beginning of his pragmatism lectures). By the time of scholasticism, neither realist nor nominalist could hope to win the debate save by privileging, to recall Dilworth’s apt phrase, their preferred hermeneutical circle.

This history is insufficiently acknowledged in Dewey’s, but not in Santayana’s critique of traditional metaphysics. Dewey lumps the problem of universals in his catch-all category of “bad metaphysics,” leaving its early origins unexplored. Santayana catches Dewey in this historical narrowness by calling the bluff of the philosophic fallacy; he helps one see how it has become a too-easy weapon of later generations of pragmatists against idolatries of many stripes:

The typical philosopher’s fallacy, in [Dewey’s] eyes, has been the habit of hypostatizing the conclusions to which reflection may lead,

and depicting them to be prior realities — the fallacy of dogmatism. These conclusions are in reality nothing but suggestions or, as Dewey calls them, “meanings” surrounding the passing experience in which, at some juncture, a person is immersed. They may be excellent in an instrumental capacity, if by their help instinctive action can be enlarged or adjusted more accurately to absent facts; but it would be sheer idolatry to regard them as realities or powers deeper than obvious objects, producing these objects and afterwards somehow revealing themselves, just as they are, to the thoughts of metaphysicians. Here is a rude blow dealt at dogma of every sort: God, matter, Platonic ideas, active spirits, and creative logics all seem to totter on their thrones; and if the blow could be effective, the endless battle of metaphysics would have to end for lack of combatants [Santayana (1925), p. 675].

Santayana acknowledges the importance of recognizing this fallacy, but as can be inferred by the word “would” in the last sentence he doubts it achieves Dewey’s ultimate aim: to overthrow traditional metaphysics. In fact, Santayana argues here, the target of Dewey’s critique is not so much metaphysics (he after all reserves room for his own “naturalistic” metaphysics), but rather “dogma of every sort,” and *that* target, Santayana argues, is misguided.

Santayana is charging Dewey here with being overly zealous in his battles against fallacious metaphysics, because at the same time as he deftly articulates the fallacy itself, he fails to recognize his own metaphysical dogma: the unquestioned approval he displays for “the enterprise of life in all lay directions, in its technical and moral complexity...where individual initiative, although still demanded and prized, is quickly subjected to overwhelming democratic control...his inspiration is sheer fidelity to the task in hand and sympathy with the movement afoot...” [Santayana (1925), pp. 675-676].

Again, the accusation here is severe but I think warranted given certain modes we find in Dewey’s writing such as the following where he is thinking about the status of present living qualities:

“This,” whatever *this* may be, always implies a system of meanings focused at a point of stress, uncertainty, and need of regulation. It sums up a history, and at the same time opens a new page...a fulfillment and an opportunity...Every perception, or awareness, marks a “this,” and every “this” being a consummation involves retention, and hence contains the capacity of remembering. Every “this” is transitive, momentarily becoming a “that.” In its movement it is, therefore, conditioning of what is to come... [Dewey (1961-1991) LW I, p. 264].

Here one finds Dewey tangled in what Santayana thought of as the troubles resulting from a too-dominant preoccupation with the foreground. There is evidence here that Dewey’s “inspiration is sheer fidelity to the task in hand and sympathy with the movement afoot”. There is no “*this*” for Dewey, no present quality, which does not by definition dissolve into a final tradeoff between a dead past and pregnant future. The present is a “point of stress,” in “need of regulation.” The foreground for Dewey here is so present as to become incapable of presenting itself at all, prompting Santayana’s disgruntled remark that Dewey’s readers are “left with an uncomfortable suspicion that it is impossible to inspect anything for the first time” [Santayana (1925), p. 678].

What is important to Dewey about present quality is not its retention of the past; the past is, after all retained in present quality and nothing more need be demanded of perception or awareness in regard to that aspect. Nor is the shining reality of the present as it is felt of much importance to Dewey because it is by nature inexorably transitive and incapable of being understood (as he revealingly characterizes, “whatever *this* may be”). What is important to Dewey rather is what present quality aids in one’s *movement towards* what is to come.

