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Reflections on Santayana's Letters

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ABSTRACT

The recently completed eight books of George Santayana's letters is the culmination of fifty years of work by scholars, editors, students, and librarians. The letters Santayana wrote to family, friends, acquaintances, teachers, colleagues, and admirers suggest that he was sincere when he wrote in the Preface to *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, "I stand in philosophy exactly where I stand in daily life". His philosophical outlook is reflected in the letters in his friendly disputation, his social commentary, his words of consolation, and even his everyday routine.

Keywords: George Santayana, Philosophy, American Culture, 20th Century.

RESUMEN

Tras cincuenta años de trabajo por parte de estudiosos, editores, estudiantes y bibliotecarios acaban de publicarse los ocho libros de las cartas de George Santayana. Las cartas que Santayana escribió a su familia, amigos, conocidos, profesores, compañeros y admiradores indican que era sincero cuando escribió en el Prefacio a *Escepticismo y fe animal*: "Me hallo en filosofía exactamente donde me hallo en la vida diaria". Su talante filosófico se refleja en las cartas cuando discute amablemente, en sus observaciones sociales, en sus palabras de consuelo e incluso en su rutina cotidiana.

Palabras clave: George Santayana, filosofía, cultura norteamericana, siglo veinte.

In October 1952 began the effort to collect and publish letters written by American philosopher, poet, playwright, novelist, and critic George Santayana. Santayana's publisher wrote a letter to Daniel Cory, the longtime assistant of Santayana, suggesting he edit a volume of Santayana's correspondence. Santayana had died the previous month, and Cory was the executor of Santayana's literary estate. By 1954 Cory had collected around a thousand letters. About one third of those were published the next year in a single volume entitled *The Letters of George Santayana*.

Fifteen years later, in 1970, Cory contacted Bucknell University English professor and editor of *The Complete Poems of George Santayana* William G. Holzberger with plans to produce a more complete version of the letters. Holzberger agreed to help Cory locate and edit additional letters, but two years into this project Cory died of a heart attack. Holzberger continued the work, and in 1977 he joined the Santayana Edition, the newly-established project led by Herman J. Saatkamp Jr and dedicated to producing a critical edition of all of Santayana's writings. Holzberger became the Textual Editor, and he and Saatkamp became co-editors of the *Letters*. The eight books of the *Letters* became Volume V of *The Works of George Santayana*.

By the time publication of the *Letters* began in 2001, over 3000 letters written by Santayana had been located—three times as many as Cory originally had found. Several letters are known to have been lost; for example Santayana himself destroyed his letters to his mother and few letters remain documenting the friendship of Santayana and John Francis Stanley, second earl Russell, which was perhaps the most intense personal relationship in which Santayana ever involved himself. Furthermore, it is almost certain that not all existing letters have been found. Most recently a short letter from Santayana in response to an autograph seeker was found for sale on eBay for \$499. The Santayana Edition has retained, with permission of the owner, a copy of the letter for a file of those found after publication.

In a project of this nature and duration there are of course many people who have made substantial contributions. The recent edition

of the *Letters* would not have appeared without the help of Margot Cory, Daniel's widow who became Santayana's literary executor. She supported the work not only by granting permission but also by transcribing letters for the Edition. Annegret Holzberger also aided the Edition by working as an editorial assistant for the Edition almost from the beginning. She has continued to help with proofreading and composing footnotes for volumes beyond the letters.

The Santayana Edition began at the University of Tampa in 1977 and moved to Texas A&M University in 1985 before coming to Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) in 1999. Along the way there were many librarians, archivists, clerical staff, and graduate and undergraduate students who helped with locating, transcribing, and proofreading letters. Perhaps the greatest acknowledgments are owed to the professional editing staff of the Santayana Edition. At Texas A&M Donna Hanna-Calvert and Brenda Bridges performed much detective and editorial work that made it possible for the Edition to publish on average a book of letters every year since 2001.

Credit for the achievement of getting the eight books of letters to the publishers and in the hands of readers belongs to several people at IUPUI including Consulting Editor and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Philosophy Paul Nagy, Assistant Editor Johanna Resler, Assistant Textual Editor David Spiech, and Director and Editor Marianne Wokeck. Ms. Resler's thorough indexes reveal to researchers the treasures of the *Letters*, and Mr. Spiech's astute editing and well-researched footnotes help bolster the textual apparatus of this edition. Professor Wokeck's documentary editing expertise, administrative skill, and leadership have maintained the strength of the project through almost a decade of changes including the shift from editing letters to editing philosophical texts, a second move to new offices, and the adoption of new software and related technologies.

