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Jorge/George Santayana and Niko Chavchavadze on Culture, Beauty, Values, and Aesthetics¹

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the similarities and differences of the approaches to the question of *culture, beauty, values and aesthetics* in some texts of Jorge/George Santayana and Niko Chavchavadze. Consequently, the argument will consist of three steps: the first two steps will describe philosophers' general considerations on the notions listed, and the last step will offer comparative remarks of the study.

Keywords: Jorge/George Santayana, Niko Chavchavadze, aesthetics, beauty, culture, values

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es destacar la similitud y la diferencia en el tratamiento de las nociones de *cultura, belleza, valores y estética* en los textos concretos de Jorge/George Santayana y de Niko Chavchavadze. El estudio consta de tres partes: en las dos primeras brevemente describimos la aproximación que hacen los filósofos a las nociones indicadas y en la tercera ofrecemos conclusiones de índole comparativo sobre el asunto investigado.

Palabras clave: Jorge/George Santayana, Niko Chavchavadze, estética, belleza, cultura, valores

PRELIMINARY

In the *Critique of Judgement* Kant notes that the judgement of taste is not cognitive and logical but rather an aesthetic phenomenon based on and determined by the subjective perceptions of an individual [Kant (1951)]. With etymological roots in the Greco-Latin expression *cognitio aesthetica*, the historical voyage of the term *sensitive knowledge* finds its place in multiple and diverse writings of philosophers, ranging from Anthony Ashley Cooper, Francis Hutcheson and Alexander Baumgarten to David Hume, Thomas Reid and Adam Smith, Alexander Gerard, George Turnbull and Lord Kames, to mention just a few. Composed by factual and ideal characteristics and concerned with the perception of values, *aesthetics* finds its place in the everyday life of an individual in every epoch, being equally important for different cultural epistemes and philosophical traditions. In this article, I hope to throw some more light on the philosophical notion of a non-physical phenomenon — *aesthetics*, and on its connections with *culture*, *beauty* and *values*— being the *beauty* a type of *value*, and the *value* —the basic component of the culture. In particular, based on the texts of Hispanic-American philosopher Jorge/George Santayana *The sense of beauty* and “What is Aesthetics?”, and on the texts of Georgian philosopher Niko Chavchavadze *Culture and Values* (published in Russian) and *For the nature of the subject of Aesthetics* (published in Georgian), I shall examine the notions of *beauty*, *value* and *aesthetics* from a comparative perspective, making emphasis on both the similarities and differences of their perception.

This paper is in four parts. After this brief introduction, I shall, in section I, present the definition and the essence of the listed notions in Santayana’s text. In section II, I shall discuss the same notions in Chavchavadze’s texts. Only in section III I will attempt to formulate concluding comparative remarks of the study.

I. GEORGE SANTAYANA ON *BEAUTY, VALUES AND AESTHETICS*

Santayana's understanding of *aesthetics* has been studied by different scholars, and my intention is not to offer a brief review of the work already done.² Instead, I try to concentrate on the concrete peculiarities which allow me to connect Santayana's thought with Chavchavadze's ideas, and, at the same time, to point the differences in both philosopher's approaches to the phenomenon of *aesthetics*.

Santayana describes *values* as a reaction to a vital experience of a human being —once something happens that has a relation with us, we react immediately forming *values*, and mostly what happens —our vital impulses— are immediate and inexplicable; it is also very important that human characteristics are individual as well as the fact that values differ from one individual to another [Santayana (1896), pp. 16, 29].

According to Santayana, *beauty* is a species of value; from here our natural interest in it —we start manifesting our aesthetic faculty as we are interested in the comprehension of *beauty* [Santayana (1896), pp. 16, 28]. By its nature, *beauty* is a positive value as “[...] it is the sense of the presence of something good, or (in the case of ugliness) of its absence. It is never the perception of a positive evil, it is never a negative value” [Santayana (1896), p. 33]. And, besides being value positive, *beauty* is also objectified by its nature, it is “pleasure objectified” [Santayana (1896), p. 35].

As values are created by our reactions on the environment, and as our reactions are individual, it is natural that one of the types of values, *beauty*, would also be very subjective —our perception of the surrounding world, as well as our labelling of something as *beautiful* could be determined by our set of values, determining its prevalent nature, on the one hand, and its perception in form of a response to general demands, on the other:

All things are not equally beautiful because the subjective bias that discriminates between them is the cause of their being beautiful at all. The

principle of personal preference is the same as that of human taste; real and objective beauty, in contrast to a vagary of individuals, means only an affinity to a more prevalent and lasting susceptibility, a response to a more general and fundamental demand [Santayana (1896), p. 83].

