

Crosscurrents Between Giants*

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Early on in his initial chapter of *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, [CIS], “The Contingency of Language”, Richard Rorty¹ claims the following:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other humans can do that [CIS, p. 6].

Somewhat further into the book he writes:

To sum up, poetic, philosophical, scientific, or political progress results from the accidental coincidence of a private obsession with a public need [...] None of these strategies is privileged over others in the sense of expressing human nature better. No such strategy is more or less human than any other, any more than the pen is truly more a tool than the butcher’s knife, or the hybridized orchid less a flower than the wild rose [CIS, pp. 37-38].

Finally, linking language, selfhood (the individual), and the notion of community (the public, the social, the political) Rorty maintains:

To accept the claim that there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are present-

ly using from which to judge this vocabularies is to give up on the idea that there can be reasons for using languages as well as reasons within languages for believing statements [*CIS*, p. 48].

The principal reason that I bring out these Rortian quotes is that they handsomely serve as insights to keep in mind when reading through John Lachs and Michael Hodges' *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency* [*TR*]. Their text, a short but insightful monograph on the "pervasive and persuasive similarities between the thought of Wittgenstein and that of Santayana," carves out new dimensions of understanding the thought of each, while bringing to the fore not only the similarities but the dissimilarities.² As readers, it is not that difficult to gauge whose thoughts underpin which passages in the book. Hodges is the expert on Wittgenstein's thought, and Lachs on Santayana. They conclude the first chapter ("Thinking in the Ruins") by drawing parallels of Wittgenstein and Santayana with Richard Rorty. The authors construct a strong case for their claims. A handful of these positions are that 1) "traditional" philosophy, defined as a search for a perennial, a-historical foundation of all being bolstered by certainty is deeply ingrained in the Western tradition; 2) the nihilistic/skeptical view of our humanity as a hopeless, desperate renunciation of the possibility of ever encountering such a foundation is ever a lure; or 3) the Deweyan awareness of contingency as a given, yet allowing for *living* practices and valuational attachments that *could* ameliorate the human condition, to the 4) postmodern stance that any foundation ascribed to any philosophical position or *attitude* is capable of being undermined or sabotaged, or as the authors mention, "decentered," are flawed and not the only responses that a thinker could muster. The contingent (contingency), as the authors affirm, elicits and evokes human responses. The goal of teasing out the Wittgensteinian and Santayanian reactions to contingency is their primary intent in *Thinking in the Ruins*.

The authors, in addition, critically discuss much more than contingency in their book. Philosophical positions and thoughts on

“displacing skepticism,” “value,” “forms of life” and “animal faith,” and the religious, are also included. This mentioned, it should be borne in mind that contingency is not a *threat* to these philosophers’ serenity, but a provocation, in the Emersonian sense — a challenge. Wittgenstein and Santayana entertain unique responses, unsystematically related, but in details distinguishable. They share, in their mature philosophies at least, an evasiveness towards that Gordian knot that has perplexed and downright befuddled many thinkers throughout history: disambiguation.

That knot, philosophical speaking, branches out and flourishes in the preoccupation with, and quest for, certainty, *i.e.*, infallibilism and foundationalism. The authors confess in the first sentence of the second chapter, that “Wittgenstein’s treatment of the problems surrounding knowledge and certainty provide us with a clear example of the central theme of this book — thinking in the ruins” [*TR*, p. 15]. In our effort as critical readers to grasp the starting-point of the comparison between Wittgenstein and Santayana, two probing considerations we could pose would be, What is the context inherent in “thinking in the ruins”?; and, What must be present for this symbolic and somewhat tragic situation (“*thinking in the ruins*”) to bind an individual her/himself in a state of abandonment and chaos?

For Santayana, it is incorporating an uncomplicated, even *ataraxic* view (“a dumb human philosophy”) of life, one that opens up as we grow from birth onward, especially as sentience and human intelligence undergo experience in the sustaining combine of material existence. He baptizes this view as *animal faith*. It is not a dogmatic position; in fact, it is unceasingly evolving and remains open to novelty and change. It admits its ignorance and doubts. Yet, it does not succumb to a skeptical fatality, or as our authors identify as a “skeptical reduction.” The same is true with regard to Wittgenstein. The concept of *form(s) of life*, also non-dogmatic, is the Wittgensteinian equivalent. *Animal faith* and *form(s) of life* should be understood as originary, vital dynamics occurring within these thinkers’ most basic notions. In an essay published in 1953 Santayana gives us a succinct denotation:

Philosophy in old men tends to coalesce into a few convictions by which their other sentiments are colored. In my case most of these convictions are ancient or primitive. Absolutely primitive is the one on which all living beings act by the force of impulse and which I call animal faith... These convictions are not infallible and sceptics or idealists will give us clever reasons to regard them as illusions [...].³

