



Thinking^{IN}
THE
RUINS

Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency

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An Overview of *Thinking in the Ruins*

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In writing a book such as *Thinking in the Ruins*, two questions arise inevitably. Why undertake the task of investigating, in an extended way, a comparison between two philosophers? Moreover, why focus on the particular philosophers we chose? The answers to these questions require a look at the state of philosophy today. What used to be thought the queen of the sciences is a fractured field: it displays divisions not only with regard to where philosophers stand on important issues, but also in how they frame the issues and what the issues are. For some, epistemology and metaphysics continue to be at the very center of philosophy, while for others thinking that demonstrates the decadence or the bankruptcy of the field. Some maintain that ethical concerns must pervade all philosophical work and that social criticism should have pride of place. Others pursue a deconstructive agenda. Today, philosophers cannot even agree on how philosophy is to be written. One person's clarity is another's obfuscation. We see demands even for professional purity: some thinkers take it upon themselves to decide who is to count as a philosopher.¹

In the philosophical community, many of these disagreements have been enshrined in the divisions between analytic, continental and American approaches to the field. At times, advocates of these "styles" of thought seem able to agree on little about what the important issues are and as a result, they exchange charges of shallowness and incompetence. This situation cries out for serious studies that reach across divides in the hope of demonstrating that the ap-

pearance of difference between these philosophical movements is greater than its reality. The extended comparison of philosophers thus promises to demonstrate the unity of the field or at least to display the presence of important underlying agreements. Only by showing the convergences that underlie apparent differences can we begin to turn philosophers away from the unproductive stance of reflex rejection to an appreciation of what others are doing in their own languages and with their own methods.

Santayana and Wittgenstein represent two different “schools” of thought and they are recognized as major, if somewhat non-standard, exemplars of them. Wittgenstein clearly has been very influential throughout the 20th century among so-called “analytic” philosophers, even though he rejected attempts to characterize his early work as such and would, no doubt, have done likewise with regard to his later work had he lived to see the uses to which it was put. Similarly, Santayana is an unlikely representative of American philosophy since he was not an American and rejected all connection with pragmatism. His early work was welcomed by the reigning American naturalists of the day, but his later, systematic ontology was thought too speculative. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein gained inspiration from analytic thinkers and Santayana shared with American philosophy the commitment to place action at the center of his thought.

At first sight, the difference between the two thinkers seems momentous. Santayana wrote in dialogue with the great traditions of the history of philosophy and sometimes even wrote dialogues. He identified himself with positions well known in the Western tradition, calling himself a materialist, an epiphenomenalist and a platonist. He spent his time sorting out the differences between essence, spirit and matter, discussed their relation to truth, and affirmed the irreducible reality of mind. All of this can be seen as “business as usual” in philosophy, made more suspicious to colleagues seeking scientific precision by Santayana’s poetic style that features stunning turns of phrase.

Wittgenstein, by contrast, emphasized the discontinuity of his thought with the tradition. He saw that tradition as founded on fundamental misunderstandings of the nature of the philosophical enterprise. He launched a sustained attack on the notion of essence and he was accused of being a “behaviorist” in the philosophy of mind. In his *Blue and Brown Books* he accused Socrates of having gotten philosophy off on the wrong foot by rejecting an examination of details. He rejected the traditional categories of philosophy and even encouraged his friends and students to shun philosophy altogether. With his style ranging from the stark to the chatty, he was certainly no poet. The austere beauty of the *Tractatus* is at an immense distance from the rich and evocative prose of Santayana.

With all these differences, one might be tempted to look elsewhere for a constructive comparison of major philosophers. On the other hand, if a study of these two representative but iconoclastic thinkers successfully demonstrates convergences, it might be especially powerful in building bridges across divides in our field. As our book attempts to show, the differences between Santayana and Wittgenstein are more on the surface than at the level of substance. To make the comparison extensive and meaningful, we pursued it through major aspects of the thought of our subjects. We began by relating the thought of Wittgenstein and Santayana to a wide variety of philosophers on the central issue of contingency. We then proceeded to consider problems in epistemology, ethics, the philosophy of religion and metaphilosophy, among others, in our search for understanding how much our thinkers share. We concluded that the level of agreement between Santayana and Wittgenstein is striking: in spite of a host of superficial differences, they concur on many of the central issues of interest to philosophers.

Throughout *Thinking in the Ruins*, we were careful not to deny the obvious and important differences in style and substance between the work of Santayana and that of Wittgenstein. The point of a comparison is not to obscure what is obvious but to highlight what has been unsuspected and therefore overlooked. The success

of the book should be measured by its contribution to breaking down the artificial lines that still exist between different ways of doing philosophy. Focusing on different problems and approaching them with divergent tools and techniques does not justify grouping colleagues in antagonistic camps. The sooner philosophers cease fighting each other, the better they will be able to get on with the task of understanding this baffling, beautiful world.

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NOTES

¹ Both Santayana and Wittgenstein have been accused of not being philosophers. Santayana is said to be a poet; Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is accused of being an evasion of philosophy.