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What Can We Learn from Santayana?
Kremplewska's Reconstruction and Interpretation of His
Political Hermeneutics

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Katarzyna Kremplewska. *George Santayana's Political Hermeneutics*, Brill, 2022, 261 pp.

Three years after her innovative *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana's Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self* (2019), Katarzyna Kremplewska follows with a volume in the Social Philosophy section of Brill's Value Inquiry Book Series. I mention her former publication as the hermeneutical reading of Santayana undertook there is highly relevant to the current work; it is expanded now into the political, social and cultural aspects of Santayana's thought, as Kremplewska herself tells us (p. 21). In the current volume, Kremplewska continues her worthy attempt to free Santayana's thought from the relative isolation, both chosen and imposed, that has been part of its lot. The novel context for Santayana's philosophy that she provides by relating it to various authors (Plato, Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville, the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, Ernst Cassirer, José Ortega y Gasset, René Girard, Paul Ricœur, Arthur Schopenhauer, Arnold J. Toynbee, and John Gray, among others) is only part of her achievement. No less important are her view of Santayana as being informed by humanism rather than by other background motives even in his most controversial views; her criticism of some of his opinions; and the sympathetic reconstruction of Santayana's

ideas and motives that she undertakes when the account seems to be insufficient. Her aim is not only to explain Santayana's views: She reconstructs or constructs them, if needed, and uses his thought as a moral compass to recommend certain principles for communities which are based on non-fashionable virtues. This creative contribution makes of her book a fresh and contemporary apport to moral thought and to cultural criticism.

As far as Santayana studies are concerned, moreover, the very undertaking of addressing the relatively neglected (and often shunned) aspects of the Spanish-American philosopher's work, his socio-political writings,¹ is praiseworthy. This is not easy territory; yet Krempleska elegantly moves in it without avoiding its thorny topics at the same time that she keeps away from narrow subjects of confrontation or unnecessary apologetics; her study concludes by shifting the discussion from politics to culture based on her insight into the reason why Santayana saw culture as wiser than politics: although she admits that Santayana never offered an explicit definition of culture, she argues that culture, in a broad understanding of the term, may constitute for him a safeguard against the evils of politics and a source of betterment for the political sphere. Thus, one of the merits of her work, and not the lesser, is to make explicit Santayana's inexplicit incentive to depoliticize culture.

Yet the initial interest in the book is ignited by its very contents, as encapsulated in the chapters' titles: Liberty, Servitude, Militancy, Arts as Powers and Dominations, the Fragility of Liberalism, Self-Government, Democracy and Justice, Communism, Why Culture Matters... all topics about which one feels, rightly or wrongly, that a direct and systematic explanation of Santayana's view of them is welcome, indeed, that an exhaustive account of such matters may have been missing from many of the (sympathetic) commentaries on his thought. Krempleska fulfills the expectations we have when approaching those aspects of Santayana's thought by drawing in each chapter on a variety of his works without getting lost in the particulars. One gains indeed a firm grasp of these topics in Santayana's *œuvre* in

general, and a feeling that one's efforts are rewarded by the satisfaction that follows when one's time has been well-spent.

These are some of the reasons that bring me to recommend wholeheartedly Krempleska's volume, and to wish her, for her sake and our benefit, a long and fruitful engagement with Santayana's thought. However, I believe that she will also use her knowledge of this philosopher to further contemporary aims, as does Herman Saatkamp [e.g., Saatkamp (2014)] and become one of the leading voices in moral and cultural matters which will help shape some of our future communities.

