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The Tragedy and Comedy of Political Life in the Thought of George Santayana

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ABSTRACT

The philosopher George Santayana was keenly aware of literature and particularly of tragedy and comedy. Taking his cue from the Platonic notion of the tragedy and comedy of life, he was able to look at politics from a detached point of view beyond tragedy and comedy. This detachment, however, is not without its problems, as it would seem to lead to a low estimation of human life in light of eternity. But precisely by maintaining his detachment from current politics, Santayana's contemplative stance offers a powerful antidote, in thought, to all forms of modern, i.e. ideological, politics, including the politics of *Realpolitik*. Santayana's awareness of the tragedy and comedy of political life shows his awareness of the limits of politics.

RESUMEN

El filósofo George Santayana estuvo muy impregnado de literatura, en especial de la tragedia y de la comedia. Fue capaz, partiendo de la noción platónica de la tragedia y la comedia de la vida, de acercarse a la política desde un punto de vista distanciado, más allá de la tragedia y la comedia. Este distanciamiento tenía, sin embargo, sus problemas, en tanto que parecía rebajar la estimación de la vida a la luz de la eternidad. Pero, precisamente al mantener esa distancia de la política diaria, la actitud contemplativa de Santayana

ofrece, en el pensamiento, un poderoso antídoto para toda forma de política, entiéndase, ideológica, incluyendo la *Realpolitik*. La conciencia santayana de la tragedia y comedia de la vida política muestra su conciencia de los límites de la política.

No discourse whatsoever can end in absolute knowledge of fact.
Thomas Hobbes¹

The Spanish-born American thinker George Santayana is one of those few philosophers who partake of both literature and philosophy. Santayana is a brilliant writer and has contributed to philosophy proper by writing in different genres, from treatises to dialogues and also including a novel. Santayana is a writer who has style and who uses this style to give to his thoughts a nobility and gentlemanliness that stands out among his contemporaries. However, it is precisely this literary sensibility that can, under certain conditions, count as a disadvantage for a philosopher, especially when philosophy is dominated by analytical programs that strive to liberate thought from the deficiencies of language and that are deeply sceptical concerning the rhetorical and stylistic features of a philosopher's language.

Santayana provides a perfect model for a thinker who can contribute serious thoughts while also presenting them, at least in part, in literary form. It is precisely this combination of literary sensibility and philosophical radicalness that should appeal to contemporary audiences in the 21st century. For his thought turns out to be both timely and untimely, to use a phrase coined by Nietzsche. Santayana is timely, because his thought contains a strong aesthetic tendency, a tendency that seeks to inquire into the sense of beauty, thereby pointing a way towards an aesthetics that acknowledges the value of beauty for life. For the sense of beauty, Santayana claims, is much more important in life than the role of aesthetic theory in philosophy. In fact, Santayana even claims that “[i]n the great ages of art nobody talked of aesthetics” [Santayana (1972), p. 275]. In this way, Santayana would seem to be a most timely thinker in the wake of

postmodernism, a thinker who shares a sensibility for all sorts of contingencies but who refuses to willfully engage in confusing contradictions, as a major contingent of the postmodernists in the last years of the twentieth century were wont to do.

The most important evidence for Santayana's combination of literary and philosophical sensibility is his novel *The Last Puritan* from 1935 which transmits a philosophical world view through the medium of a *Bildungsroman*. Many years earlier, his literary sensibility may already have contributed to Santayana's plan on returning from Germany in 1888 to write a dissertation on Schopenhauer's philosophy, as Santayana writes, "because Schopenhauer was the German author that I liked most and knew best" [Santayana (1986), p. 389]. In a letter to Henry Ward Abbot from 1886, Santayana also refers to his "metaphysics or ethics" and specifically mentions Spinoza and Schopenhauer as the sources of his philosophy [Santayana (1955), p. 11].² The supervisor of his doctoral dissertation, Josiah Royce, however, did not agree to this and urged Santayana to write about the much more tedious and boring logician Lotze. Santayana, however, did not become another Dr. Dryasdust from having to do academic work on the less thrilling forms of German philosophy. In fact, his early fascination with Schopenhauer contributed decisively to his generally unorthodox understanding of philosophy³.