Wittgenstein, in ideational harmony, comes to grip openly with his own limitations within his therapeutic project, and Hodges and Lachs point out this crucial ‘investigation.’ Language is inherent in a practice (living and maturing) that rightly can be called the *everydayness* of human *beingness*. Language is the wellspring and signifying force of what it means to be, and is understood as, *human life*; it also dismisses the nagging epistemological concerns of skepticism and certainty. For as Wittgenstein claims in *Philosophical Investigations*⁴ [*PI*], “It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life” [*PI*, p. 88]. And why make problems when there is none actually to be solved? Santayana, in accord with Wittgenstein, writes that “technical philosophy itself abounds in unnecessary problems, which the truly wise will not trouble about, seeing that they are insoluble or solved best by not raising them.”⁵ Similar Wittgensteinian remarks are such as

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is [*PI*, p. 47].

This willingness to assume philosophical modesty and humbleness characterizes both philosophers under question. Their anti-foundationalism, their anti-metaphysical, and their anti-epistemological (“radical,”) or in Rortian terms “edifying,”⁶ efforts seem irrelevant and too *self-ish* for the vast majority of critics and the general philosophical community. Yet, their childlike ruminations and affirmations, their cherishing the non-pretentious, even self-effacing claims, do

counter the adamant and absolutist positions that philosophical community posits, and are refreshingly enchanting; they appeal to us as extensions of philosophical grace. They are “edifying” precisely because they help to engender a *spiritual*, (call it openness, call it philosophical) state of being. Santayana in his own manner, and most certainly Wittgenstein, view “the human animal’s certainty about its world as a field of engagement and about the behavior of relevant parts of it is an expression of its form of life. That engagement and its success give meaning to the practices in which we participate” [TR, p. 63].⁷ The authors subsequently identify what they deem as an irreconcilable tension separating the mature thought in the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Santayana: the religious.

Why does it appear to us, as critical readers, that this is not that difficult to understand and account for? Because, for one, religion (*not* spirituality) has always been a great partitioner amongst peoples, cultures, empires, nation-states, sects and denominations, and individuals. What conceptual focus of human organization or value of personal solitude and privacy, the public or the private, has this phenomenon not influenced or sined with divisiveness? Little wonder then that it could do the same to the thought of two of the most renowned thinkers of the 20th century. And as Hodges and Lachs make clear, it does. The principal difference revolves around the extent of Santayana’s *engagement* with the phenomenal world.

Throughout his life Santayana always held a soft spot for the religious. He admired the symbolic, architectonic body of rituals in Catholicism. The religious was, to be sure, a subject of admiration and respect, despite his personal inability to be “converted” to any faith. However, for him, the religious was always equated with the *spiritual* [TR, p. 83]. He even made it evident that the religious could be understood as a vital ingredient in his own philosophical views.

The authors conclude their highly original study in a most charitable and unifying way. After bringing out the irrefutable resemblances of Wittgenstein and Santayana’s thought by establishing their *actual*, rather than their seemingly *incongruent*, convergence

of accord, they confess the opposite: the undeniable, profound differences in each's response to contingency that cannot immaturely be wished away. The *stylistic, ontological, and epistemological* considerations are, undeniably, obstinate concerns:

Wittgenstein's tortured struggles with philosophical problems stand at the opposite extreme from Santayana's polished expression of his distilled views....Wittgenstein is all caution and apparent indecision; Santayana never seems to lose direction or to hesitate....The two thinkers differ in philosophical idiom, in the conceptual framework in which they choose to express their views. Wittgenstein continually turns our attention to language — to what we say — while Santayana speaks of things, actions, and relationships [...] Santayana's chosen idiom is the language of the grand tradition of philosophy that reaches back through medieval logic to Aristotle and Plato [...] [Wittgenstein's] orientation can be seen to have turned from world to word, from the effort to understand the structure of the universe in his earlier work to the attempt to clear up linguistic confusions in the later [...] But whatever may be true of other philosophers in his tradition, "turning to the word" does not make Wittgenstein face away from the world [...] By contrast, Wittgenstein gives due acknowledgment to the reality that surrounds us and thereby, ironically perhaps, acquires the right to charge that tradition with not taking that world seriously enough [...] The same is true of the anti-ontological bent of Wittgenstein's thought [...] Santayana's ontological categories systematically undercut the traditional philosophical understanding of the ontological project [...] For Wittgenstein, ontology is impossible simply because we cannot attain the perspective to take an objective inventory of all there is. Surprisingly and clearly, he is in complete agreement with Santayana on this point. Only their approaches differ: Wittgenstein altogether refuses to take up ontology, while Santayana displaces it by means of an "ontology" that undercuts its own objectivity. This deep similarity hiding behind superficial difference is analogous to what we discovered with regard to the regard to the problem of

knowledge. There we saw that Santayana thinks the resolute attempt to take the skeptic seriously reduces the philosopher to ignorant silence, while Wittgenstein believes that even the attempt to get the skeptical enterprises started misconceives the nature and status of our cognitive practices. Their subjective views are identical [...] [TR, pp. 87-92].