The person most responsible for the consistent quality of the publications, the steady productivity of the Edition, and the congenial environment of the Edition offices is the Assistant Director

and Associate Editor of the Santayana Edition Kristine Frost. She has been with the Edition for over twenty years and was in the thick of tracking and transcribing letters. She joined the Edition at Texas A&M and is undeniably and without a doubt key to the success of the Edition at IUPUI.

But one may wonder what exactly is the achievement of the *Letters*, or what is it that is worth this more-than-50-year-long effort. One response might mention the correspondents to whom Santayana wrote. In addition to friends, immediate and extended family, and admirers, recipients include philosophers such as William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, and Sidney Hook; and literary figures such as Gertrude Stein, Logan Pearsall Smith, Bernard Berenson, R(ober) C(alverley) Trevelyan, Upton Sinclair, Max Eastman, Clifton Fadiman, Miguel de Unamuno, Ezra Pound, and Robert Lowell. There are also letters to faculty members, students, and administrators at Harvard where Santayana studied philosophy and then taught for 20 years. But any justification this could provide is secondary, and the primary questions may lie closer to the ones put to me by someone unfamiliar with the work of the Edition: Why Santayana? Why now?

I answer that Santayana's work offers a philosophical vision of human values without superstition. This vision reveres truth with courage and sincerity. These values diverge from — without condemning — the love of celebrity, possessions, and power prominent in popular alternative visions of human life. Santayana's prized values arise from the potentials and capacities of human reason and spiritual life, and his understanding of human spiritual capacities is always rooted in nature, in the larger universe. Hence, Santayana's vision is broad but not shallow and human but not anthropocentric. Accordingly, he conceived of science without arrogance; religion without fundamentalism; pluralism without coercion; and disillusion without nihilism.

Santayana wrote to Mary William Winslow "you know my philosophy has always been that disillusion is the only safe foundation

for happiness" [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 2, p. 233], and the theme runs throughout his writing including his early letters. For example it appears in letters on religion to a college classmate, Henry Ward Abbot with whom Santayana carried on an energetic correspondence while studying abroad for two years following graduation. Santayana chides his friend for his simplistic dismissal of religion and points out the dogmatism of his friend that has become yet another illusion:

Your last letter, like all the others, interests me exceedingly, although I confess your view of Catholicism and orthodoxy in general is pitiful. Allow me to tell you that you don't know what you are talking about. I say this simply because it is what I think, and not because I am angry or provoked, and I will let the matter rest, without attempting to explain to you why religion is fit for other people besides whores and servant girls. I am sure that you say this absurdity impulsively and that you wouldn't maintain it in the face of history and daily experience. Yet I can't let you tell me things of that sort without protesting against them as vigorously as possible. I like myself to ridicule religion. There is nothing in the world which seems to me to be without absurdity of some sort in it, and I see no reason why we should not enjoy the ludicrous wherever we see it as much as we enjoy the beautiful. We are surely exercising a faculty on its appropriate object. But when you deny to religion the right to awaken any other feeling but that of scorn, you are depriving yourself of some of your noblest faculties, by depriving them of their only object. And what is worse, you are insulting those better equipped mortals who possess the religious organ, which you call an excrescence because you don't know how to use it. Pray try to look at the matter otherwise. (...) If you expect me to cure you of pessimism you have struck the wrong man. "Eat, drink, and die" is precisely my motto, only it has come to seem to me a very comforting one. Our demands, especially our emotional demands, are easily changed. That hope and belief we are deprived of are not necessary for us; we can substitute something else for them. Belief in God and in the mons-