The literary dimension of Santayana's thought can also be linked to his way of perceiving the world in terms of tragedy and comedy, even while trying to get beyond tragedy and comedy in thought. The notions of tragedy and comedy that are usually applied to literary works, are extended in their use to phenomena of the human world, the life world as such. This is evident in the various ways that Santayana explains the goings-on in the world. In *The Last Puritan*, he includes some reflections on the way that both tragedy and comedy are played out in life. These reflections on life are connected to Santayana's religious views which have been characterized as those of an unbelieving Catholic or a Catholic atheist [Müller (1950), p. 249]. These categorizations however offer only a very impreci-

se understanding of what is the fundamental concern for Santayana. Let us therefore take a look at *The Last Puritan* in order to get a better understanding Santayana's conception of the tragic in life. Santayana here has the narrator think about the importance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for the formation of the worldview of a young man. He asks about what it means to think through spiritually and that means philosophically what is presented by means of a work of art to the mind and heart of a young person that is still able to wonder at what the world is? The narrator thinks about nothing less than the philosophical potential of *Hamlet*, the potential *Hamlet* offers for a philosophical education:

What better theme than *Hamlet* for orchestration by young emotions, when the world still surprises us for being so wrong and transports us by being so beautiful? *Hamlet* provokes speculation, and without speculation, without wonder raising afresh the most baffling ultimate questions, the fervid confabulations of youth would not be complete [Santayana (1935), p. 286].

Thinking about Hamlet is thus intimately connected to the last or ultimate questions, i.e. precisely those questions that are the subject of philosophy. Obviously fascinated by the zeal with which young people can engage these questions, the narrator continues with a poetic characterization of philosophy that is pregnant with meaning:

Philosophy is a romantic field into which chivalrous young souls must canter out bravely, to challenge the sinister shadows of failure and death. The sublimity of the issue establishes a sort of sporting fellowship even among opposite minds, and the green battlefield draws them together more than their contrary colours can avail to separate them.

Poetry has the force to attract the young and lead them into a philosophizing that acknowledges both the beauty and the ugliness of

life. As a noble fight for an understanding of the world, philosophizing is by definition sublime and therefore, it seems, beyond tragedy and comedy.

The good life is, according to an old tradition, not only the object or topic of philosophy but also of art and in particular poetry. Santayana has created such a work of art with his novel *The Last Puritan* which presents much more than just the education of the last puritan. It also presents a philosophical education of sorts for the reader who is forced to reflect on what the good life is and how the good life can be sustained in the face of the tragedy and comedy of life.

As a matter of fact, *The Last Puritan* does not offer much by way of a *political* philosophy, although the basic outline of Santayana's metaphysical outlook appears fairly clear, especially with regard to religion. In terms of *political* philosophy, Santayana takes up the Platonic linking of "the tragedy and comedy of life", as Socrates calls it in the *Philebos* (50b), in his late work on *Dominations and Powers*. One therefore needs to turn to this book for a more specifically *political* philosophy that is linked to Santayana's generally contemplative, i.e. non-instrumental understanding of the nature of things. In what follows I will focus on this work, drawing as well on other references in order to explore the implications that this view has for Santayana's judgment of the political life. At the end of the twentieth century, Noël O'Sullivan drew attention to the importance of Santayana's book, describing it as "one of the most ambitious attempts to restate the intellectual foundations of the western ideal of limited politics that the twentieth century has witnessed". O'Sullivan, who correctly sees Santayana as part of a tradition of modesty in philosophy ranging from Aristotle to Montaigne, Locke, Hume and Oakeshott, regards the attempt as flawed but he also stresses that this cannot detract from the fact that Santayana's *Dominations and Powers* re-opens consideration of "the first principles of limited politics" that otherwise "remain concealed from sight" [Sullivan (1992), pp. 103, 11]. As the western ideal of limited

politics as expounded by Santayana is endangered by various trends of today's societies, any attempt to re-gain an understanding of this ideal by drawing attention to its underlying principles deserves a careful and fair hearing. Anyone interested in the foundations of liberty would therefore do well to study Santayana's writings. I propose to at least guide the reader towards such an understanding.

The textual basis for reading Santayana's political philosophy in this light is a short remark he makes at the end of the preface to *Dominations and Powers*. Santayana here explains what the moral looks like in which he sees the world. He will not offer any "historical investigation" nor any "political precepts". He goes on to say:

All that it professes to contain is glimpses of tragedy and comedy played unawares by governments; and a continual intuitive reduction of political maxims and institutions to the intimate spiritual fruits that they are capable of bearing [Santayana (1972), p. ix].

