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## Santayana's Vision

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### ABSTRACT

Santayana's philosophy presents us with an integrated, accessible and attractive view of the human condition. His honesty concerning action and its conditions provides him with a method of selecting justifiable beliefs. His notion of the spiritual life is not at odds with his famous idea of the life of reason. Instead, it provides the peace so necessary in our world of tortured hurry. His examination of the materialism of idealists shows the massive agreement of all concerning the empirical world; differences arise only in discretionary over-beliefs. His notion of truth is liberating. He leaves us a rich and enduring heritage.

*Key Words:* Santayana, Psyche, Spirit, Essences, Substance, Spiritual Life, Immediacy, Life Of Reason, Materialism Of Idealists, God, Truth.

### RESUMEN

La filosofía de Santayana ofrece una mirada atractiva, accesible e integrada de la condición humana. Su honestidad respecto a la acción y a sus condiciones le permite disponer de un método para seleccionar las creencias justificables. Su noción de la vida espiritual no está reñida con su conocida idea de la vida de la razón. Al contrario, aporta la paz tan necesaria en este mundo de torturante prisa. Su examen del materialismo de los idealistas destaca el acuerdo general sobre todo lo relativo al mundo empírico; las diferencias surgen solamente respecto a las discrecionales creencias

sobre lo superior. La noción santayaniana de verdad resulta liberadora. La herencia de Santayana es rica y perdurable.

*Palabras clave:* Santayana, psique, espíritu, esencias, sustancia, vida espiritual, inmediatez, vida de la razón, materialismo de los idealistas, Dios, verdad.

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What does it take for a philosopher to be great? We can sum it up in one word: vision—an integrated, accessible and attractive view of the whole of things. Such visions offer accounts of the human world and of the nature and role of values in it, making personal orientation possible. Plato portrayed such a vision, as did Spinoza and Kant. Fichte's system was not well worked out and integrated, Sellars' was not accessible and Schopenhauer's was not attractive. Then there were philosophers who had no vision at all, even though they were masters of technique. Last of all come the professors of philosophy who took no interest in the value of philosophy for the guidance of life.

Measured by these standards, Santayana was a great philosopher. His thought presents a rich picture of human life that is carefully structured, open to non-professionals and simply beautiful. Its resources are now, at last, in the process of being discovered. The combination of its unity with its scope and diversity qualifies it as a magnificent system of philosophy. The effortless way it mediates between timeless problems and contemporary concerns establishes it as a top candidate for making sense of the confused reality of today.

Santayana understood the search for meaningful lives that was precipitated by the receding tide of religion. He stationed his philosophy at the intersection of the scientific image of the universe and the world our experience reveals. Attempting to do justice to both, he adopted a materialism in line with the former and developed a sensitive phenomenology to support the latter. His view that

all knowledge is symbolic eliminated the apparent conflict between the inhuman material world and the cozy realm we inhabit. The key, he insisted, was to be an honest and generous thinker, accepting the facts no matter in what direction they take us.

Santayana's skeptical elimination of all our beliefs in the first third of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* clears away unexamined pre-existing commitments. It sets the tone of his philosophy: he explicitly rejects the suasion of popular ideas, devoting himself to the explication of beliefs unavoidably enacted. Philosophers often call for the unity of theory and practice or at least maintain the view that to believe something is to have a tendency to act on it. But the unity of theory and practice tends to be achieved only in theory, leaving a large residue of lazy words, and the habit of enacting our beliefs fails to justify them. Santayana's novel contribution here is the method of animal faith, which is the process of ferreting out the beliefs that are justified by our ordinary activities in the world.

The central commitment is to honesty: Santayana does not repeat the disingenuous Kantian gambit of closing the door to God in one book, only to readmit Him in the next two. He is prepared to construct his philosophy only of those beliefs our actions endorse, and to embrace them all, no matter how fiercely contemporary sentiment may run against them. This liberates him from the pieties and metaphysical inventions of many philosophers of the past. It also enables him to sidestep the groundless skepticism of thinkers who doubt the existence of the physical world even on their way to lunch.