The book holds nine chapters, the last one concludes the work and offers "Further Reflections on Why Culture Matters". The first chapter, titled "Foundations and Contours," provides the basis for the interpretation that Krempleska advances and the key notions that connects this study with her previous work: a negative anthropology taking into account the limitations of the human condition and of human nature, and a vision of existence as a struggle in which everything exists at the price of something else, which echoes Heraclitus' view.² Upon entering the sphere of politics, the existential variables which Krempleska discloses manifest themselves in ways that require both *managing necessity* and *harmonizing diversity* (to accommodate the moral dimension of Santayana's thought, the protection of human variety under the conditions of pluralism) (p. 42). The levels of necessity and of liberty conveyed by these notions represent a specific formula of the separation of powers and competences: later on in her study, she argues that "the art of harmonizing diversity must be found in the art of managing necessity" (p. 238). The questions of how to govern life and with what purpose in view are what the great alternatives in the various forms of society, authority or political government address. The spiritual perspective is relevant for the political realm, as Daniel Moreno has also noted [Moreno (2015), p. 101]: The Santayanan highest good —human well-being and completion— singles out as beneficent the continuity, maturation, experience,

and wisdom which constitute culture for Santayana, and highlights the source of knowledge that guides artful action, the principle of benefit that constitutes the *ars vivendi* that he extolls (p. 243).

Rather than dwelling on the narrower context of Santayana's criticism of the American ethos, in Chapter 2 titled "Liberty," Kremplewska extracts from his view a broader criticism of modernity (p. 44). Similarly, in Chapter 6 titled "the Fragility of Liberalism," she does not venture into measuring his affinity with liberalism (p. 149), yet another narrow endeavor. She rather notes that "while certain key liberal virtues remained dear to him, he was never a fully committed liberal, for some not a liberal at all". Whilst she is convinced that liberalism enabled both the goods Santayana valued and the very possibility of Santayana's lifestyle, she explains his attitude as follows: "He might have been too disillusioned to lay a wager on the lasting endurance of the liberal order. He might also lack the spirit of activism to struggle for the preservation of liberalism" (p. 176). Chapter 6 unifies Santayana's loose and scattered remarks about liberalism, his criticism of liberal theory and practice on socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects. Adding clarity and substance to the chapter's topic, Kremplewska offers an intelligent and sympathetic, yet nuanced and non-apologetic, reconstruction of Santayana's thought and sometimes also of his motives, as exemplified in the last quote.

After this short digression into Chapter 6, which I juxtaposed to Chapter 2 in order to exemplify the work's general import and the means to it, I revert to the natural order of the chapters. Santayana's views of liberty and freedom are paralleled in his view of servitude, which is the topic of Chapter 3. For Santayana servitude means the variety of human dependencies, both natural and artificial, both constructive and suppressing, its three kinds being necessary (servitude to nature, our helplessness as mortal beings), voluntary (servitude to society), and involuntary and accidental (or slavery). The existential fact of servitude, or the human condition, grounds the idea of liberty. The author believes that Santayana's "negative anthropology" informs his views of society and politics, enabling

him to analyze how human helplessness is a target in human politics, to clarify misconceptions in interpretations of freedom, and to formulate a balanced approach to how liberty and subjugation are to be realistically negotiated. The feeling, yet not the fact, of subjection to society may be eluded through willing conformity or mental reservation. Santayana notes that the latter means escaping from ordinary society into mental and imaginative sanctuaries, into one of the non-political heavens offered by culture where one can still contribute to the common good. Krempleska notes that “*disinterestedness of certain areas of common life*,” or “*freedom from politization*” is “*an inexplicit yet vital postulate of Santayana’s political thinking*” (p. 85; emphasis in the original). Finally, Santayana denounces both mass society and the trampling of the individual in the name of an impersonal yet ideological education, which uses him to serve interests he does not understand and which scarify his life in endeavors of unknown costs. “Choking the human genius by social pressure” (quoted in p. 75) is the thing to avoid if indeed “Society suffocates liberty merely by existing” (motto of Chapter 3, p. 75).

Chapter 4 and 5 address respectively “Militancy” and “Arts as Powers and Dominations”. The crux of the former is to clarify Santayana’s view of war, notably to reject the idea that he promotes war, and to demarcate a cynical from a moral approach to politics. The latter looks at the role of the arts in contemporary society in contradistinction to the ancients’ views, and its relevance to the way we consider work nowadays. This chapter will be further commented on below.