For Santayana, it was very easy to negatively attribute such preoccupation with present movement and control of potential future outcomes with Dewey’s Americanism and theory of democracy, which strives to “give individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social

changes without introducing disorder” [Dewey (1961-1991) MW 9, p. 105]. I am uneasy with this negative association if only for the fact that I think it short-winded on the virtues of Dewey’s democratic theory. But I remain convinced that it is a matter of great concern to explain the politicization, after Dewey’s time, of philosophy; by this I mean the overwhelming predominance of social and political concerns in philosophic discourse, exemplified in a certain dominant strand of post-Deweyan pragmatism.

#### V. CONCLUSION: THE POLITICIZATION OF PHILOSOPHY IN POST-DEWEYAN PRAGMATISM

Exclusive fidelity to the forward-moving character of life takes curious forms in contemporary pragmatism, forms that sometimes reduce the entire doctrine to a political stump speech for progressive liberals. In one context Richard Shusterman accepts without appreciative analysis the characterization of pragmatism as “forward-looking philosophy,” and praises as a “radical” example of such philosophy the work of John J. Stuhr. Stuhr, Shusterman praises, reminds us that “Change...is inevitable, so instead of letting it happen to us passively we should actively embrace and shape it by willfully striving to change our lives and thought into directions that we determine, rather than just going with the flow of previous directions” [Shusterman (2005), p. 67]. The foreground here is not just dominant: it has romantically reached a place of untouchable privilege. Philosophy, in the style of Shusterman and Stuhr, is a style of politics that is also a curious form of psychotherapy, of identifying sources of individual anxiety and suffering and awakening persons to possibilities of healing and growth.

Richard Rorty played a leading role in encouraging this moral-“therapeutic” notion of pragmatism<sup>15</sup>. He ushered in the idea of Deweyan pragmatism as departing with tradition (along with Continental philosophy) in its disavowal of “appeal[s] to commonly sha-

red criteria [that have the] ability to decide issues of ultimate significance for our lives” [Rorty (1991), p. 75]. This narrow, therapeutic account of pragmatism is unfortunate. If all that the entire corpus of Dewey, Peirce, and James can offer contemporary philosophers like Shusterman and Stuhr is a disavowal of consensus about ultimate meanings and a warning to “get with the times,” to shake off the stubborn yoke of dead pasts, one wonders about the fate of the many deeper philosophic contributions made by the founding pragmatists. It is a very legitimate question, one that diagnostically leads back to Santayana’s foreground-privileging critique of Dewey: how does it come about that tired inspirational slogans like “change is inevitable” and “don’t just go with the flow” (none of which would have impressed Dewey), become the core message of pragmatism? Space limitations forbid a sufficient examination of this phenomenon, but some necessary historical points of focus are in order.

Rorty is preeminently the figure responsible both for reinvigorating, and at the same time politicizing pragmatism after Dewey. Intellectually daring in a time when philosophy had become almost exclusively an affair of logic-chopping and argument-refuting, Rorty spearheaded in the late seventies a return to pragmatism, among other philosophic orientations, as a means of bridging the growing chasm between philosophic discourse and social life. As Neil Gross accurately portrays, Rorty’s invocation and embracement of Dewey was due, biographically, to his political patriotism and his “sense that Dewey [like him]... viewed philosophy through a sociological lens” [Gross (2003), p. 121]. Rorty’s contribution to the reinvigoration of interest in Deweyan pragmatism, it is well known, is alternatively embraced or violently resisted where he has been perceived as laying to waste time-honored dogmas persisting in academic philosophy. Rorty has, in other words, been received as a “radical” in the sense, clearly, that pragmatists such as Shusterman and Stuhr are trying to emulate.