Of particular interest should be the relation between *individuality* and the *sense of beauty* — what to estimate as *beautiful* is based on *individual* perception and the same perception is formed by stimulus which defines and cultivates our *individualism*:

[...] individuality is a thing acquired in the mind by the congeries of its impressions. They have power, also, because that depends on the appropriateness of a stimulus to touch the springs of reaction in the soul. And they of course have beauty, because in them is embodied the greatest of our imaginative delights, - that of giving body to our latent capacities, and of wandering, without the strain and contradiction of actual existence, into all forms of possible being [Santayana (1896), p. 116].

Forming part of our set of values, the perception of *beauty* is further converted into a form of adaptation to the environmental factors realized by our cognitive functions, such as senses and imagination. Obviously, as environmental factors are subjected to the permanent changes, the adaptation will not be complete — nature will be the basis, as Santayana put it, and man will be the goal [Santayana (1896), p. 104]. From this perspective, the importance attributed to the perception of *beauty* is twofold: it ensures the development of imaginative and sensitive capacities, and it creates new possibilities for increasing the role of an individual in a permanently changing world.

Santayana's understanding of the notion echoes Hume's approach to *beauty*; Hume insists on the existence of some faculties in man's mind that determine the perception of *beauty*, the perception that farther may be discovered and detected based on individ-

ual grounds. According to Hume, *beautiful* for one man may mean the opposite for another: “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others” [Hume (1894), p. 136].

Defining *aesthetics* as the “theory of perception or of susceptibility”, Santayana indicates that the term is too broad and is “concerned with the perception of values” [Santayana (1896), pp. 13-14]. Its essence is that the nature of *aesthetics* is universal —despite the fact that the faculty of perceiving *beauty* may be differently developed among men, the judgment of a thing as being *beautiful* is determined by a universal nature of *aesthetics* —in other words, a thing may be judged as *beautiful* as it is *beautiful* in itself. The following step is the characterization of object based on its *aesthetic* faculties as, for example, social objects are less *aesthetic* by nature, which may be explained by the low capacity of their imaginative nature; as imagination is one of the basic stimuli for the formation of *values* and as *beauty* is value positive by nature, all that is less imaginable results to be less subjected to the aesthetic perception; in other words, the emotions that accompany social objects cannot be transmuted into *beauty* and cannot form the domain of *aesthetics*. Santayana defines different aspects of *aesthetics*, distinguishing its factual and ideal characteristics: “Now, much that is aesthetic is factual, for instance the phenomena of art and taste; and all this is an object for natural history and natural philosophy; but much also is ideal, like the effort and intent of poetic composition, or the interpretation of music, all of which is concerned only with fulfilling intent and establishing values” [Santayana (1904), p. 322].

II. NIKO CHAVCHAVADZE ON *CULTURE, VALUES AND AESTHETICS*

In his approach to the understanding of *culture*, Chavchavadze makes emphasis on the different understandings of the notion in philosophy and in social disciplines. In the very center of the social sciences, Chavchavadze sees *culture* as a total sum of a human actions; *culture* is formed by acting individuals, it is a product of an action. Chavchavadze distinguishes two different natures of *acting* — *material-real* and *ideal*. The first is connected with the everyday life and with the realization of man's basic functions; the second forms part of less material and more abstract peculiarities, in case of both societies and individuals [Chavchavadze (2007a), p. 40]. But both of them are important for the realization of the social functions and for the achievement of collective and individual goals. Regarding the place of *culture* in philosophical optic, Chavchavadze points out its importance in the process of studying man's inner world, while explaining basic ideas of his acting. Chavchavadze considers culture to be a philosophical product, as it helps to explain the expression of man's inner world, the understanding of his ideas and intentions. As man is not just a sum of biomolecules, but also represents a social and a spiritual being, Chavchavadze advocates to examine his spiritual peculiarities. If we try to analyze cultures from a comparative perspective, we may succeed in detecting cultural characteristics, being by nature universal and, at the same time, society-specific. Hence the need, continues Chavchavadze, to distinguish *culture* from *non-culture*, and to define the former as a set of values formed and shared by societies [Chavchavadze (2007b), pp. 16-17].

Chavchavadze indicates that philosophers locate *values* in the center of cultural studies. *Values* are valuable, and hence the necessity of distinguishing them from *signs*, being the latter more similar to *objects* than to *values*. *Values* do not depend on the existence or non-existence of *objects*, and as human products, they are described in cultural and social ambiances [Chavchavadze (2007b), pp. 18-22].