Chapter 7 collect reflections on “Self-Government, Democracy, and Justice,” where Krempleska argues that Santayana aims not at discrediting democracy, “but rather to show the ways in which democracy may fail or actually does” (p. 185), and this vain he proposes a meritocratic aristocracy, a natural aristocracy which will be a version of timocracy, as a better option because it would create an environment conducive to “the art of liberal living,” where wealth could be “nobly enjoyed,” and genius well fed and well assimilated

[Santayana (1954), p. 148; quoted in p. 200]. A good authoritarian regime is also an option. His views of fascism and words of support towards Mussolini are deemed “unfortunate,” and are relegated to a note (p. 207n95) and to other scholars’ discussions.

Kremplewska notes Santayana’s “provocativeness and ambivalence” (p. 206), which prompts her to look for another principle of justice which would compensate for the insufficiency of the principles of harmonious diversity and beneficent difference. She finds it in his idea of justice as charity, which differs in the kind of love it expresses, harmony being the Ancient Greek “erotically” (positive, rationally, aesthetically) motivated dimension of justice (p. 209). She ties up the ideal of a natural aristocracy as establishing a reflective equilibrium between charity and the ideal-seeking pursuit of harmony, which she considers “insightful and sensitive,” although “never incorporated into a complete and practicable political project” (p. 205). Revolutionary democracy is communism (p. 193), and as a critic of social democracy, he seemed for some time to welcome the rise of communism (p. 199). This topic is developed in Chapter 8, which addresses Santayana’s views on communism. Notably, she interprets Santayana’s view of justice in terms of harmony and charity. As she regards these notions as two facets of love, she brings in the discussion also Paul Ricoeur’s view of love. She draws on Santayana’s claims in *The Life of Reason* that “justice and charity are identical” [Santayana (1954), p. 271; quoted in p. 210], that the parties to a suit must be all heard sympathetically, and that justice without charity “remains only an organized wrong” [Santayana (1954), p. 272], while “a justice deeper and milder than that of pagan states” is “a universal justice called charity, a kind of all-penetrating courtesy,” where “value is attributed to rival forms of life”, and charity being “nothing but a radical and imaginative justice” [Ibid]. She argues that the sources of Santayana’s view of charity are eclectic yet that “the idea forms at once a substantive and universalistic foundation” for Santayana’s general conception of justice.

She concludes by recalling that vital liberty, an individual achievement, is the ultimate moral horizon for human government,

yet it is burdened or benefited by the society, the culture and the specific political circumstances in which it materializes. Thus, the target of criticism and the measure of judgement becomes the relation of socio-political arrangements to the attainability of vital liberty. As human diversity is to be sought and protected as a good, the life of reason is revealed as a naturalistic and pragmatic ideal of a pluralistic environment..., and the principle and virtue proper to the art of government and self-government become rationality. Rationality is part of wisdom, which requires also experience, far-sightedness and the understanding of the conditions of human well-being help to address politics in its nobler sense, much as Plato and Aristotle did by associating it with virtue.

Yet she notes that Santayana deliberately does not give priority to any form of government or political doctrine; she argues, however, that a totalitarian system is obviously excluded from the array of acceptable options because it is a radical negation of diversity and vital liberty, and thus, *de facto*, makes culture redundant (p. 236).

While the reader gains a better understanding of Santayana's thought on the most delicate issues of his time, and on those he says too little according to contemporary standards, Krempleska takes his thought one step further. She elicits from Santayana five principles of human benefit relevant for human communities (p. 236), which opposes the dehumanizing tendencies of modern culture and the cynicism of politics.

Krempleska sees Santayana's thought as providing moral guidance through virtues that he endorses and vices that he denounces. While shunning naïve optimism, it is sensitive to attitudes she deems "overlooked or considered as 'dated,'" such as criticism, patience, moderation, humility, disinterestedness, understanding of and sympathy with otherness (p. 240).