Santayana thus professes an understanding of philosophy that is alien to the modern ways of philosophizing in the wake of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes and others who have clear and distinct practical goals. Santayana does hold that clarity is a philosopher's prime virtue in so far as it is opposed to every form of intoxication. Intoxication is alien to the philosopher's mind, as it prevents him from taking and maintaining his stance of contemplative distance.

Insofar as Santayana defended the contemplative attitude, he was indeed a philosopher in the classical sense. And insofar as he was a philosopher in the classical sense, he necessarily had to echo Plato (as Elkin Calhoun Wilson noted) when he remarked that "unmitigated seriousness is always out of place in human affairs".⁴ Santayana, in fact, explicitly refers to Plato on that score, without giving a precise source. However, he mentions Plato "in his solemn old age" as the author of the above sentence. This most likely refers to the *Nomoi* in which Plato includes a pertinent discussion of what is truly serious that deserves to be at least mentioned here.⁵ For Plato serves as

a witness to the fact that Santayana does not indulge in flippancies when he limits the place and the importance of seriousness in human affairs. Plato, according to Santayana, acknowledged that “our ignominious condition” would force us “to be often terribly in earnest”⁶. That we are forced to be serious about our life does not, however, prove that life as such is as serious as we believe it to be. The special way that Santayana interprets the lack of seriousness in life must be seen in light of his conviction that “the world is not a tragedy or a comedy: it is a flux.”⁷ This view may be experienced as rather depressive view of the world since it grounds his philosophy “on the the basis of a radical disillusionment,” as Irving Singer says, so that it shows distinct resemblances to the “tragic cast” of European existentialism [Singer (2000), p. 134]. But it is also possible to regard this disillusionment that comes with Santayana’s naturalism as the ground for a free and uninhibited relationship with the world. And it is at this point, where life is located beyond both tragedy and comedy, that the role of laughter and humor can adequately be gauged.

For Santayana, as Noël O’Sullivan has pointed out, places laughter “at the very center of his philosophy”, which does indeed strike “a note which is alien to most modern thought” [Sullivan (1992), p. 50]. Santayana regarded laughter as an important antidote to vanity and self-deception, especially in connection with anthropocentrism, i.e. the belief that human beings were created to be the “the goal and acme of the universe” [Santayana (1920), p. 228]. Santayana’s attitude, deeply influenced by the contemplative attitude of Spinoza, would seem to look at the world from a point of view of eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis*. For only from this standpoint can one properly say that longevity is not an important value or, as Santayana says, a “vulgar good”, which can be considered “vain after all when compared to eternity.” [Santayana (1972), p. viii].

Viewing the political things from the perspective of eternity, Santayana is able to contemplate the decline of what seems utterly powerful in the present. Thus, in *The Life of Reason*, Santayana points out that

as yet the tide of commercialism and population continues everywhere to rise; but does any thoughtful man suppose that these tendencies will be eternal and that the present experiment in civilisation is the last the world will see? [Santayana (1998), p. 145].

The historical development of human society, seen from this perspective, cannot appear to be highly important, so that Santayana seems to indulge in a form of detachment that can be read as dubious moral equidistance to all the political ideologies rampant in the 20th century [McCormick (1987), p. 358].

Santayana's personal outlook is therefore not without certain ambivalent qualities that may be linked to his essentially aesthetic perception of political things. This would appear to be clear from certain remarks in *Dominations and Powers*. His sympathies, he says in the preface to this book, "go out to harmony in strength, no matter how short-lived" [Santayana (1972), p. viii]. It is above all form and beauty that appeal to Santayana, and these beauties are to be cherished even and especially when they belong to those "rare beauties that die young." Santayana goes on to declare that he prefers the "the rose to the dandelion" and "the lion to the vermin in the lion's skin": "In order to obtain anything lovely, I would gladly extirpate all the crawling ugliness in the world". Santayana's politics could therefore be said to be a politics of beauty. What counts as beauty, is another matter. But Santayana takes the beautiful as the starting-point for a reflection on "the causes and the enemies of the beautiful", and this, in turn, leads him to a consideration of "those *Dominations and Powers* in whose train the beautiful lives, and in whose decline it withers" [Santayana (1972), p. ix]. Santayana regards the powers as those forces or circumstances, as Noël O'Sullivan explains, that "promote the realization of potentialities, whereas dominations are "hostile circumstances". To distinguish between these two forces in political life is the "principal task of political philosophy as Santayana envisages it in *Dominations and Powers*" [O'Sullivan (1991), p. 89].