trous importance of our own condition is rather a source of unhappiness and unhealthy strain than of consolation. The one consolation is the “vanitas”—the voice of judgment crying “All’s well” through the dark silence following the extinction of the world. All is finite, all is to end, all is bearable—that is our comfort. And while it lasts, we can enjoy what we find to enjoy, running our scales as merrily as possible between hunger and satiety. We are souls bereaved, to be sure, but we can be easily comforted. Off with the old love and on with the new, if you have any sap in you. If you haven’t, of course you will mope and whine, and lament the loss of your first and only love. As for me, I confess I am happier without religion of the optimistic sort—the belief in a Providence working for the best. Disbelief leaves one freer to love the good and hate the bad (...) But while I say that I get on better with this new love . . . why should I insult my old love and call her a whore fit only for sailors and drunken knaves? That is what you want me to do. The fact is Christianity is still a possible system, seeing that intelligent men are still able to believe it. If you or I are not able, what a piece of foolish arrogance it is in us to vituperate those fortunate mortels whose mental kaleidoscope still presents the old and beautiful pattern. And how vain it is to wish to disturb them, when we know that the least shock will destroy that vision, and that probably we may turn and turn forever without finding it again. The trouble with you, my dear fellow, is that you are still a dogmatist, and believe that nobody has a right to have a picture different from yours. This seems to me the vainest of all superstitions [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2001), bk. 1, pp. 58-61].

In a subsequent letter to the same friend Santayana declares his naturalistic allegiances and exhibits ideas that he would develop in important works over thirty years later, namely his notion of the natural and practical convictions that all actual human reasoning presupposes, which he would come to call animal faith. He wrote:

As a matter of fact, I agree with you that Christianity is becoming untenable, because the firm and unshakable convictions in our minds are

no longer Christian doctrines, but scientific ones (...) There are certain convictions which cannot be exiled from the mind, convictions about everyday practical matters, about history, and about the ordinary passions of men. A system starting from these universal convictions has a foothold in every mind, and can coerce that mind to accept at least some of its content. The same is not true of systems founded on extraordinary and exceptional experiences, because these simply may cease to exist, in which case the system loses its hold. This is what is happening to Christianity. So I should say that the criterion by which one system is judged to be more tenable than another is not logic but necessity — not the greater reasonableness of believing its facts but the greater impossibility of disbelieving them [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2001), bk. 1, p. 64].

These letters exhibit Santayana's lifelong resistance to coercive conformity and to what he would call, in a philosophical sense, egotism. Another aspect of this resistance appears in a letter written thirty years later to his former student at Harvard, the American journalist, author, and activist, Max Eastman. Santayana was responding to Eastman after receiving copies of his literary journal *The Masses*. This letter explaining Santayana's views on freedom and social change exhibits the same honesty of opinion as his letters to his college friend:

It is a pleasure to know that you still remember me and to see, by the two numbers of "Masses" which arrived this morning, what interests occupy your thoughts and those of your friends. It would be an ill return on my part if I deceived you about my feelings. Let me say frankly, therefore, that you must not send me your review; it would be wasted on me, if you wish to do missionary work, and it would not increase the sympathy which I naturally feel for any effort to free human life from unnecessary trammels, and to let youth have its say.

Theoretically I admit the right of every individual to make what experiments he will, and nothing seems to me sacred merely because it exists and is habitual. In that sense, I am as radical a revolutionist as any

of you: but the question is, in any particular case: Is this possible; and if it is possible is it worth while? Human life is not a product of reason but of natural, biological forces: we have to accept and use the organisms that grow up, including our bodies and their various propensities; and we deceive ourselves if we imagine that our criticisms and rebellions are anything but the expression of partial natural movements within us, quite coordinate with those we oppose, and not one whit more authoritative.

The question is simply what values our animal or social habit will create in comparison with another. And here my judgment probably differs entirely from yours. I am not sure whether *The Masses* represents one of the classes — the most numerous — or rather a few independent and exceptional individuals. In either case it would not represent the principal values which life in our time can possess. Consciousness must not quarrel with its instruments: and as its instruments in other ages have been religious or family institutions, so today they are nations and corporations and scientific bodies — and the press too, no doubt: and if you cultivate ill-will and bitterness — as you do — towards the best things which are possible for us in these times — gallantry, disillusion, courage to face the real world and heartiness in enjoying what is to be enjoyed in it — you are wasting your only true opportunities. You are also closing your heart to the only sweet and voluminous human sympathies which you could have shared: you are spoiling life for others and for yourselves in the very ignorant and very factious pursuit of some inopportune ideal. Not that I blame anybody for having the passions he has: only, if these passions are narrow and hopeless, I am very sorry for him. I know as well as anyone what it is to tread the wine-press alone; but why should a man who suffers from injustice be himself unjust? If you are incapable of loving what other people love, why should you hate it and hate them? It is an illusory revenge, by which nobody can gain anything. Yours very truly GSantayana [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 2, pp. 279-80].