However, she also expresses some reservations, which sometimes translate into a careful analysis of what Santayana did indeed say. Whilst some issues, such as Santayana's attitude toward Fascism, Mussolini or additional authoritarian figures are broached mainly in notes or by

quoting other commentators, throughout her study Kreplewska clarifies the type of individualism that Santayana endorses (p. 242), which she relates to “Socratic self-knowledge” and to “authenticity” (p. 243). The (“modest”) affinities his thought has with romantic philosophy is mentioned, albeit in a note (p. 243n43). Most importantly, despite the sympathetic approach to his work, which involves reconstructing it when insufficient or providing motives for it when unexplained, Kreplewska does not recoil from criticism, if needed. I would like to give an example in relation to an issue which may be of special interest to the Spanish reader. I refer to the comparison that Kreplewska draws between Santayana and the thought of his contemporary and compatriot, Ortega y Gasset. She refers to the latter in relation to the crisis in art and its socio-political context [Ortega y Gasset (1968), pp. 3-56]. In the Chapter “Arts as Powers and Dominations” (pp. 140-2), she compares Santayana’s and Ortega y Gasset’s respective diagnoses of this crisis and prescriptions for it. While they are agreed on the diagnosis, they differ in the prescriptions. Notably, Kreplewska argues that Ortega y Gasset’s embrace of a futuristic interpretation not devoid of optimism is superior to the attitude Santayana expresses in *Dominations and Powers*. She voices in this context a critique of Santayana, who far from being a “reliable guide... may be charged with dilettantism in respect to modern art”. Most importantly, because of its relevance outside of the argument on art, she notes how “this sketchy juxtaposition with Ortega y Gasset brings to light certain weaknesses of Santayana’s way of philosophizing, such as an excessive tendency to generalize and expressing opinions too heavily colored by personal sympathies”. However, Kreplewska also argues that the dynamic dependance of art on socio-political and economic trends as expressed by Santayana finds no equal in Ortega y Gasset’s reflections (p. 142).

Let me conclude with a personal remark. I believe that this wonderful study would have been strengthened, *insofar as Santayana’s thought is concerned*, by explicitly addressing his view of religion. This is so because of religion’s relevance to the negative anthropology that Kreplewska formulates (Chapter 1), to politics, militancy,

and especially to culture which she addresses in the entire study, and to the virtues and vices which she emphasizes in his thought and which she recognizes as limits to his moral relativism (Chapter 9). This is not out of place in a study of his last work, *Dominations and Powers*, whose very name is an acknowledged quote from *Colossians* I, 16 [Santayana (1995), p. 111]. This is a work which contains no less than five titled chapters referring explicitly to religion, which defines religion in relation to Powers [Santayana (1995), p. 19], and which in “Whether Naturalism Is Irreligious” (Chapter 6, pp. 17-21) clearly states not only that materialism does not exclude religion but that the materialist should entertain another attitude toward religion: because “the materialist in his ethics should be a humanist, an anthropologist and philanthropist,” he should not inveigh about religion; being a lover of man, he should recognize his plight and his heart’s yearning [Santayana (1995), p. 20]. *Santayana’s uncommon association of humanism with religion may deserve explication, especially in a study that emphasizes the former.* Moreover, as religion is defined elsewhere and more than once, as “the love of life in the consciousness of impotence” [Santayana (1926), p. 43], religion is of the outmost relevance to Santayana’s frequent emphasis of the impotence of spirit that Krempleska rightly notes, and to the unraveling of the ambiguous “moral-spiritual” epithets that she sometimes uses. A clarification of the relation of spirit to morality, of their respective virtues and their relation to beauty would have been helpful.³