The beautiful is regarded by Santayana as a “mark of vital perfection”, so that beauty can also be said to be a latent possibility in all kinds of things. The relationship of beauty to power or domination is not entirely clear, however, since these may root out “one beauty”, even though they may plant another. Santayana’s point of view in this respect is the contemplative perspective, transcending even the historian’s detached engagement with the goings-on in human history. Faced with the destruction of some beauty, the historian may react with tears, as Santayana acknowledges, but through these tears “there often comes a smile”, because “the evening of one civilisation is the morning of another” [Santayana (1972), p. ix]. This detached view of human life may be too much for ordinary human beings to take, but Santayana urges us to look at human affairs from precisely such a point of view that could be defined as attachment to detachment from ordinary human affairs. This is the philosopher’s view, and Santayana attempts to circumscribe the goings-on in the political realm in the multitude of essays that make up *Dominations and Powers*. Michael Oakeshott already noted in an early review of Santayana’s book that the casual reader may find in this book a “collection of essays.” But Oakeshott later comes to the conclusion that the “book is not, in fact, an anthology of miscellaneous reflections strung together on the thin thread of an arbitrary attitude to the universe”. Rather, it can be described as “an intellectual structure, a vertebrate and well-considered philosophy” [Oakeshott (2007), pp. 363-364]. Some of the thoughts contained in these essays can already be found in earlier works by Santayana, which is not surprising in light of the fact that Santayana’s work on this project went back some decades [McCormick (1987), pp. 483-485].

The complicated texture of this book makes it necessary to pick just one or two points to offer a first intimation that Santayana does indeed provide reflections that can count as a political philosophy. For political philosophy has to be concerned not only with the good society as such, as an ideal, but as a standard implicit in political life as such. Political philosophy thus cannot look at things as they

are merely from a standpoint *sub specie aeternitatis* but has to take account of the manifold variety of the political things in light of the good and of a true understanding of the nature of man. One of Santayana's chapters that would seem to offer pertinent reflections in this vein is that on *Realpolitik*, i.e. on a form of politics allegedly completely disregarding fanciful notions about politics. Santayana does not share the Machiavellian approach, even though his philosophical stance, informed by Spinoza, would seem to be fairly close to it. Machiavelli does not, in Santayana's estimate, stand alone; he rather treats him together with "his recent emulators", thus indicating that reflections on Machiavelli are of more than historical interest. Machiavelli stands for a permanent possibility of dealing with politics. Santayana also acknowledges that Machiavelli's "insight into the ways of the world is genuine". He even says that Machiavelli and his followers were honourable in so far as they actually faced the facts and also "obloquy in reporting them frankly" [Santayana (1972), pp. 208-209]. However, Santayana qualifies his praise for Machiavelli in an important way: he faults him for having neglected the distinction "between the efficacy of means and the choice of ends". Santayana disagrees as well with the understanding of Machiavelli of what can be regarded as rational politics, or, as Santayana calls it, "rational government" [*idem*]. Santayana accepts the fact that *Realpolitik* contains within itself an insinuation of something which is true or rather "morally sound". True virtue, as he admits, does not have convention as its standard; and supposing that Machiavelli's *virtù* stands "for what is *naturally* admirable and splendid", one can ascribe to the Machiavellians a "genuine moral reform, masquerading as satire or licence or devilry." In light of the fact that the "reigning notions of morality" may be or are even very likely to be misguided, "the satirist or scoffer, however offensive his tone may be to polite ears, is a prophet of true goodness" [Santayana (1972), p. 210]. The Machiavellians, on this view, are promoting a kind of wickedness that is not identical with what the superstitious people would call wickedness. Santayana suggests that the

wickedness they encouraged was perceived by them as wicked but still encouraged or welcomed it due to a “certain romantic excitement”. This romantic excitement is linked, in Santayana’s view, to a certain “desire to smash things generally” and to their “consciousness of their own radicalism”—and it is connected to an aristocratic urge not to belong to the “vulgar crowd” [Santayana (1972), p. 211]. Santayana clearly disapproves of such an understanding of Machiavellian *Realpolitik*. For to him this kind of approaching politics is childish in the extreme; it is not only foolish but also wicked—and most certainly a result of vanity. Santayana’s observations may not account for much of what Machiavelli himself may or may not have thought and believed. His discussion only occasionally refers to actual passages or quotations from his books. What is important to note, however, is that even from his extremely detached point of view, Santayana has a keen eye for what is actually going on in the political sphere, with no illusions about the various forms of political idealism but also no illusions about the immorality of much that counts as *Realpolitik*. His detachment also allows him to see the specious humanitarianism of what he calls the “sentimental bandit” who may “not always [be] a highwayman or a burglar: sometimes he is a monarch or a general or the founder of a colony, or of a great business enterprise.” He may even be a revolutionary leader whose political activity is wholly directed towards the good of others: “He is not robbing and murdering for his own benefit; he is doing it for the greatness of his country or for the emancipation of the poor” [Santayana (1972), p. 213, cf. also 430-431]. By calling the sentimental bandit by his name, Santayana offers an important insight into one particular *type* of behaviour that may again and again occur in political life. By offering this type as well as other types to be viewed detachedly, he offers us the possibility of liberation from the here and now, of seeing through the fascination these particular types exert on the popular imagination.