The letter perhaps takes on additional significance when one recalls that Eastman the youthful leftist later became an outspoken anti-communist and rejected his Marxist views.

Santayana's views, as he himself remarked more than once in letters and published works, remained constant throughout his life though the mode of expression may have varied. The letter to Eastman shows the consistency of his materialist philosophy with his social views and cultural observations. He made such an observation in other letters including one to an admirer in 1934. Santayana wrote, "The mediocrity of everything in the great world of today is simply appalling. We live in intellectual slums" [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2003), bk. 5, p. 148].

But, as mentioned earlier, his disillusion was not nihilistic. In a 1937 letter to an unidentified individual named Richard Cheney, Santayana wrote, "The age is not intellectual, but the human race is capable of becoming so, and ought not to be ashamed of the fact" [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2004), bk. 6, p. 39]. Around the same time to his Harvard classmates on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of their graduation he wrote that, "On the whole the world has seemed to me to move in the direction of light and reason, not that reason can ever govern human affairs, but that illusions and besetting passions may recede from the minds of men and allow reason to shine there" [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2003), bk. 5, p. 330].

Santayana expressed views on society and culture in published works, and in addition to cultural critique, he wrote a best-selling novel, poetry, and plays. He was among the most intellectual of public intellectuals. He rejected academic professionalism, but never aspired to punditry. He wrote for those who would read him, neither excluding readers through intentional obscurity nor pandering to popular sensibilities. In a letter written two years before his death Santayana wrote, "I never wished to be a professional or public man. Nor do I want disciples: I want only a few sympathetic friends, and I have them" [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2008), bk. 8, pp. 264-65]. But this did not entail disdain toward outsiders, and in fact Santayana had written many years before to a friend, "I protest against being called a snob; what I love is what is simple, humble, easy, what ought to be common, and it is only the bombast of

false ambitions and false superiority, that I abhor” [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 2, p. 411].

Though Santayana was reputed to be cold and aloof, this may have been misinterpretation of a reserved manner. He would not have been surprised at the misunderstanding; in one letter he acknowledged, “One of the fatalities of my life has always been that the people with whom I agree frighten me, and I frighten those with whom I naturally sympathize” [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 2, p. 155].

Still he was widely known to be friendly and sincere to visitors and correspondents regardless of their social or intellectual pedigree. In 1936 he wrote to his nephew and his nephew’s wife “I am being treated very kindly by the world in my old age. Even an unknown friend I have in the Michigan State prison, called Wayne Joseph Husted, No 35571, sent me a Christmas card. Years ago he honoured me with a psychological essay, really very good, on prison life, and since then we occasionally exchange civilities. I am now sending him *The Last Puritan* [Santayana’s novel]. I hope it won’t be stopped by the authorities as dangerous to convict morals” [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2003), bk. 5, p. 424].

After World War II American soldiers and civilians in Rome sought out the philosopher for autographs, photographs, and conversation, all of which he provided with good humor. In 1946 he wrote to a Lieutenant Garcia in California, presumably an American officer who visited Santayana in Rome. The letter is a serious response to Garcia’s ideas about Plato and Darwin [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2006), bk. 7, pp. 221-22].

After Santayana moved to Europe in 1912 he lived a relaxed and simple life of, what he called in one letter, “Epicurean contentment, which was not far removed from asceticism” [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2003), bk. 5, p. 297]. He was devoted to contemplation, writing, and quietly generous friendship, and he traveled a regular circuit according to the season living mostly in hotels and following a simple routine wherever he happened to be staying. He would

rise early and write until lunch, which, as he related in a 1920 letter, “is a long affair, as it involves in the first place dressing (which I put off as long as possible in the morning, having had a first breakfast (and washed) in privacy); and crossing the Piazza della Minerva . . . and buying [a newspaper] . . . ; and walking to the restaurant di San Carlo, to my usual corner; and having my usual food (and drink); and going to a cafe for coffee. . . .” [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 2, p. 393]. After this he would walk and, in favorable weather, read on a park bench, often from pages of a book that he had cut out so he could conveniently carry them. He would return to his room in the early evening, change out of his clothes, have dinner in his room, and read and write letters until ten or eleven o’clock in the evening. In this way of life he was a retiring though accessible exemplar of the human life of reason and harmony he articulated in his works.

