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The Essences of Santayana

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GEORGE SANTAYANA, *The Essential Santayana. Selected Writings*, Martin A. Coleman (ed.), Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2009, 647 pp.

The idea of a collection by the title of *The Essential Santayana* might have horrified Santayana himself, who posited an infinity of essences but claimed none of them constituted the essence as distinct from the accidents of anything. The Santayana Edition appears to have answered this concern by producing an anthology of Santayana's writings so comprehensive that no selection seems accidental. One problem with their editorial approach is that *The Essential Santayana*, at 621 pages, is too long. *The Portable Nietzsche* runs to 704 pages half the size of the sheets on which *The Essential Santayana* is printed, and Riverside's *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* consists of just 517 small pages. Experts will study Santayana's books, so readers unfamiliar with Santayana's writings presumably form the target audience for *The Essential Santayana*; yet the sheer variety of selections the anthology presents is likely to bewilder if not to frustrate beginners.

On the other hand, the new collection re-prints much of Santayana's best work, including 12 chapters of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* — a system of philosophy arguably as important as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* — and some of Santayana's incomparable reflections on American culture and American philosophers are also included. Moreover, the anthology's comprehensiveness makes it

highly useful for advanced courses because it displays the full range of Santayana's interests.

Every student of a great philosopher probably enjoys some of that writer's books more than others and perhaps one above all, so complaining that one's favorite text is not included in the new anthology is an easy and possibly an illegitimate tactic for the reviewer. Yet what Santayana calls spirituality is arguably the crown of his entire philosophy, so the absence from *The Essential Santayana* of *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, a tiny masterpiece in which spirituality is carefully distinguished, is a shame. For Santayana, "spirituality" means the experience of peace flowing from contemplative absorption in what is immediately given to consciousness. According to Martin Coleman, whose Introduction to *The Essential Santayana* captures the subtlety of Santayana's thought, one of the purposes of the anthology is to encourage "a deeper appreciation" of spirituality, which makes the exclusion of *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* an even greater mystery.

The Essential Santayana is long and *Platonism* is very short — less than 100 pages in large print — so why not include it? Nowhere else than in *Platonism* does Santayana draw the line between spirituality and morals as sharply, describing spirituality as "disintoxication from the influence of values". The drive to improve life dominates contemporary culture in the developed world, but spirituality offers an escape from the urgency of living. Just seeing the colors of a flower with complete attention or listening to the sounds of the rain with one's whole mind may not improve things, but such moments of transcendence give immediate satisfaction and peace.

Fortunately the topic of spirituality is addressed either directly or indirectly in many of the texts included in *The Essential Santayana*. Chapter 7 of *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, pp. 72-75 of the anthology, presents one of Santayana's most original and striking ideas and a mainstay of his theory of spirituality: that nothing immediately given to consciousness exists. Philosophers have distin-

guished existence from essence at least since Plato, for whom essences are universal forms such as humanity, while existences are particular beings of which Socrates and Obama are examples. St. Anselm and other Catholic thinkers relied on the distinction between the concept or essence of a perfect being and His existence outside our minds to prove that God necessarily exists. But the idea of that which is immediately given to consciousness is more recent. It comes from the inquiries of empiricists like David Hume about exactly what is present to our minds in sensation or perception.

Santayana's astonishing claim that nothing given exists is the outcome of combining the distinction between essence and existence with the search for the ultimate present element in consciousness. He identifies the given with essences, timeless natures the elements of which are all internally related. Existence, on the other hand, involves external relations, of which time is a necessary function, such as the relation between food and nutrition, or between a moving vehicle and its destination.