A similar respect for facts guides Santayana's approach to other contested issues. He thinks that immortality is a romantic dream and nationalist, racist and class-focused ideologies constitute unfortunate and indefensible theories. His sympathy lies with the Ancient Greeks who saw the possibility of finite perfection and preferred it to a meaningless infinity. Santayana's temperament was classicist throughout, which explains why he had so little good to say about the thought of Josiah Royce, his dissertation advisor and

benefactor. Royce's universe was populated by persons whose purposes and infinite obligations kept them from ever dying. Santayana viewed such ideas with amusement; he could not see them making connection with anything we know about the real world.

One way to enter into the thought of this complex philosopher is by embracing the idea that the ultimate issue in life is the health of one's soul. This requires doing justice to both mind and body or, in his language, to both spirit and psyche. A material organism in the turbulent world, the psyche serves as the dynamic center of life. Its values tend to be those of the animal in us: it seeks food, shelter, safety and a host of other goods. Its operations are governed by needs and desires that evoke mighty struggles to satisfy them. These battles are daily events, focusing the psyche's efforts on modifying its environment to achieve its purposes. Psyches are the selves we know and are: experiencing organisms that remember the past and devote themselves to the future.

We might say that the psyche works in the dark, in the sense that it doesn't require the mediation of consciousness to attain its ends. By contrast, spirit is awareness that provides nothing beyond the momentary light of cognition. It is produced and supported by the psyche, in return for which it adopts the concerns of its parent. The result is a consciousness wracked by worries it is unable to assuage, a tortured impotence that feels itself at the mercy of events. To reach its unique perfection, spirit must liberate itself and become properly spiritual. In this phase of its existence, it enjoys undisturbed immediacy with its objects, essences. The reward is a blessed absorption in the present, a joyous celebration of whatever forms happen to float by. The great achievement of spirituality is to strive for no achievements, but instead to surrender itself to the peaceful contemplation of the picture show nature provides.

Santayana's realm of essence attains central significance at this point. Essences are not embodied, threatening beings, but lifeless yet shining qualities and relations. They are neither events nor processes, though under the name of "tropes" Santayana admits their

motionless essences into the realm of the eternal. Substance is food, he avers, calling attention to the tendency of material things to absorb their neighbors and to resist being absorbed themselves. The eternal is a realm of peace and of the timeless enjoyment of disembodied realities. Some people find it difficult to conceive such a realm, yet few things are easier. All we have to do is to think of the world without its dynamism, pretending that it is just a picture show. Only children get scared in the movies, and they only because they think the monsters on the screen are physically there.

These reflections reveal that Santayana's ontology operates in the service of his ethics. The significance of the realm of essence is that it provides a special set of objects for consciousness. Being eternal and therefore free of motion and change, these objects make the peace of the spiritual life possible. The peace, in turn, serves as an antidote to the restless agitation of the rat race. Santayana saw early and clearly that a hurried life cannot yield satisfaction. The endless rounds of anxious activities demanded of us in jobs and in social interaction infect the soul and make even its relation to itself a fevered storm. Spirituality is the answer to the modern world's need of something that will not unhinge it or drive it to the future for completion.

Temporary freedom from past and future is the hallmark of the spiritual life. This is not a new idea: Schopenhauer offered something similar in his account of absorption in beauty. In Santayana, however, spirituality is democratized by allowing any object of consciousness to serve as an invitation to immediate delight. Revulsion to certain sights, sounds and smells points to the selectivity of the psyche; spirit is the impartial readiness to welcome any essence. Santayana offers the joy of immediacy as at least a partial solution to the problems caused by the rapidly escalating speed of modern life and the distraction attendant upon it.

