

limbo

Núm. 43, 2023, pp.

ISSN: 0210-1602

George Santayana—the last of the systematic philosophers?
Introducing a non-totalitarian mode of thought in *Scepticism
and Animal Faith*

TILL KINZEL

ABSTRACT

George Santayana presents his thinking in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* as a “system” in spite of the fact that philosophical systems building can appear as a particular form of folly. In light of the intense debates in 19th century German philosophy about philosophical systems not only their possibility is a matter of controversy. Likewise, the attempts to turn philosophy into a science make any form of literary or fictional contamination of philosophical discourse problematic. However, Santayana develops a subtle argument to present the insight that not only are attempts at some sort of systematicity legitimate but that they should also be combined with a pluralistic openness towards poetic forms of discourse.

Key-words: Systematic Philosophy, Literature and Philosophy, 19th Century German Philosophy, Fictional Contamination, Pluralism

RESUMEN

George Santayana presenta su pensamiento en *Escepticismo y fe animal* como un “sistema” a pesar del hecho de que los sistemas filosóficos pudieran parecer una forma particular de locura. A la luz de los intensos debates sobre los sistemas filosóficos en la filosofía alemana decimonónica, no solo es controvertida su posibilidad. Igualmente, el intento de convertir la filosofía en ciencia convierte en problemática cualquier forma de contaminación literaria o de ficción en el discurso filosófico. Santayana, sin em-

bargo, desarrolla un sutil argumento para presentar la intuición de que no solo son legítimos los intentos de lograr algún tipo de sistematicidad sino que también se han de combinar con una apertura pluralista hacia formas discursivas poéticas.

Palabras clave: filosofía sistemática, literatura y filosofía, filosofía alemana decimonónica, contaminación de la ficción, pluralismo

. . .

Philosophizing takes place in the wide and open field between two diametrically opposed ambitions and claims. One of these is the striving for a system, the attempt to form all insights and all knowledge into a coherent totality, a whole that can be known *as* the whole. For this kind of philosophy, truth ultimately not only rests on systematic knowledge but has to take the form of a system. The fulfillment of truth has to take the form of a system, for only a system can give individual knowledge its rightful place within the whole in which everything is hierarchically ordered. The contrary disposition, however, follows the desire for systems building like a shadow. For those thinkers and critics who do not accept the claims of the system builders, the very notion of a system, and particularly so of a system of complete knowledge, appears as a hindrance to truth, as a veritable impossibility that is based on the pretense of knowledge that can under no circumstances be acquired. Systems, on this view, are displaced efforts to reach some absolute knowledge that can stand the test of time. These efforts are wrong-headed, the critics of systems would argue, because they can only rhetorically (but not in fact) overcome the delimiting insight that all our knowledge is partial. A good example for such a stance is the opposition of the German 18th century thinker Johann Georg Hamann to Immanuel Kant, with Hamann urging the argument of the necessary insufficiency of all past and any future attempts at building a system.

Although one can argue that the tension between systematic and non- or antisystematic approaches to philosophy goes back a very long way, it is probably fair to say that the matter was not very much discussed as such during many centuries. In fact, only in the 17th century, it seems, the attempts to produce a systematic philosophy, perhaps by means of reference to geometrical methods, became very powerful. Thinkers like Christian Wolff clearly believed that it must be possible to create a system of knowledge in which everything has its proper place [cf. Wolff (2019)].

When later philosophers like Kant began to build systems of thought, they were met with the criticism of people like Johann Georg Hamann, who early on suggested that a system is no less than a hindrance of the truth. He argued for the impossibility of a system by claiming that all knowledge is of a piecemeal character and can never attain the status of complete knowledge, as a thinker like Hegel would explicitly suggest was possible [cf. Hegel (2016); Kinzel (2019)]. Hegel did in fact claim, in his *Phenomenology of Mind*, that the true form in which truth exists has to be the system and he also adds that the True is necessarily the Whole.¹