We normally view essences as signs of the movements of existence, but essences themselves are mere pictures or images incapable of acting and unaffected by action. The astounding implication of Santayana's theory of the given is that our lives as we experience them are "such stuff as dreams are made on". The objects that fill our experience, lacking all existence and arrayed in eternity, form Prospero's "insubstantial pageant". So the very constituents of human experience seem to invite spirituality. We may be in the habit of relating essences to existence, but our feelings and perceptions, as well as the objects about which we think and dream, are non-existent essences open to being contemplated for their own sakes; and when at last we learn to view immediate objects as pure essences, the anxiety of existence drops out of consciousness and the peace of spirituality suffuses our minds.

Another advantage that derives from the comprehensiveness of *The Essential Santayana* is that the volume presents enough ma-

terial to give readers a sense of Santayana as more than a brilliant technical philosopher and sensitive critic of literature and culture. Chapter 7 of *The Realm of Matter*, pp. 188-197 of the anthology, develops the sophisticated position that values cannot preexist the physical conditions on which they depend. The classical teleological view of nature clashes with the obvious fact that values are secondary to material causes, not original beings. Intentions and purposes may have emerged from the flux of physical nature, Santayana reasons, but they could not have created it, and the flux runs on independently of them. Perhaps only a specialist could follow these advanced considerations, but soon enough they are balanced by surprising personal reflections from which anyone with an education may profit.

The learned philosopher who in recent paragraphs fearlessly wielded the blade of criticism against a venerable theory of nature suddenly surrenders his weapon as if the fight had been unimportant and addresses the reader as though speaking in confidence to an old friend. The world is not governed by human values, Santayana confides, and often what happens to us is not what would be good but what conditions are ripe to produce. That we love something makes its causes seem cosmically significant, as if the whole process of nature had conspired to make us a beautiful gift. Yet when we set aside our values we see the relative importance of all goods and the cosmic insignificance of all of them. "I confess that the life of a spider, or my own life, is not one which, if I look at it as a whole, seems to me worth realizing", Santayana continues. "The spider is a marvel of pertinacity, and I am not without affection for my own arts and ideas; we both of us heartily welcome the occasions for our natural activities; but when those occasions and activities have passed away, they will not be missed".

The reader's sense of Santayana as a thoughtful friend confiding private insights is enhanced by Santayana's remarks on Emerson and William James in "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy", pp. 526-540 of *The Essential Santayana*. Emerson may have

been tempted to write a system of philosophy, Santayana speculates, but he was too much inclined to spirituality to find satisfaction in the strenuous labor of explaining things. "When he came out of the conventicle or the reform meeting, or out of the rapturous close atmosphere of the lecture-room, he heard Nature whispering to him: 'Why so hot, little sir?'" The passionate feeling of triumph that might have come to him from seeming to dominate the world by explaining it paled in comparison to the peace of contemplative absorption in whatever chanced to appear before his eyes.

As for William James, Santayana offers a second striking insight that captures James's personality in a single phrase. James was in love, we are told, with the idea of the universe as an unfinished project and with that of humans as heroic adventurers contributing to its creation by going bravely to meet the unknown challenges of our lives. The nature of things has not been decided, so who can predict what victories we may win for human values? "There shall be news in heaven!" was a favorite exclamation of James's, Santayana tells us.

The Essential Santayana might have been differently organized. The editors might have divided the volume between the writings of an early Santayana and those of a later Santayana, or they could have published two separate volumes, one consisting of technical philosophy and the other of the fun things Santayana wrote about literature, culture, and his philosophical contemporaries. The way in which the collection is actually organized invites criticism because it seems to lack trajectory, starting with autobiographical texts and ending with a variety of Santayana's critical essays grouped together with the Prologue and the Epilogue of his novel *The Last Puritan*. Moreover, the title of Section III of the anthology, "Rational Life in Art, Religion, and Spirituality", is misleading since there is nothing rational about spirituality on Santayana's view.

But no principle of organization would be invulnerable to criticism, and the publication of *The Essential Santayana* is a banner

event for those who love Santayana and who appreciate the importance of his contribution to the development of human thought. The editors at The Santayana Edition are to be thanked for producing a volume that showcases some of the finest products of an extraordinary mind.

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