The contemporary relevance of Santayana’s philosophy becomes clearer if one has chosen reason and intelligence in response to popular notions of post-modernism, to social fragmentation, and to globalization. Santayana’s broadly humanistic philosophy not only respects but draws heavily on established cultural traditions while acknowledging the lack of universal applicability of any one tradition. His outlook is unmistakably grounded in European culture, in the English language, the Greek philosophical tradition, and the Roman Catholic religious tradition. But his thought also displays a deep appreciation for Asian philosophical and religious traditions both as contrast and complement to his European roots. Furthermore, Santayana was irreducibly influenced by his American experience — an experience of conflicted allegiances that often provoked his best literary and philosophical writing. Out of this cultural material Santayana creates a philosophy that is both open to the variety of human experience and faithful to the concrete individual.

Nevertheless, the cultural pluralism attributable to Santayana’s philosophy is the product of a man with prejudices that are sometimes politely identified as those of his class and time. The letters

sometimes display an insensitivity (though not a blithe dismissal) of racial conflict in the United States, and the philosophical and cultural critique of Judaism found in his published work is sometimes supplemented with unkind remarks about Jews in his marginalia and letters. But the *Letters* also contain this 1926 response to an offer to be president of the Aryan Society:

Against whom is the Aryan Society directed? Against the Arabians, the Jews, the Chinese, and the blameless Ethiopians? I confess that I don't like the Jewish spirit, because it is worldly, seeing God in thrift and success, and I know nothing of the blacks; but the Arabs and the Chinese seem to me in some ways, apart from the costume, nearer to the Greeks than we are in Europe and America: they have taken the measure of life more sanely. Might it not turn out, then, that the Aryan Society, if it stood for the life of reason, was especially directed against the Aryans? Races, like nations, seem an unfortunate class of units to identify with moral ideas. If you had called your Society the Society for the Preservation of Traditions, or the Lawgivers Club, or something indicating the love of order as against the thirst for chaos, I might, as far as my sympathies are concerned, have been heartily with you: but even then, not as President. Even in the same church some are born to be monks and others to be bishops: I was born to be a monk [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2002), bk. 3, pp. 294-95].

In times of rapid social and technological change and accompanying cultural uncertainty, Santayana's philosophy is a serious and cheerful alternative to various forms of irrationalism like the fundamentalism, fanaticism, denial, or shallow relativism that seem to threaten intellectual life from all sides. Santayana's philosophy values the richest fruits of social life such as religion, art, and science; but it never ignores the tragic nature of individual human existence and the unavoidable loss and limitation of being mortal. He could write of the eternal without resort to illusion or mysticism. Santayana's response to his friend Iris Cutting Origo after the death

of her son shows how the honesty and humanity of his philosophy live together:

[. . .] We have no claim to any of our possessions. We have no claim to exist; and, as we have to die in the end, so we must resign ourselves to die piecemeal, which really happens when we lose somebody or something that was closely intertwined with our existence. It is like a physical wound; we may survive, but maimed and broken in that direction; dead there. Not that we can, or ever do at heart, renounce our affections. Never that. We cannot exercise our full nature all at once in every direction; but the parts that are relatively in abeyance, their centre lying perhaps in the past or the future, belong to us inalienably. We should not be ourselves if we cancelled them. I don't know how literally you may believe in another world, or whether the idea means very much to you. As you know, I am not myself a believer in the ordinary sense, yet my feeling on this subject is like that of believers, and not at all like that of my fellow-materialists. The reason is that I disagree utterly with that modern philosophy which regards experience as fundamental. Experience is a mere whiff or rumble, produced by enormously complex and ill-deciphered causes of experience; and in the other direction, experience is a mere peephole through which glimpses come down to us of eternal things. These are the only things that, in so far as we are spiritual beings, we can find or can love at all. All our affections, when clear and pure and not claims to possession, transport us to another world; and the loss of contact, here or there, with those eternal beings is merely like closing a book which we keep at hand for another occasion. We know that book by heart. Its verses give life to life.

I don't mean that these abstract considerations ought to console us. Why wish to be consoled? On the contrary, I wish to mourn perpetually the absence of what I love or might love. Isn't that what religious people call the love of God? [Saatkamp and Holzberger (2003), bk. 5, p. 25].

Santayana acknowledged the conflicted nature of human experience, but also imagined in detail the harmony of a life of reason

and the unassailable freedom available to the human spirit. Santayana's philosophy is materialism without reductionism and idealism without fanaticism. The letters attest to the sincerity of his vision and to his commitment to a philosophical life.

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