Hegel as the epitome of a systematic thinker seriously studied the anti-systematic Hamann, thereby indicating that any system-building thinker needs to acknowledge the existence of his opponents and their claims that there is no way that one can gain knowledge of the whole, a knowledge that one would need in order to actually place everything where it belongs. It is thus no hyperbole to claim that the contradistinction of (and tension between) system and critique of system concerns one of the fundamental problems of classical German philosophy. [Sandkaulen (2006), pp. 11-34]

This is also true because the various proponents of systems of thought were at the same anti-system thinkers with regard to the systems of others. Those who proposed a system were more or less by necessity critical of systems that did not follow their own conception or predilection. And so the notion of Friedrich Schlegel comes into play which seems to include a paradoxical view of the

matter. For Schlegel, in his so-called *Athenäums-Fragmente* (no. 53) argued or claimed that it was “equally fatal for the mind to have a system and not to have a system. The mind will therefore have to decide to combine both.”² A system of thinking that maintains the possibility of itself as a system can have an irritating effect in so far as it will always have to reflect on its own potential impossibility. And this may well have to do with a very serious problem, namely how one can actually determine, if it is not just a question of arbitrarily deciding, what the foundation or principle of a given system is. If, following Schlegel, it is really true that those who have a system are in the same way spiritually lost as those who do not have a system, one needs to acknowledge the necessity of a plurality of approaches to philosophy. Whereas the classical systems constructions were the result of attempts to arrest at some point the movement of thought, the later attempts to discredit all systems-building, including the postmodern dispensation, were motivated by some kind of justice towards what was excluded or marginalized in a given system [cf. Beelmann (2001), pp. 112-114].

Santayana, as is well known, stayed in Berlin for three semesters during his early studies and therefore gained first-hand knowledge of contemporary German philosophy. He was initially drawn to one of the great early 19th century German philosophers, Arthur Schopenhauer, who was a systematic philosopher and as such clearly some sort of follower of thinkers like Kant and Fichte. In fact, Santayana regarded Schopenhauer as “at bottom a discoverer of the secret of the universe, like Fichte and Hegel.” [Santayana (1971), p. 142]³ However, when he had returned to the United States in order to write his doctoral dissertation, his wish to write about Schopenhauer was thwarted by Josiah Royce who told him to write about Hermann Lotze, another thinker in the tradition of systems building. [cf. Buschendorf (2008), p. 156] So it was certainly fitting that Santayana should have written his dissertation about Lotze’s system of philosophy, and one may well suppose that Santayana’s remark according to which “Lotze takes all things into

consideration” must have also expressed his own desire when he later embarked on expounding his own systematic thoughts. [cf. Santayana (1971), p. 226]

When we now begin to take a closer look at Santayana’s thinking, the first thing that we come across, on opening *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, is, of course, the preface.⁴ This preface opens with an astonishing sentence: “Here is one more system of philosophy”. But Santayana does not, of course, stop here, but deftly leads his readers into a kind of strange meditation. Immediately after stating the simple fact that he is offering a system, he draws the reader in: “If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him, and that my system (...) differs widely in spirit and pretensions from what usually goes by that name” (*SAF* v). Obviously, a number of points that should be noted pop up in this brief passage. By referring to the possible smile on the face of the reader, he acknowledges that putting forward a system must appear to be foolhardy, to say the least. One might also say, perhaps, that putting forward a system can be regarded as a provocation. Everyone, one can assume Santayana’s statement to imply, *knows* that systems are a thing of the past and not of the 20th century. But one now needs to read on very carefully. For Santayana indicates clearly that the concept of a system is employed by him in a somewhat different way from what is normally the case. So he breaks, or seems to break, with the standard view of the matter already in the very second sentence of his preface. His system, he claims somewhat irritatingly, is neither properly his, nor is it in any way new. What does this mean?

