

Realms (Santayana) and Rules (Wittgenstein)

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In a book or article comparing two philosophers, of necessity there will be mention of some features they share and others on which they differ. The writer will often fix on one or other of these groupings as the dominant one, and take this as the main theme of the work. In the comparison of Santayana and Wittgenstein found in *Thinking in the Ruins* [TR], the two authors emphasize similarities; whereas I am more inclined to emphasize the differences. I shall not question important similarities that Michael Hodges and John Lachs point to in regard to contingency, which is their main concern, but will deal instead with analogies they see in Wittgenstein to Santayana's four realms of being.

It is difficult to engage fruitfully a comparative survey of this nature, with its two compilations of similar and opposing features. A supposed critic of a point made in one grouping of features may find that the point he wants to make, or something very similar, is already to be found in the second grouping: arguments comparable to those I wish to present as criticisms of the text can sometimes be found elsewhere in that text. Thus I want to question certain analogies drawn between Wittgenstein's thought and Santayana's realms of being. This seems at odds with my overall impression that the broad articulation of Santayana's philosophy through his realms of being stands in stark contrast to the piecemeal analysis of examples involving language and games found in Wittgenstein. But Hodges and Lachs do not fail to make this point and do not deny the contrast. I think that the value of the

comparisons made in this book between the two philosophers is captured in a phrase located right at the outset: “This is done best by putting their ideas in context and viewing them as *two related, though interestingly different, approaches* among historical alternatives” [TR p. 3, my italics]. I may feel that the differences between the two philosophers on any point are sweeping ones, while the authors may feel that these are less sweeping; but the profit in the enterprise comes of searching out cases where they are *interestingly* different.

In the final chapter of the book, Hodges and Lachs consider in turn Santayana’s four realms of being. With each of these, the authors concede an apparent radical difference in Wittgenstein’s treatment of the concept, but they go on to argue that beneath this there is a marked similarity. My aim in each case is to suggest that, perhaps, the original insight wins the day. I look narrowly at some of the analogies made in the text in regard to the realms, some that seem questionable, and to try to shed some light on the overall situation through these specific arguments.

I. EPISTEMOLOGY

Both Wittgenstein and Santayana concern themselves with a response to sceptical doubts; and each argues in his own way that these doubts cannot be allowed to carry the day. Common sense opinion must be bolstered and accepted. Hodges and Lachs cite a passage from Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* [OC]:

The statement “I know that here is a hand” may then be continued: “for it is *my* hand that I’m looking at.” Then a reasonable man will not doubt that I know.—Nor will the idealist [skeptic]; rather he will say that he was not dealing with the practical doubt which is being dismissed, but there is a further doubt behind that one.—That this is an illusion has to be shown in a different way [OC, § 19].

With Wittgenstein, common sense stands immune from this further doubt, this philosophical puzzlement, which is illusory and grounded in a linguistic tangle. The tangle can be sorted out, with sufficient understanding of the vagaries of language. Santayana, on the other hand, takes the sceptical argument seriously, saying that it cannot be answered by logical argument. The common sense approach cannot be left without clarification but must be seen as supported by animal faith. This leaves, in his view, a radical scepticism concerning the literal knowledge of fact, coupled with a full acceptance of adequate symbolic knowledge of the world and our place in it. Thus the two offer quite different ways to counter the destructive effects of sceptical arguments; these do so in interestingly different ways.

In his earlier works, Wittgenstein sought to make contact with the physical world through atomic sentences making basic empirical claims. Russell carried out a similar investigation. With these, Santayana would have some sympathy: he would endorse the idea that there is a background to our actions in this world. However, this does not mean that he approved of the empiricist dogma that atomic protocols yield a direct, literally true access to reality; nor did he accept the empiricist practice of always speaking in terms of reductive substitutes in place of physical things and events. In any case, the later Wittgenstein retreated from this project in favour of the application of language games to disentangle the illusory problems.

Others in the empiricist school gradually came to the realization that atomic sentences were not exempt from theory and subjectivity. (The reasons for this had already been set down with some clarity in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* [SAF].) The project was dropped. However, from Santayana's point of view, the external reality must be recognized in any sound philosophy. His solution to this difficulty differs not just from that of Wittgenstein, but in fact from most other thinkers of his day. He refused to abandon the category of substance, a notion that empiricists shunned

at all costs. Central to his thought is the realm of matter, the physical cosmos, and he insisted that this category ought to be a part of any sound naturalist philosophy, even though *literal* knowledge of it escapes both the philosopher and the scientist. I move on to a consideration of his four realms of being, beginning with the realm of matter.