There are two major problems that stand in the way of appreciating the radical nature of Santayanian spirituality. The first is an apparent contradiction. Spiritual focus constitutes a great value for

people struggling to find peace and momentary satisfaction. Nevertheless, Santayana describes such pure intuitions as free of value, which means independent of preference and desire. How is it possible for something that involves no valuation to be of value to people? The paradox is only apparent, because there is a simple answer to the question and it turns on distinguishing the inner nature of spirituality from its external uses. If we analyze pure intuition, we find in it no trace of valuing or choice; it is neither means nor end, neither longing nor achievement. But if we view it from the standpoint of its uses, that which has no value-ingredients can nevertheless be a valuable ingredient of a good life. In fact, it is precisely its distance from the world of values that makes it good for those who tire of toiling incessantly to create the good.

The second major problem grows out of the phrase “spiritual life.” It looks as though the name is a counterpart to Santayana’s famous “life of reason.” This impression, however, is misleading. The life of reason is indeed a stretch of existence lived under the good-maximizing guidance of the principle of harmony. The spiritual life, by contrast, is not a life at all: it is constituted by a loosely connected string of pure intuitions. Such a life has no unifying principle and exerts no effort to put its imprint on its constituent processes. The reason for this is that no processes enter into its constitution; it is only a thin stream of consciousness.

Nothing is lost if we view Santayana’s talk of a spiritual *life* as simply a manner of speaking. If we do, we eliminate the possibility of supposing that the spiritual life is a competitor of the life of reason. Not only do the two fail to be at odds with one another, they may even be harmonious, with moments of pure intuition punctuating and providing respite from the struggles of the psyche. Santayana does not spell this out, but it is a mistake to suppose that the emphasis on spirituality in his later works amounts to an abandonment of the ideal of the life of reason. To the contrary, how to lead good lives was of central interest to him even in *Dominations and Powers*, a book completed not much before he died.

Santayana's recognition of the need for inner peace was prophetic. By comparison with our world of email and iPads and Facebook and Twitter, the early twentieth century was a haven of quiet reflection. Santayana foresaw the growing demand for dispersed attention and asserted the right of the mind to quiet reflection or fertile emptiness. He did not live long enough to experience the fractured hurry we face every day, but the assembly line of industrial civilization was enough for him to conjecture what the outlines, even if not the details, of the mad hurry of the digital age might look like. The busy-ness of Harvard in 1910 was enough of a hint for Santayana of what life might be like a hundred years later. If mind, as he said, is a lyric cry in the midst of business, spirituality is a moment of silent sanity in the rush.

Santayana's vision doesn't stop with spirituality. He places these sacred moments in a naturalistic context, presenting a picture of the world we all recognize. Deeply religious people and idealist philosophers tend to introduce over-beliefs and interpretations upon what we all agree are the facts. Those who believe in God might be convinced that they are guided in what they do or that there is a secret plan that governs their lives. The idealists among us may aver that the ultimate constituents of the mundane world are miniature minds called "monads," or that everything can be analyzed into perceptions or ideas or notions. Such convictions provide comfort in times of trouble by presenting the universe as a friendly place that favors our ambitions. When tragedy strikes, it is reassuring to suppose that there is a way out and that we will one day be reunited with the people dear to us. If things don't go well for us here, it is a mighty consolation to think that there is another world where love and justice reign.

Such beliefs do not change the facts: the nasty material world continues to operate just as it does, without mercy and justice. The laws of causation make no reference to morality and physical processes cannot be modified by hope. We cannot think away hunger and death, to all appearances, terminates personhood. The striking

reality is that we don't disagree concerning how the world operates; it is just that some hope physical events will not stand as final. This is what Santayana calls "the materialism of idealists," meaning to call attention to the accord of all interested parties concerning empirical facts. Additional beliefs may place the everyday world in a broader context, but no clear evidence supports these opinions. They are matters of personal commitment or faith and, so long as we remain alive, it is unlikely that we will gain access to another world.