To take an example, whilst noting that Santayana “escapes from a difficult judgment into an aesthetic contemplation of eternal themes,” Krempleska worries about the dangers of “anesthetization... becoming anesthetization,” and about his thoughts being “a mere declaration of disengagement and spiritual emigration” (p. 120 n130); she deems Santayana’s declarations “controversial phrases” (p. 121): in what sense? She considers the masks of the critic, the moralist and the detached and disillusioned poet dwelling in an unworldly realm as different, and the last as incommensurable with the former two. About this “mask,” she asks: doesn’t it “condemn one to being inhuman in

the sense of being indifferent? Alternatively, it may be read as a poetic expression of a sense of helplessness, when one thinks that the only lasting victory possible for humans struggling in ‘the infinite vacuity’ [Santayana (1995), p. 212] of the world is of a spiritual kind” (p. 121). Is this sense of helplessness only poetic? Is this an alternative reading? Are these indeed three different “masks”?⁴

Kremplewska may have her reasons for not having reserved an explicit space —a chapter, for example— to religion (religion is indexed as a subtopic in politics), and for choosing to remark briefly about the Church and Catholicism instead of more explicitly formulating Santayana’s approach to these cultural, political and sometimes militant forces. *As her work is a reconstruction of Santayana’s thought, and a very elegant one, this can hardly be a critique.* But as a reader of Santayana, the relation of religion to the main political, social and cultural forces that Kremplewska so craftily articulates, its centrality or peripherality to these topics in his thought and maybe also to the cultural recommendations that she further provides would have been welcomed.

However, Kremplewska’s concludes her work as follows: she seeks “to provoke further questions and research” because she does not “hope to exhaust the interpretative possibilities” of Santayana’s political reflections”. Her “more modest aim” is “to breath into Santayana’s political *hermeneia* some of the vitality it deserves, a philosophical kind of vitality...” (p. 247). This has certainly been achieved, and masterfully so. But the work does more than that: it provides us with a thorough and honest interpretation of Santayana’s thought on some difficult topics. My remark pointed to one more of these, which, to my mind, is not only part and parcel of the subject at hand, but also holds the key to it.

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NOTES

¹ A notable exception is Skowroński (2007). See also Krempleska (2022, p. 8n26).

² An assessment of this contribution has been published in *Limbo* (Wahman 2019). While Jessica Wahman argues that “*Life as Intuition* [Insinuation, should have been the right term] presents an original take on Santayana and an intriguing analysis of selfhood” [Wahman (2019), p. 120], she takes issues with the concept of “a triadic self, structured as body-psyche-spirit,” which is advanced in the 2019 volume. She argues that “by contrast, Santayana is quite clear and consistent... in his assertion that the self is the material psyche, or soul, particularly when considered *in its social and political contexts*” [Wahman (2019), p. 112; my emphasis]. It is because the current volume (2022) addresses social and political contexts that I mention this remark. However, in relation to Krempleska’s final chapter in the 2019 volume, which engages with Santayana’s political philosophy, Wahman adds that “it may be the most appropriate to his concept of the self” [Wahman (2019), p. 118].

³ Especially for an author, who concludes his preface to his last masterpiece as follows: “We cannot help caring... I have my likes and dislikes... I prefer the rose to the dandelion; I prefer the lion to the vermin in the lion’s skin. In order to obtain anything lovely, I would gladly extirpate all the crawling ugliness on the world” [Santayana (1995), pp. xxii-xxiii].

⁴ See, for example, the study of Santayana’s detachment in life and politics undertaken by Laursen and Román Alcalá, in which they note, “a detachment or unwillingness to take it [the world] seriously and to take it to heart” [Laursen and Román Alcalá (2015), p. 9], and where they quote him saying that he is “a materialist, Cynic and Tory in philosophy” (pp. 392), who dislikes “all the quarrels and panaceas of the political moralists” [Santayana (1986), p. 502], and where they report on an interview where he says, “I’ve never kept in touch with politics” [Lind (1962), p. 148; quoted in Laursen and Román Alcalá (2015), p. 24]. Krempleska is aware of this: she notes in her Introduction that Santayana’s last work is more a psychology of politics, in a sense, a prolegomenon (my formulation) to all political thinking. This is what makes it interesting, she argues.

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