Santayana refers first of all to the fact that he does not propose a system of the universe; he does not offer a system that contains within itself the whole world except in so far as it falls under certain categories. But whether all things that exist in the universe actually do fall under the categories that Santayana uses, is an entirely open question. The categories are in the final analysis based on those distinctions that he has made in the course of observing the world. There is then, it would seem, an ineluctably subjective dimension

to this system. In this way, by acknowledging the fundamentally personal view and interpretation of things as they are, Santayana comes across as a pluralist who accepts that other views and interpretations may well offer a better approach to the universe. But to speak here of better is perhaps also somewhat problematic, as at least initially the different point of view may just be what another person prefers (*SAF* vi).

Santayana does not regard logic as a direct expression of reality; the categories with which we try to order reality are not taken directly from anywhere where they can be seen and counted.⁵ Rather, logic “is partly a free construction and partly a means of symbolising and harnessing in expression existing diversities of things” (*SAF* vi). The tolerant pluralism of Santayana, which is accepting of heterogeneity and diversity, distinguishes itself from the idea of rightness and juxtaposes to it the notion of faithfulness: “No language or logic is right in the sense of being identical with the facts it is used to express, but each may be right by being faithful to the facts, as a translation may be faithful” (*SAF* vi). The “patriotic” preference for one’s own system does not invalidate other approaches; Santayana’s attempt to clear *his mind* of cant and “free it from the cramp of artificial tradition” does not imply his wish that others have to think in the same terms. Others may try to clean better the windows of their respective souls, as Santayana suggests, if they wish to do so (*SAF* vi-vii).

In these preliminary reflections about his procedure, Santayana makes it very clear that he does not pretend to know the Whole, nor does he reject the notion of metaphysics in a way that comes naturally to those who object to something being “metaphysical” if it is merely difficult to understand or determine. Santayana’s rejection of metaphysics is not due to his dislike of dialectical thinking nor to his disdain of immaterial things. One might even say that those things he talks about — essence, truth, spirit — are prime topics of metaphysical discussions. But what he chiefly understands by the term metaphysical or metaphysics is what he calls “dialectical

physics, or an attempt to determine matters of fact by means of logic or moral or rhetorical constructions” (*SAF* vii). This attempt, however, is faulty, because it is based on the very confusions of different “Realms of Being” that Santayana makes it his business to distinguish as best he can.

These remarks already indicate that what Santayana offers as a system is of a very peculiar nature. It is not a system strictly understood in that it attempts to portray the true character of everything, but it nevertheless is expressed in terms that seem to imply more systematic weight than they can perhaps carry. Santayana presents his thought by constant references to something he calls “essences,” thereby implying that certain things are what they are due to some essential feature. His philosophy would then have to count as a form of “essentialism,” although this kind of thinking is perhaps the most irritating in an age which rejects talk about essentialism a priori in favour of constructivist and deconstructivist approaches. For if every essentialism can be deconstructed, it is at least unclear what any thing’s essence might possibly be.

But Santayana views essence as something that is much less dogmatic even in an ontological way than the postmodern criticisms of essentialisms suggest. For Santayana on the one hand sees “a sweeping reason for scepticism” in light of the “all particular contradictions or fancifulness of dogma” (*SAF* 99), whereas on the other hand any hypostatizing of essences into facts lead him to animal faith, because the realm of nature is for him “only another object of belief” (*SAF* 100). We have a strong “hypostatizing impulse”, Santayana avers, but this impulse can produce only the illusion that any intuited essence is “evidence of anything else” (*SAF* 100). Does that mean that there is no coherent whole that can be intuited? It would seem so, but what exactly is the status of Santayana’s claims? I will not answer this question directly, but in a somewhat circuitous fashion, highlighting a few aspects that seem to me relevant for not only understanding Santayana’s philosophy,

but also for determining in how far such a system of thought can or should be accepted as such under the conditions of modernity.