The sad fact is that pragmatism under this influence struggles to be taken seriously as a *philosophy*. Rorty, uninterested in legitimating anything as a philosophy, least of all pragmatism, contented

himself with playing ironically with competing vocabularies and with the idea that pragmatists believe:

...that the best hope for philosophy is not to practice Philosophy. They think it will not help to say something true to think about Truth, nor will it help to act well to think about Goodness, nor will it help to be rational to think about Rationality [Rorty (1982), p. xv].

Contemporary pragmatists such as Stuhr echo Rorty in this and think it misguided to even worry whether pragmatism ever gets taken seriously as a philosophy. To me this is a deep problem for those truly interested in recovering the core insights of the sort found in John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*.

Thinking along these lines, Santayana's critique of Dewey is more challenging and potentially offensive than strict consultation of the published exchange can reveal, especially by limited attention to the "half-hearted naturalism" dig. His foreground criticism was in a deeper sense a backhanded way of saying that Dewey's thinking is not sufficiently broad enough to be considered *a philosophy*. One can surmise this consulting Santayana's writings beyond the critique, in his various attempts to characterize philosophy and to assess its relative worth. Throughout his thinking he associated philosophy with religion in its ultimate scope: "Philosophy and religion are nothing if not ultimate; it is their business to deal with general principles and final aims" [Santayana (1900), p. 208]; "...what is philosophy...except religion liberated from groundless fear or anxiety, that is to say from superstition, and also from rage at honest illusions?" [Santayana (1951), p. 285]. And he strongly contrasted the enterprises of politics and philosophy as emancipating activities: "It is not politics that can bring true liberty to the soul; that must be achieved, if at all, by philosophy..." [Santayana (1922), p. 184]. More poignantly, Santayana saw the worth of a philosopher's moral ideal as lying in its ability to both conceive of morality naturalistically, and to appreciate the breadth of moral forms as they range across political, social, and existential lines:

...in considering the moral ideal of any philosopher, two questions arise. First, does he, like Spinoza, understand the natural basis of morality, or is he confused and superstitious on the subject? Second, how human and representative is his sense for the good, and how far, by his disposition or sympathetic intelligence, does he appreciate all the types of excellence towards which life may be directed? [Santayana (1981), p. 245].

Bringing these characterizations into contact with Santayana's criticisms it is clear that he thought Dewey's thinking failed both of these evaluative criteria, in large part for the reasons explored in this examination.

What, after all, is to be said of the *ultimate scope* Santayana understands it to be the business of philosophers to establish? Very little from the standpoint of many contemporary, at least Rortian, pragmatists. Their aim is to hold in skeptical abeyance all claims of ultimate significance and meaning. But there is a cost, a tradeoff that Santayana presciently diagnosed of Dewey's pragmatism. Not holding to significant account the general direction of modern life, viewing it as self-justifying as a basis for morality, for conceiving means as at least equal to ends, for privileging intelligent methods and processes over ideal ends and preferred outcomes; and not least, politicizing pragmatist doctrine to such a degree as to render altogether questionable its philosophic legitimacy: these are the undeniable legacies of the Rortian strand of Deweyan pragmatism. The moralism Santayana suspected of Dewey's pragmatism may have only now made its full appearance.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “The words ‘affairs’ and ‘situations’ in their intentional vagueness, express very well the ethical nerve of this philosophy...” [Santayana (1925), p. 681].

<sup>2</sup> Or to what Edmund Husserl elsewhere diagnosed as “psychologism,” a misconceived elaboration of the Protagorean maxim about man being the measure of all things.

<sup>3</sup> Also, and more paradoxically given the associations of progressive education with lowering standards, it is difficult to understand Dewey’s influence on facets of educational practice that display a striking appreciation for standardized methods, established technique, and historical authority.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney Hook’s characterization at [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 12, p. xxi]; Dewey’s association and identification of “*the philosophic fallacy*” is at [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 1, p. 34].