Santayana looks at many of these concrete examples but then always recovers his position of the detached observer. This observer

cannot be unconcerned by moral questions, as the use of the terms “tragedy and comedy” indicates. For it only makes sense to speak of tragedy and comedy within some moral framework. Only when moral agents interact can actions come to be called tragic or comical. It is not even a contradiction to say that only the somewhat Spinozist detachment of Santayana the philosopher finally enables him to view the human things in the light of tragedy and comedy. For to those who are actively engaged in some tragedy or comedy, being engaged in them fully makes them unable to rise above them. Only the self-critical stance of the political philosopher who knows that self-knowledge is linked to humility can gauge the relative merits of even those things a large majority of their compatriots regard as absolutely necessary for all practical purposes. This is also why Santayana is highly critical of liberalism as he understood it. For the liberalism he had in mind was engaging, in contrast to the Machiavellians, in an exercise of not wanting to see all there is to see about political things and culture in general. Liberals usually appear on the scene, according to Santayana, when a “civilisation has spent its force and is rapidly declining”. And even though they cherish their “intellectual and artistic achievements”, “they are full of scorn for its conventions now become empty and its principles proved false” [Santayana (1972), pp. 437-438]. In their attempts to reform this civilisation which is already in decay the liberals suffer from a peculiar kind of ignorance:

They do not see that the peace they demand was secured by the discipline and the sacrifices that they deplore, that the wealth they possess was amassed by appropriating lands and conducting enterprises in the high-handed manner which they denounce, and that the fine arts and refined luxuries they revel in arise in the service of superstitions that they deride and despotisms that they abhor [*idem*].

It is difficult to think of a more apt and pertinent statement to highlight what is entailed in viewing political life as one on-going

tragedy and comedy combined. Political life, in Santayana's view, is a combination of tragedy and comedy, as seen from an observer's point of view. It is not a mere flux even though one may be led to think so. It is a tragedy, because there is every chance of Santayana's theoretical or contemplative insight remaining wholly without practical relevance. There is no way that his insight into the blindness of liberals, e.g., will lead to any major cure of this kind of blindness. This particular blindness, which sees and approves of one thing but disapproves of the things that are the conditions for the other things one cherishes, is an eternal possibility. It is not only an eternal possibility but also an eternal actuality. For this reason, Santayana's insight may help us to discern the elements in the tragedy and comedy of the whole political life around us. But this insight, as Santayana also teaches, will do nothing to redress the situation. At least, it will do nothing to redress the situation in any more than transitory sense. Santayana's insight is not a particularly cheerful one, but it is also not wholly devoid of humour based on the knowledge that not everything taken seriously by human beings in the present deserves to be taken seriously. As Santayana remarks, in one of his flourishes of genuine insight that lift him above those thinkers who, some years later, merely turn out to have been the propagandists of some ideology or other:

The concupiscence of the flesh, the concupiscence of the eyes, and the pride of life exhaust and kill the sweets they feed upon; and a lava-wave of primitive blindness and violence must perhaps rise from below to lay the foundations for something differently human and similarly transient [*idem*].

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NOTES

- ¹ Quoted in Santayana (1998), p. 173.
- ² The connection of Santayana's political philosophy to Spinoza is indicated by Singer (1970), pp. 103-104, 107.
- ³ On Schopenhauer and Santayana see the recent succinct study by Buschendorf (2008), p. 139-173.
- ⁴ George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England*, 6; here quoted from Wilson (1973), p. 141.
- ⁵ See on this issue valuable study by Sandvoss (1971).
- ⁶ George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England*, 6; here quoted from Wilson (1973), p. 141.
- ⁷ Santayana to Charles P. Davis, April 3, 1936, here quoted from Singer (2000), p. 76.

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