As Hodges and Lachs admit, the crucial characteristic that separates Wittgenstein and Santayana is their position on the aims and *telos* of philosophical activity. Whereas, in the authors' judgment, Wittgenstein lived out his *philosophical* life (buttressed by his everyday one) in search of downplaying the importance of philosophy, of overcoming the desire and need to conceive of problems and living a therapeutically sane existence, "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bot" [PI, p. 103]. Santayana engaged himself in philosophy "with the purpose of conveying it. He presents sketch after sketch of the distinctions in terms of which his picture of the world is articulated" [TR, p. 107]. In the end, in a curious fashion, the authors leave with us two metaphors to aid us grasp the complexity and catholicity of the two, typically understood as miles apart on the philosophical spectrum: Santayana is a painter at work instantiating scenes and moods of human life, while Wittgenstein is a restless original musician (not a virtuoso) whose impression is of a lightning-like nature, leaving only interpretations to follow in its wake.

Thinking in the Ruins is an outstanding, thought-provoking work that sheds insight into the thinking of Santayana and Wittgenstein, but also a balanced assessment of how the two thinkers parallel yet diverge. More comparative works of this nature would be welcome today in a philosopher's effort to comprehend her/his past.

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* A Review of Michael Hodges and John Lach' *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2000.

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.

² Hodges and Lachs themselves acknowledge awareness of the influence of Rorty's thought: "The discussion of contingency cannot be exhaustive within the limited scope of this book. Yet, in the current philosophical climate, it would be seriously lacking if it failed to make mention of the ideas of Rorty" [*TR*, p. 11].

³ John Lachs, ed. *Animal Faith and Spiritual Life*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967, pp. 12-13. In another description of this concept penned by Santayana, he writes: "Sceptical analysis may indeed reject the word 'dynamic' and the word 'things,' [...] But the naturalist preserves the primal assumptions implied in being alive, such as that perception may be indicative, and action may be efficacious. He trusts that tolerably reliable world of which his body is an evident part and, for him, a constant but moveable centre." *Ibid.*, p. 237. See also *TR*, pp. 32-34, and pp. 58-65.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953.

⁵ George Santayana, *Realms of Being*, New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1972, p. xxvii.

⁶ Rorty writes about such a thinker: "On the periphery of the history of modern philosophy, one finds figures who, without forming a 'tradition,' resemble each other in their distrust of the of the notion that man's essence is to be a knower of essences. Goethe, Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, the later Heidegger, are figures of this sort. They are often accused of relativism or cynicism. They are often dubious about progress, and especially about the latest claim that such-and-such a discipline has at last made the nature of human knowledge so clear that reason will now spread throughout the rest of human activity." (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 367.)

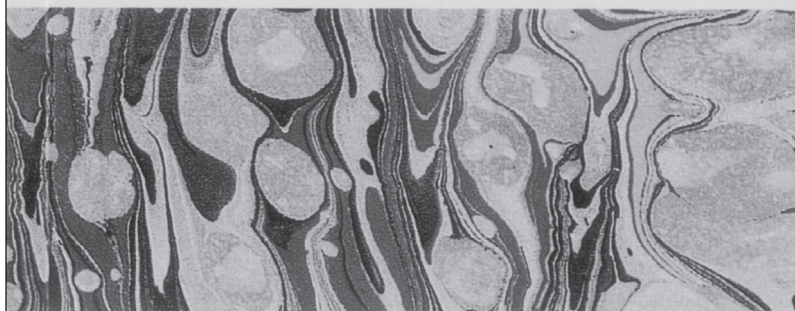
⁷ Nevertheless, it is in one specific passage where, I think, Hodges and Lachs capture succinctly the intersubjective crosscurrents between Wittgenstein and Santayana: "Santayana believes that whatever has existential primacy should enjoy epistemic prerogatives as well. Accordingly his philosophy of animal faith [Santayana's] embraces the engaged life of the animal as its foundation. Of course, we must not suppose that he takes 'foundation to mean the absolute-

ly certain ground of all further knowledge [...] The fact that Santayana thinks of our form of life as the beginning of reflection while Wittgenstein uses it as its final stage should not, moreover, be seen as a significant difference between them. They agree that whether you start or end with the facts of animal life, they constitute the final and definitive context of all our practices" [TR, p. 65].

Santayana

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