Although Santayana's book offers an introduction to his system of philosophy, he does not thereby aim at popularization. In one letter to Susan Sturgis, 4 September 1923, he explicitly notes that *Scepticism and Animal Faith* "is a technical book and not intelligible unless you have a very analytic mind." [Santayana (2002), p. 150] This implies that he did not try to make it easier to understand his philosophy for a general audience but rather confronted this audience with the formidable task to make sense of his systematic approach to man's relation to the world, practically as well as epistemically, and thus, ultimately, metaphysically. When Santayana closes his own book, he has not closed the discussion. In fact, he ends on a note that explicitly affirms openness to various "Realms of Being" that need to be further explored. These Realms of Being have, according to Santayana, "very different kinds of reality in themselves and a different status in respect to my knowledge of them." What Santayana offers as his "system" of philosophy is far removed from any dogmatism but rather presents itself as an invitation to accompany him "in a further excursion through those tempting fields" (*SAF* 308).

Philosophy is thereby presented in the image of an excursion through fields that imply a combination of nature and culture – and any excursion will never result in the one and only definitive view of the world but is in itself as much a contribution to one's view of the world as the instigation for still further and other explorations within the limits of time and space that are also the inherent limits to any attempt at reaching "the system."

There is one further problem connected to Santayana's way of philosophizing and the issue of systematicity. This was already detected by one of his contemporaries who had experienced him at Harvard, namely Paul Shorey. In his Roosevelt Lectures held at the University of Berlin in 1913, Shorey gave a thorough overview of the development of American philosophy to a German audience.

Although he expressly states that he regarded Santayana (together with George Herbert Palmer, Josiah Royce and Hugo Münsterberg) very highly, he also notes his reservations about them, because he considers them, in the light of Santayana's essay on "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" as merely representing the rhetorical or rather literary tradition in American philosophy. Acknowledging that they were "all first-rate writers," he berates them for being "more concerned with elegant, finished writing than with scientific exactness or systematic philosophical thinking." This was the result, Shorey avers, of lecturing before large audiences, taking part in a culture of non-specialization, and writing under the still very strong influence of Emerson, Lowell, and Holmes [cf. Briggs/Kopff (1995), 301-302.]⁶ Santayana, Shorey goes on, "is certainly elegant and genteel," but this is in fact a serious problem: "He is in fact a poet, and his prose is so beautiful and polished that it occasionally obscures its thought; and his philosophy, as far as I can gather from his chief work, *The Life of Reason*, is simply modern scientific positivism in poetic garb." [Briggs/Kopff (1995), 302] Shorey here clearly juxtaposes poetry/literature to philosophy/science, so that the resulting evaluation of Santayana implies the dominance of beautiful writing over systematic philosophical thinking. Does this also imply that his system can be regarded as merely poetic or literary? To answer in the affirmative would be to perpetuate the view that true philosophy, which also means philosophy oriented towards the truth, is separate from merely poetic philosophy in the romantic vein, a form of philosophy, however, that goes back to at least Plato. Santayana's philosophy does not reject the literary or poetic dimension of reality, showing that more or less scientific attempts at beginning a system of philosophy with universal doubt, as Descartes tried to do (*SAF* 289–293), need to be analyzed as forms of discourse: "But discourse, no less than the existence of the self, needs to be posited, and the readiness with which a philosopher may do so yields only a candid confession of personal credulity, not the proof of anything" (*SAF* 291). But if philosophical discourse,