The materialism of idealists points to the fact that we live in a single space-time continuum, which serves as a field of action. If anything gets accomplished, it is somewhere and somewhen in this field. Astronomers of old were no fools when they directed their telescopes toward the far reaches of sky, expecting to find the Deity. They knew that if there is a God, He must be an agent in the cosmos, and if He exerts no discoverable force, He is probably not real. For all we know, the empirical world is *the* world, and so long as things go well for us in it, we are not tempted to deny it. To say that this world is *material* means only that it consists of forces unevenly distributed in space and time that operate on the principle of the symmetry of action. This balance amounts to the common sense notion that any force that affects us can in turn be affected. In the empirical world, this is the principle of security and sanity: people are less likely to strike us if we can strike them back. Individuals who think God is an inhabitant of our field of action extend this idea, thinking that pious prayer can move the Deity to protect or restore us through miracles.

The trouble, of course, is that miracles are but temporary irregularities in the movement of the world. Looked at from the perspective of what is possible, it is no more surprising if scratching one's head causes pleasure than if it leads to an explosion. Admittedly, the latter is a rare sequence, but so is choosing ten successive winning numbers in the lottery. Stationing God as an agency in the empirical world converts Him into an Old Testament power: we turn



Him into an enforcer of morality and a big brother who extends protection when the wicked threaten us with harm. Such a conception falls far short of the ideal God has been thought to represent. It is truer to our experience to view the field of action as thoroughly secular. What justice there is in the world, we are likely to have introduced; there is no compelling evidence that what good we don't do will somehow be accomplished anyway.

There is at least one additional element of Santayana's vision that is compelling and generally shared. Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of lying. Without knowing the truth, we cannot rightly claim that someone is not telling it; stable reality underlies all distortions and makes efforts to mislead possible. Philosophers have had untold amounts of trouble developing an adequate account of truth. Santayana wants to sidestep the pesky technical details as much as possible by offering a sensible and commonsensical view of the independent reality of truth. Fact stands over against error and ideology as something humans may be able to deny, but cannot destroy. The state of the world at any given time is just what it is and if we repeat any portion of the hugely complex essence that characterizes it, we are thinking or speaking the truth.

Fact and truth are in this way organically connected. They are objective realities immune to the influence of mind, power or emotion. Their eternal status does not interfere with the incessant changes of the empirical world; any condition that obtains at any time remains eternally the case concerning that place and time. We can live assured that such truths are discoverable and, though the world may change, they do not. Because of their eternal availability, they can serve as standards for our explorations. They spur us on not to be satisfied with lies and propaganda, but to discover the facts of which the world consists. Truth in this sense has a wonderful liberating effect. Many people have given their lives for the right to pursue it; others have died demanding the freedom to speak it. Whatever philosophers say truth is, these are its nature and function in the human world.

The universe in which we live cannot be radically different from how it seems to us. The role of philosophy is not to reveal hitherto unsuspected realities, but to present a plausible and harmonious account of the condition of humans in the world. The point is to aid us in living well by improving our condition where possible and accepting it where there is no alternative. This, roughly, is the wisdom of the ages and we would be wise to take it to heart. Unfortunately, philosophers have by and large abandoned their traditional task, so people can no longer turn to them for guidance and for help. The loss has been palpable, leaving the room open for self-help gurus, life coaches and charlatans. Philosophers look down on such folks, but the people who need help and are reduced to buying self-help books refuse to take philosophers seriously.

A central part of regaining the traditional role of philosophy is the presentation of an integrated and attractive vision of (and for) life. Santayana's vision is as good as any produced in the last hundred and fifty years. It is an inviting and honest account, based not on wild hopes or human self-importance but on a realistic assessment of our prospects. In the annals of philosophy, it is rare to find a system that combines cold-eyed naturalism about the world with the demands of spirituality. Santayana accomplished this remarkable fusion and left us a rich and enduring heritage.

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