II. THE REALM OF MATTER

Although I would interpret the term ‘matter’ somewhat differently from that given in the text, this need play no part here. For purposes of this paper, however, the term ‘realm of matter’ will refer to the physical cosmos, as defined in the book of that title, *The Realm of Matter* [RM], *Book Second of The Realms of Being* [RB]:

[...] a substance is posited which must be external to thought, with its parts external to one another and each a focus of existence; a substance which passes through various phases is unequally distributed in the field of action, and forms a relative cosmos surrounding each agent. ... The field of action is accordingly the realm of matter; and I will henceforth call it by that name [RB, pp. 234-235]

This realm of matter is always in Santayana’s thoughts when he considers the field of action; it is “the vital foundation of my philosophy” [*The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. P. A. Schilpp [PGS], p. 503]. Although the realm is an irrational surd and does not permit of any precise or final definition, it is an essential part of his mature philosophy, the ground not only of critique of belief but also of his freedom to confront the world, the “perfectly evident basis of the moral emotions [...]” [PGS, p. 504]. As the authors indicate, Wittgenstein did not deny the existence of the world and

feelings within that world; but there is nothing to correspond to Santayana's constant appeal to the realm of matter, something that he would surely refuse to admit into his philosophy. Of course, many other philosophers are in the same case; and indeed, Santayana observes that almost none of his critics traced the vital foundation of his philosophy to the realm of matter. This is one disanalogy between the two philosophers that might be discussed more thoroughly.

III. TRUTH

In the text of *Thinking in the Ruins* is an exemplary introduction to truth as Santayana understands it [*TR*, pp. 100-101]. It is "an objective, unchangeable reality." When he claims that truth is the standard comprehensive description of a fact, "he does not mean to imply that human activity need be involved; in fact, all that is needed is that matter selectively and successfully embody some essences." The truth is a standard in that we can — almost certainly do — fall short of capturing it in our theories and accounts. "It is comprehensive, moreover, in that elements of it have no moral or other prerogatives — any and every essence embodied, no matter how low or trivial, is a part of it."

However, I have some difficulties with the paragraphs immediately following this text [*TR*, p. 101]. I do not find the hidden "deep communality of view" mentioned there, and rather agree with their offhand suggestion that Wittgenstein might remark: "how could the truth be independent of what we think, if "truth" is a word in our language" [*TR*, p. 101]. Like Rorty and others, he does not believe that an absolute truth need play a major part in his philosophy. It has its proper place in language, and occurrences of the term 'truth' can be eliminated. He appeals directly to the Tarski rule, and declares that nothing further is needed.

For what does a proposition's '*being true*' mean? '*p*' is true = *p*. (That is the answer.) [L. Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, New York: Macmillan, 1956, p. 50].

Truth is thereby made to dissolve from view, an attitude alien to Santayana, who sees both theory and action as dependent on a (perhaps latent) acceptance of truth. He criticizes the belief that truth is merely a property shared by certain propositions. *The truth* becomes for him a basic category. As he sees matters, anyone with a robust acceptance of the realm of matter will have little difficulty in accepting this further category. This would not be metaphysical in the pejorative sense, precisely because his realm of matter does not depart from physics; it does not replace physical things and events by experiences or ideas or linguistic objects. It is of course metaphysical in the non-pejorative sense more commonly used today.

In drawing a comparison with Wittgenstein, the authors question the merits of the notion of an absolute truth, saying that it undercuts the effort to secure an objective matrix for our opinions. While this might be seen as a flaw by some, it remains Santayana's position; and I would question whether the totality and objectivity in Santayana's account of truth recede on a closer examination. Indeed, he points to these properties of an absolute truth with some frequency. In my opinion, moreover, he has it right. We do our best to be objective, but can never strip from our opinions a measure of subjectivity. This does not remove objectivity from philosophy, for it appears in its proper place, in the realm of truth. Once again, the positivists and empiricists see such a realm as an unacceptable piece of metaphysics. However, when a philosophy includes physical substances at the heart of things and accepts something like the realm of matter, truth is not metaphysics in the derogatory sense, but is rather physics itself, being merely an ideal record of what happens in that realm. That there is subjectivity and fallibility in our opinions is less threatening

and indeed seems natural in the presence of an objective truth in the background.