even of the Cartesian kind, does not really prove anything that was not assumed in the premise (*SAF* 290), there is no way to turn philosophy completely into a science, for philosophy cannot be reduced to a mere study of nature. Santayana explains some of this in his chapter on literary psychology, in which he notes that scientific and literary psychology are “practised together” (*SAF* 252) and that therefore also what purports to be mere presentation of fact turns out to be contaminated by fictionality.⁷ Santayana first mentions the example of historiography which is not content with merely recording what was recorded by others. In fact, historians of antiquity invented speeches for their characters; and modern historians “explain how their heroes felt, or what influences were at work in the spirit of the age, or what dialectic drove public opinion from one sentiment to another” (*SAF* 253). Santayana’s conclusion here is that all this is merely a “shameless fiction,” without any truth value (*idem.*). This consideration directly bears on the issue of what philosophy is and what its relationship to systematic thought and to poetics really looks like. Philosophy in modern times, he goes on to explain, “ceased to be the art of thinking and tried to become that impossible thing, the science of thought” (*SAF* 254). Because a science of thought is impossible, according to Santayana, thought necessarily has to be an “object of literary psychology” (*idem.*). In light of the fact that Santayana had studied both German and British philosophy very carefully, his next sentence may well appear shocking to its aficionados: “The whole of British and German philosophy is only literature” (*idem.*). This seems to imply that all this philosophy is deeply personal or subjective, even if put forth in systematic fashion; but more generally speaking, each philosophy is some sort of literary enterprise: “The universe is a novel of which the ego is the hero; and the sweep of the fiction (...) does not contradict its poetic essence” (*idem.*). This kind of literarily inflected philosophy of the British and German varieties suggests, as it does for Santayana, “great dramatic interest and profundity.” And it is precisely at this point that Santayana dramatically turns

the tables on those philosophies or philosophers who think that philosophy should be scientific and distance itself from poetry: “But not one term, not one conclusion in it has the least scientific value, and it is only when this philosophy is good literature that it is good for anything” (*idem.*). Even though Santayana’s relationship to Germany and German philosophy with its strong bent towards systematic thought was animated by a strong critical assessment, [cf. Santayana (1916)] he remained strangely attracted to it—and it was neither Hegel nor Fichte, neither Schopenhauer nor Nietzsche whom he studied most assiduously “to help him understand matters of deep personal importance,” but rather Goethe [Price (1990), p. 168.] Goethe, for Santayana, was not a mere poet, as is indicated by his book on *Three Philosophical Poets*—dealing with Lucretius, Dante, Goethe—who are explicitly linked not only to philosophy but also, as in the case of Lucretius, to “one complete system of philosophy.” [Santayana (1968), p. 147] Poets then can present systematic thought, and it is in this book, not *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, that Santayana asks whether it can be an accident that the three schools, or systems, of philosophy (materialism, supernaturalism, romanticism) should have been most adequately presented by poets [Price (1990), pp. 149-150.] Santayana’s thinking, as these preliminary discussions suggest, is non-totalitarian in the sense of refusing to build a dogmatic and impermeable system. Rather, his thinking combines both some kind of systematic thought with an openness towards forms of poetic discourses that may be used to present a system without, however, claiming that there is only this particular way of looking at things. The philosophers and the poets meet on common ground if they accept that both can be systematic and poetic at the same time without compromising their intellectual rigor. In fact, there are good reasons to assume that it is precisely rigorous thinking that, contrary to what Paul Shorey’s criticism implies, shows the inadequacy of merely scientific thinking to come up with a system of thought at all. Any system that builds on scientific analyses will at some point have to reach the conclusion

that there are things—including the instruments of language in which these analyses are made—which cannot be reduced to mere items of information and that even scientifically charged language may show elements of fictional contamination. In the spirit of Santayana one may then reach the provisional conclusion, to be further examined by a more comprehensive reading of other relevant texts, that systematic philosophizing is and remains possible and that this is not prevented by the fact that philosophy and poetry can be united in such a way as to enhance their significance for human life and to further our understanding of the inescapability of both skepticism and animal faith.

Literature Department
Technische Universität Berlin
E-mail: tillkinzel@gmail.com

ABBREVIATIONS

SAF Scepticism and Animal Faith. Introduction to a System of Philosophy. New York, Scribner's Sons, 1955

NOTES

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hamburg, Meiner, 2015, p. 11: "Die wahre Gestalt, in welcher die Wahrheit existirt, kann allein das wissenschaftliche System derselben seyn." See also: "Das Wahre ist das Ganze." (19) See also Gregor Schäfer: "Die wahre Gestalt, in welcher die Wahrheit existirt": Zu Hegels enzyklopädischem Konzept wissenschaftlicher Wahrheit. In: Thomas Sören Hoffmann, Hardy Neumann (eds.): *Hegel und das Projekt einer philosophischen Enzyklopädie*. Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2019, pp. 59–88, here 62.