<sup>5</sup> As Sidney Hook helpfully puts it in the introduction to Dewey’s 1915 *Essays*: “Dewey argues that this conclusion [cosmology from the standpoint of biological evolution], which admittedly could never be established by any scientific inquiry, depends upon an unacceptable conception of metaphysics that regards the world as a whole or in its totality as a legitimate subject of inquiry.” [Dewey (1961-1991) MW 8, p. xi].

<sup>6</sup> Letter from John Dewey to Herbert W. Schneider, dated Jan 6, 1927, courtesy of Special Collections, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

<sup>7</sup> The fuller excerpt of Dewey’s elaboration: “1.) In the first place ‘consciousness’ goes; except as a name for essences made existent by the conditions of the organism. Its [sic] as flat a denial of consciousness as any behaviorist ever made the entities called essences taking its place. 2.) There is no ground for any distinction between psychics and physical, since that is a matter of existences. The essences must be neutral, and there is no way by which animal faith can refer some to physical and some to psychical existence, for these terms have no meaning. 3.) Some descriptive matter of fact statement of the organic conditions under which essences come out of the sky and are present is called for, not just as a desiderated addendum but intrinsically. 4.) I can see how, or admit that, animal faith might make a reference of essences to existence in general, to an X thing-in-itself, but how existence [sic] can be qualitatively and numerically discriminated by them I dont [sic] see. 5.) Its [sic] perhaps a case of the same point but in his comment S seems to me to use ‘walk’ in two senses. Does a *walk* have an essence or is [it?] an essence? If the former it is presumably an act which is existentially discriminated and hence neither a datum nor reached by ani-

mal faith from a datum, If the latter we dont take the same act twice but only the same essence; and it may be doubted whether we can literally take the same walk, in the sense of performing the same act twice, since identity is a matter of essence. In other words, I think the argument skips back and forth between essence and existence at will.”

<sup>8</sup> My translation of Santayana’s “moralism” into “politicization” is an attempt to facilitate its more direct application to examples of contemporary philosophic discourse. Identity politics in social and political philosophy is a particular instance of politicization in philosophy, where claims are frequently made as to the priority of an individual’s political status over other considerations, such as (for example) those having to with inherited biological, or even cultural features that determine their lives. I would add too however that privileging “the political” in any way from a philosophical point of view tacitly rejects other broader strategies of criticism, such as those pursuing the same questions from an ontological perspective. The latter concern is at the center of the present examination.

<sup>9</sup> For example in Neil W. Brown’s *The World in Which We Occur: John Dewey, Pragmatist Ecology, and American Ecological Writing in the Twentieth Century*. University of Alabama Press, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> “Every need, say hunger for fresh air or food, is a lack that denotes at least a temporary absence of adequate adjustment with surroundings. But it is also a demand, a reaching out into the environment to make good the lack and to restore adjustment by building at least a temporary equilibrium” [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 10, p. 19].

<sup>11</sup> Dewey discusses this most extensively in *Experience and Nature*, [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 10, p. 248].

<sup>12</sup> An example that Santayana undoubtedly has in mind: “It follows that theories which identify knowledge with acquaintance, recognition, definition and classification give evidence, all the better for being wholly unintended, that we know not just events but events-with-meanings.” [Dewey (1961-1991) LW 10, p. 249].

<sup>13</sup> *Metaphysics*, Book IV, chapter 1, lines 21-25 (translation from *The Basic Works of Aristotle* edited by Richard McKeon).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, Book II, chapter 2, lines 17-25.

<sup>15</sup> “I think of pragmatism as primarily therapeutic philosophy-therapy conducted on certain mind-sets created by previous philosophers. In so far as reading pragmatism frees you up from various old habits and convictions, it does it in the same way that a startling new literary text does. It makes you think, ‘Gee, I never knew you could look at it that way before!’ But therapy isn’t the same as providing criteria, or a theory.” Richard Rorty (quoted) [Ragg (2002), p. 373], with, October 2002: 373.

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