In their effort to expose a “deep commonality of view,” the authors go on to point out a puzzling passage in Santayana’s text:

Even more remarkably, the truth includes every perspective generated by taking any fact “as the centre and viewing everything else in relation with it” [*SAF* 267]. This makes all perceptions true, so long as we take into account the relational situation of the person perceiving. How, then, can we distinguish objective truth from subjective falsity, and how can tell that the opinions we entertain are true? [*TR*, p. 102].

Let me say first that, if there is a flaw in Santayana’s position, this does not bring that position any closer to that of Wittgenstein. I see a difficult point here, rather than a serious flaw; but it is one that touches more on knowledge than on truth. Any intuited essence associated (say) with a perception, is admitted by Santayana to be a part of knowledge, however subjective and incidental it might be. After all, he says, it is elicited by our sensory contact with some thing, and the intuitive reaction of the body to this; but some such intuitions are better than others, and scientists have learned to deal with observations that have a great deal more objectivity. Of course, none is guaranteed to yield the truth, according to his epistemology.

Santayana recognizes that his position makes it difficult to deal with the above question about how one can distinguish between objective truth and subjective falsity. Our knowledge about matters of fact cannot be expected to be literally true. For this reason he is forced to give a pragmatic criterion for knowledge. This is indeed untidy and disagreeable. Still, it could just be that this is the true situation.

In his account of this difficult point, Santayana makes statements which focus on the contingent fact from which truth “radi-

ates.” Through this radiation, he says, truth establishes “harmonies and distinctions dominating the realm of thought.” (In the marginal note, he says: “Truth in turn subtends intelligence.”) “Truth thus becomes the arbiter of success in one of the most important functions of life: that of intelligent adjustment on the part of living beings to the conditions under which they live.” Perhaps some light is shed on this questionable passage by looking at a more complete text on the same theme in the chapter “Radiations of Truth” in *The Realm of Truth* [RT], *Book Three of the Realms of Being*:

The truth will be declared, however partially, by any opinion that prophesies and even before this event arises, or describes it when occurring, or reports it after it has occurred. Such opinions are all incidental to the truth: they may be framed or not, according to the accidents of human life and intelligence. They reproduce the truth in part, as it may be discoverable from their various stations with their various organs; but the truth in its wholeness outruns and completes their several deliverances, and is the standard which these deliverances conform to, in so far as they are true [RB, p. 446].

Santayana says that, in the truth, events “have left their unintentional mark, their indelible portrait. Even if things escape observation, they cannot escape having been what they were” [RB, p. 479]. The realm of truth is crucial for him, both in theory and in practical affairs. Whatever faults this theory might contain, it remains very different from Wittgenstein’s redundancy view.

In speaking about Spinoza, Santayana says of the truth that it is cruel but it can be loved. We might suggest that, with Wittgenstein’s earnest attempts to solve philosophical puzzles, he showed himself to be a lover of truth, despite his reluctance to admit a genuine truth into his philosophy. This is certainly tempting, but it would run against Santayana’s notion of knowledge of the truth, which for him requires the posit of a material entity about which some claim is made. It is the realm of matter that can be cruel.

IV. SPIRIT

Sanatayana's notion of spirit is surely be the least promising candidate for an analogy with Wittgenstein, who inspired a whole generation of philosophers to suspect any notion of private thought. I do not believe that Hodges and Lachs dispute this. However, they do point to several good points of comparison. Wittgenstein never denied the reality of sensation, they say, even though he certainly had behaviourist tendencies; and indeed, Santayana himself held that, for a *scientific* study of psychology, such a methodology was required. Literary psychology should not pose as science, in his view; however, it retains an important function in opening up the moral field; we form our ideals and survey the good in these terms. Even though spirit is impotent, it is of the first importance for Santayana in the moral direction. Wittgenstein does not develop his thinking very far in this direction. The two agree that mind is irreducible, and share a "dogged and wholesome insistence that the subjective cannot be reduced to something else" [TR, p. 103]. Wittgenstein bolsters this view with various arguments expressed in terms of language games. While he might accept Santayana's literary psychology as a language game, though, he does not practice it to the extent that Santayana does. As noted in *Thinking in the Ruins*, there is little in Wittgenstein to correspond to Santayana's study of spirit in the moral and religious life.