² "Es ist gleich tödlich für den Geist, ein System zu haben und keins zu haben. Er wird sich also wohl entschließen müssen, beides zu verbinden." [Schlegel (1978), p. 82].

³ Fichte still figures in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, indicating how important it was for Santayana to come to terms with his type of philosophy [cf. Santayana (1971), pp. 62–63, 184–185].

⁴ I quote parenthetically from George Santayana: *Scepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy*. New York 1955. So far, no critical edition of this book has been published. The most recent treatment of Santayana as a systematic philosopher is the very thorough study by Guido Tamponi: *George Santayana: Eine materialistische Philosophie der Vita contemplativa*. Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2021. There is also one earlier German study relying heavily on *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, namely Vera Christoph: *Zur Erkenntnistheorie George Santayanans: Eine Philosophie außerhalb des American Mainstream*. Frankfurt/M.: Lang, 1992.

⁵ It would perhaps be worth examining Santayana's understanding of the relation of logical categories to reality in light of the controversial debate concerning the same issue with regard to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and his *Categories*.

⁶ The text of Shorey, as translated by Reinke, reads “the influence and literary tradition of Emerson, Lowell, and Holmes were still not very strong at Harvard,” but this must be an error, perhaps due to the translation; and I therefore suggest that the “not” be eliminated from the sentence.

⁷ On this issue cf. also most recently the pertinent discussions in Jarmila Mildorf: *Life Storying in Oral History. Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity*. Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2023.

REFERENCES

- BEELMANN Axel (2001). *Theoretische Philosophiegeschichte. Grundsätzliche Probleme einer philosophischen Geschichte der Philosophie*. Basel.
- BRIGGS Ward W. and KOPFF E. Christian (eds.) (1995). *The Roosevelt Lectures of Paul Shorey (1913–1914)*. Translated from the German into English with Annotations by Edgar C. Reinke. Hildesheim/Zürich/New York.
- BUSCHENDORF Christa (2008). “*The highpriest of pessimism*”: *Zur Rezeption Schopenhauers in den USA*. Heidelberg, Winter.
- CHRISTOPH VERA (1992). *Zur Erkenntnistheorie George Santayanans: Eine Philosophie außerhalb des American Mainstream*. Frankfurt/M., Lang.
- HEGEL Georg W. F. (2016). *Hamanns Schriften. Notiz zu Hamann*. Wien/Leipzig, edited by Till Kinzel.

- KINZEL Till (2019). *Johann Georg Hamann. Zu Leben und Werk*. Wien/Leipzig, Karolinger.
- PRICE Kenneth M. (1990). *George Santayana and Germany: An Uneasy Relationship*. In: Peter FREESE (ed.): *Germany and German Thought in American Literature and Cultural Criticism*. Essen, pp. 159–169.
- SANDKAULEN Birgit (2006). *System und Systemkritik. Überlegungen zur gegenwärtigen Bedeutung eines fundamentalen Problemzusammenhangs*. In: *System und Systemkritik. Beiträge zu einem Grundproblem der klassischen deutschen Philosophie*. Ed. Birgit Sandkaulen. Würzburg.
- SANTAYANA George (1916). *Egotism in German Philosophy*. New York, Scribner's Sons.
- (1968). *Selected Critical Writings*. Vol. I. Ed. by Norman Henfrey. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- (1971). *Lotze's System of Philosophy*. Ed. by Paul Grimly Kurtz. Bloomington/London.
- (2002). *The Letters of George Santayana. Book Three, 1921–1927*. Ed. William G. Holzberger. Cambridge, Mass.
- SCHLEGEL Friedrich (1978). *Kritische und theoretische Schriften*. Stuttgart.
- WOLFF Christian (2019). *Über den Unterschied zwischen einem systematischen und einem nicht-systematischen Verstand [De differentia intellectus systematici & non systematici]*. Lateinisch–deutsch. Übersetzt, eingeleitet und hg. von Michael Albrecht. Hamburg.