Being contingent by nature (*means as values*) and belonging to concrete individuals aiming to strive for supreme values (*goals as values*), *values* represent an ability of an individual for self-expression and for the development of a culture. As Chavchavadze put it, supreme *goals as values* contain absolute and objective elements; absolute characteristics determine the formation of human achievements inside the framework of the human culture, which may be understood as a final and ideal level of human existence. Human striving toward absolute values will be brought out during the study of man's aesthetic attitude toward reality. By nature, *values* may be *material* and *spiritual*, representing the latter a higher category:

The classification of values is conditional because empirically a man's vital and spiritual demands are not differentiated from one another. They are usually combined. Anyway, a man's vital demands are not primitive demands. Public life made them soft and human and thus, involved elements of spiritual demands in it (For instance, a man doesn't eat meat first of all because it is immoral and then, because it is physiologically unacceptable and abhorrent). However, how much combined material and spiritual demands are, they are still demands of different categories. This difference is shown by the concepts of material and spiritual culture. They are parts of one culture. Material and spiritual cultures differentiate only in abstraction. However, nobody mixes them up. While the concept of material culture refers to everything that is created by a man to meet his material demands, the concept of spiritual culture refers to everything that is created to meet a man's spiritual demands [...] None of spiritual value is boiled down to usefulness. It can be explained by the fact that these values are of higher categories. At the first glance, it contradicts the idea about the role of consciousness in the process of practice. Consciousness appeared and developed in the process of practice. All its aspects were in the service of practice, or utilitarianism. First was utilitarianism and later, other values were created. Now it is stressed that original value of truth, kindness and beauty precedes the opportunity to use them for

practical and utilitarian goals. Although contradiction is obvious, it is all show. For instance, it is wrong that first man had useful idea and then, it was converted into the truth. The idea was true from the beginning but man looked at it from utilitarian point of view and later, he appraised its truth. It is wrong that the attitude and behavior towards events were first useful and later, they acquired a sign of the truth. They had a sign of the truth from the very beginning but man could not notice it. Later, he was able to appreciate it [Chavchavadze (2007a), pp. 167-168].

Thus, following Chavchavadze's perception of the role and the function of values, we may distinguish two different spaces for humans to act: *common* or *general*, which is determined by the everyday life, and *individual* or *particular*, which aims at the realization of the supreme goals. Both spaces coexist, but are formed by peculiar characteristics, making observable the latter when we receive and interpret a reality in an *aesthetic* way.

As Chavchavadze put it, all that is aesthetic is valuable. Taking into consideration that the notions of *useful* and *aesthetic* are quite different (*useful* for individual, and *aesthetic* as a spiritual and non-utilitarian phenomenon), he distinguished a twofold structure (*front* and *back*) of an aesthetic subject: *front* is perceptible and sensuous, giving opportunity for aesthetic appraisal, meanwhile *back* is the sum of all peculiarities that a man possess towards the reality:

An aesthetic subject must have sensuous, perceptible front layer. A subject that is not perceptible can't be aesthetic. Although sometimes there are talks about the beauty of some theories, ideas or spiritual content, this case concept of beauty is used in its figurative sense (ethical), not the beauty of the idea or theory itself as an intelligible object is meant, but the beauty of its sensuous imaginary icon. [...] On the other hand, a front layer of an aesthetic object must have its in-sensuous deep content because without it perception of aesthetics will be equal to the universal perception, and an aesthetic object will be equal to a

sensuous, facial layer of an empirical object. Consequently, sensuous, front layer is a form through which deep content of an aesthetic object becomes clear. [...] A “back layer” of an aesthetic object has very difficult structure. It consists of many elements, including all attitudes and connections of a man to the reality. However, content of an aesthetic object is not a sum of these elements. These elements lost their first face in this content. They must be changed to become elements of content of an aesthetic object. [Chavchavadze (2007b), pp. 21, 27].

Aesthetic for Chavchavadze is a spiritual value, it may be conditioned and developed only by individuals. *Values* are cultivated as a result of the perception of and response to the reality, that is defined as an *action*, and the connection of a *culture* with *action* is not accidental —it is bidirectional by nature: on the one hand, *action* develops *culture*, and, on the other, *culture* processes the *action*.