V. ESSENCES AND RULES

The authors point out that the chosen idiom throughout Wittgenstein's philosophy is linguistic — from formal languages in his early *Tractatus* to the difficult discussions of ordinary language found in his later works. On the other hand, "Santayana's chosen idiom is the language of the grand tradition of philosophy that reaches back through medieval logic to Aristotle and Plato" [TR,

p. 88]. Some of his readers mistakenly see his ontology as “a faint echo of old ways of philosophizing” [*TR*, p. 88], whereas his purpose is very different. He is not building a system of the universe, but is rather elaborating on the workaday opinions of mankind. I agree whole-heartedly; however I differ in regard to the realm of matter. Whatever might be the correct interpretation of the term ‘matter’, I see the *realm* of matter as the real world, the physical cosmos, the material sphere of action for human endeavours. This is a profoundly naturalistic notion, I believe, rather than an ironic term. It is moreover to be found in the workaday opinions of mankind. The realm of matter is not a system for Santayana, in the sense that he does not advance a systematic theory of the realm as do the physicists. But I see the realm as the hard outside world, rather than an abstraction, and the term ‘realm of matter’ as a common sense term that can be clarified without venturing into science.

As the authors agree, Wittgenstein would have no truck with anything like a realm of essence; and indeed his nominalistic tendencies would rule out anything Platonic. I do not take issue with the comments of the two authors on essences, and instead suggest that some puzzles advanced by Wittgenstein can be worked out with the help of essences. I shall consider briefly this issue as a point on which the two thinkers differ, one not covered in the book. This concerns examples of the possible failure of rule following about which Wittgenstein was radically sceptical. There is a vast literature on the subject, partly an attempt to know exactly what he had in mind, and partly to question whether there is reason to take seriously such an extreme scepticism. I can only touch on this, but I shall point to comments Santayana makes that I think offer what is needed to dispel the doubts raised.

Wittgenstein questions the use of algorithms or mathematical constructions, and gives examples of the most rudimentary kind. Consider the simple construction of a sequence of integers obtained by adding two to the previous integer. This would yield:

2, 4, 6, 8, 10, ...

Why could there not be an unexpected change from what is expected here at some remote stage of this sequence? Wittgenstein embraces such a radical conventionalism that he can offer nothing to prevent such a divergence. I shall not go into his complicated discussion here, but will merely point out that Santayana's essences yield a plausible response to the sceptical problem.

It has been argued by Platonists in mathematics that the problem does not arise for their philosophy of mathematics. Even though Santayana never looked at the particular problem, what he says about dialectic makes it evident how in fact he would deal with it. Moreover; the weak Platonism he adopts with his essences avoids some of the difficulties associated with theories whose 'abstract objects' are seen as existential in the same sense as physical things. For Santayana, essences do not exist. (In this brief sketch, there is no space for a defence of this view.)

For Santayana, a demonstration in logic or mathematics does not yield a truth in the primary sense, which always involves an existential claim. The demonstration must be seen in the large in terms of a single essence encompassing a theory and its leading assumptions. The theorems might be called *formal* truths. A construction, such as Wittgenstein's infinite sequences of integers, will similarly be governed by an overarching essence:

Suppose, for instance, I have reached the conclusion of a calculation, and the final equation is before me: the inner relations between its terms are parts of a given essence. [...]. Thus any survey which is analytic, so that it gives foothold for demonstration, or any definition following upon such analysis, presupposes the repetition of the same essences in different contexts [*SAF*, p. 118].

One can only carry out a proof or construction if one can keep one's attention on this one essence and not stray. Failure to do so, of course,

can lead to error. However, the correct way is set by the essence originally chosen; in the example where two is added to each successive member of the sequence, there is a correct infinite sequence, the one that all expect. What is required to carry this out is just what Wittgenstein denies us: one must “be capable of reverting to an old idea” (*SAF*, p. 118]. I see the source of the difficulty in Wittgenstein’s nominalist refusal to admit something like an essence. Nor is it necessary for this essence to have anything like a strong notion of existence for this remedy to apply.

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