III. CONCLUDING COMPARATIVE REMARKS

Our surrounding world has an enormous impact on our perception —physical, chemical, biological, social and behavioral environmental factors determine both the way we accept the world, and the mechanisms with which we respond to its changeable nature. Once we define something as *beautiful*, we stimulate our cognitive functions making them ready to identify and to estimate similar things and moments as *beautiful*, and the opposite ones —as *non-beautiful*. This happens on the level of an individual development and determines the formation of our imagination by the way we perceive a *real-material* and *non-material (spiritual)* worlds. The nature of *aesthetics* is universal (Santayana), and *goals as values* contain objective elements, being, at the same time, an ability of an individual (Chavchavadze).

I think that *individualism* is one of the main crossroads where Santayana and Chavchavadze coincide. Individuals possess an ability of imagination, that makes possible to apply changes to the sur-

rounding world. Acting is a response based on imagination, and the latter determines the creation of values. As society is developed based on individual attitudes, we can suppose that the role of imagination in the development of society is decisive. Bertrand Russell in his influential *Authority and the Individual* indicated that “Practically all progress, artistic, moral, and intellectual, has depended upon such individuals, who have been a decisive factor in the transition from barbarism to civilization. If a community is to make progress, it needs exceptional individuals whose activities, though useful, are not of a sort that ought to be general” [Russell (2010), pp. 27-28]. Indeed, there is a clear relation between acting and culture, if we consider *culture* as a total sum of human *acting* that forms values shared by concrete society. This approach to culture is not new — Edward Burnett Tylor defined a *culture* as a “[...] complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” [Tylor (1871), p. 1], and according to Franz Boas each culture “[...] can be understood only as an historical growth determined by the social and geographical environment in which each people is placed and by the way in which it develops the cultural material that comes into its possession from the outside or through its own creativeness” [Boas (2010), p. 4]. Hence, from the very beginnings of studies on man and culture, the necessity of understanding the phenomenon of *culture* and the ways of its development, and as *culture* is a human product, it occupies a central place in Humanities, or, as Chris Barker put it, *cultural studies* form an important and novel field of research in Humanities [Barker (2000)].

Another point on which Chavchavadze echoes Santayana is a characterization of an *aesthetic* nature of objects — Santayana indicates that social objects are less imaginable, which means that they are less transmutable into *beauty* as a *value*, and Chavchavadze argues that *objects* are more similar to *signs* than to *values*, as the *means as values* form the part of *material-real* acting and are not directly related with an ideal level of human existence.

Despite the stated similarities in approaches realized by Santayana and Chavchavadze regarding the nature of *aesthetics* and *individuality*, I think that there are some perspectives that distance their philosophical understandings of the surrounding world. In particular, it seems that Santayana deepens his thought more in the *aesthetic* as a branch of culture and science, whereas Chavchavadze makes emphasis on *aesthetics* as a cultural component of a human society. Santayana discusses the issues of aesthetic education, the role of aesthetic principles regarding the judgment of works of art, and the role of literary accidents in the formation of aesthetic characteristics while Chavchavadze tries to detect the role of individual imagination and cultural values as determinants of human action and as a response of society to the changing social and political reality. The above-mentioned could be determined by the historical context in which both philosophers lived — Santayana's life, described in multiple publications and from different perspectives,³ was very different from Chavchavadze's existentialist reality:⁴ director of the Institute of philosophy of Georgian SSR,⁵ Niko Chavchavadze lived a long life participating actively in the political and social tensions that occurred in Georgia in the second half of the past century. This may further explain the difference in interpretation of the same phenomenon — *aesthetics* as a source for inspiration and instrument for imagination on the one hand, and *aesthetics* as a basic determinant element of human conduct, on the other.

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NOTES

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² On this topic, see: Blum (1958), Ashmore (1966), Coleman and Resler (2004), *Bandurová* (2012), Grossman (2014), Macewen (2016), Horváth (2018).

³ On this topic, among others, see: Moreno (2007, 2015), Beltrán (2009), Coleman (2009), Lida (2014), Barbagallo (2017), Moreno and Beltrán (2021).

⁴ On Chavchavadze’s family, see: Luarsabishvili, Vladimer (2016), *The Chavchavadzes: Culture and Values*, Tbilisi: Edition of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia; on the life and work of Niko Chavchavadze: Luarsabishvili, Vladimer (2017), “Philosopher Niko Chavchavadze: life and work”, *Kultura i Wartości*, 2017, 22, pp. 21- 53.

⁵ On the history of the Institute of Philosophy of Georgian SSR, see the edition of Ilia State University *The 1946-1991 soviet period archive materials of Savle Tsereteli Institute of Philosophy*, 2 volumes, edited by Mery Tsutskiridze, Tbilisi: Ilia State University Press, 2017.

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