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## Remarks on Santayana's Use of the Concept of Egotism

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of egotism plays a deep and pervasive role in Santayana's philosophy, from the earliest letters to *Dominations and Powers*. Egotism appears as the single most important obstacle to achieving a sane and humble recognition of that to which spirit must *bow*. But although "egotism" is a ramified complex concept that cries out for analytical treatment, Santayana hardly tries to unpack its many forms and strands: the main distinction he introduces is that between an innocent, natural or animal egotism and a "diabolical" or perverse one. All in all, egotism functions in Santayana's thought very much as original sin does in the Abrahamic religions, a similarity endorsed by Santayana himself. In spite of Santayana's disclaimers, the context and date of publication of *Egotism and German Philosophy* suggest some connection between German philosophy and Teutonic bellicosity, or at least some common cause. I question whether a generic concept of egotism can be used to explain convincingly why individuals, groups or nations become violent or aggressive.

*Key words:* egotism, German philosophy, spirit, violence, original sin

### RESUMEN

El concepto de egotismo juega un papel profundo y ubicuo en la filosofía de Santayana, desde las más tempranas cartas hasta *Dominations and*

*Powers.* El egotismo representa el obstáculo más importante para lograr un reconocimiento cuerdo y humilde de aquello a lo que el espíritu debe *doblegarse*. A pesar de ser «egotismo» un concepto complejo y ramificado que pide un tratamiento analítico, Santayana apenas intenta desenredar sus múltiples formas y facetas: la distinción principal que introduce es entre un egotismo inocente, natural o animal y un egotismo «diabólico» o perverso. En definitiva, el uso de «egotismo» en el pensamiento de Santayana es muy parecido al del pecado original en las religiones abrahámicas, una similitud avalada por el propio Santayana. A pesar de los desmentidos de Santayana, el contexto y la fecha de publicación de *Egotism in German Philosophy* sugieren alguna conexión entre la filosofía alemana y la belicosidad teutónica, o al menos alguna raíz común. Me pregunto si un concepto amplio de egotismo puede explicar de manera convincente por qué los individuos, grupos o naciones se vuelven violentos o agresivos.

*Palabras clave:* egotismo, filosofía alemana, espíritu, violencia, pecado original

The aversion from egotism is one of the deepest and most pervasive philosophical commitments of Santayana, and I can hardly hope to do it justice in the few, somewhat disjointed, remarks that follow. I remember mentioning *Egotism in German Philosophy* to Irving Singer in conversation. His immediate reaction was: “Stay away! It’s Santayana’s worst! A piece of shameless propaganda!” (or words to that effect). Indeed, that book probably isn’t Santayana’s best, although, as always, it contains sundry striking and insightful passages. Here, I will try to say something about Santayana’s use of the concept of egotism and about at least one of the book’s possible shortcomings. Along the way I will broach another topic: the recent upsurge of psychological research on egotism, and in particular the link between egotism and violence and aggression.

I. SOME PRELIMINARIES

Four possible shortcomings of *Egotism in German Philosophy* come readily to mind: 1) the definition Santayana offers of “egotism” — “subjectivity in thought and willfulness in morals” [Santayana (1940), pp. ix-x]— is neither properly inclusive nor properly exclusive; 2) even if, in itself, Santayana’s definition were adequate, it neither fits the characteristics of German philosophy as a whole, nor those of the particular philosophers he deems representative of that school of thought; 3) Santayana insinuates, but does not argue, that there could be a link between, or at least a cause common to, egotistic German philosophy — mainly transcendentalism— and Teutonic bellicosity, and 4) Santayana represents the egotism/aggression connection as a disease peculiar to Germans.

One of the problems of *Egotism and German Philosophy* seems to be, then, that “egotism” is a multiply ramified concept that cries out for analytical treatment. But Santayana uses “egotism” as a common generic name; he hardly ever tries to unpack and interconnect its different forms, strands and conceptual clusters, as did for example the French moralists he admired —La Rochefoucault, La Bruyère, Pascal— or Arthur O. Lovejoy [Lovejoy (1961)], or more recently Jon Elster [Elster (1999)]: the main and perhaps the only real distinction he recognizes is, as we shall see, the one between an innocent, natural or animal egotism and a “diabolical” or perverse one. Neither does he advance any interesting etiologies of the prevalence of egotism, since his analyses of the origins of egotism are usually couched in the metaphysical, Schopenhauerian, idiom of “The Will”.

What would be, incidentally, an “interesting etiology”? Well, for example, an evolutionary explanation involving the three following facts: 1) that people everywhere seek, often at great cost and by way of great sacrifices, admiration, applause, approval, authority, consideration, dignity, distinction, dominance, esteem, honor, praise, preeminence, rank, reputation, respect, status or veneration (the list

is by alphabetical order); 2) that we are primates, a zoological order “swept by rank-order anxiety”, as Paul Shepard observes, where “self-assessment is a perpetual concern” [Shepard (1978), p. 19], and where, in general, a dominant position in a hierarchy is statistically convertible in reproductive success and 3) that we are nonetheless, as Lovejoy writes in his wonderful *Reflections on Human Nature*, a “great biological anomaly” in that we are self-conscious animals “which ha[ve] an urgent desire for a thought of a thought” [Lovejoy (1961), p. 93], animals susceptible to take pleasure in, or to desire, the thought of oneself as an object of thoughts or feelings, on the part of other persons, a susceptibility Lovejoy names “approbativeness” [Lovejoy (1961), p. 94].

Why does Santayana forgoe these tempting philosophical activities that the concept of egotism affords? Why isn't Santayana interested in analyzing the paradoxical labyrinths of egotism, nor in finding plausible evolutionary or anthropological explanations of its prevalence? The answer has obviously something to do with the fact that, especially in the later works, for better or for worse, his primary aim is neither empirical adequacy nor conceptual clarity, but spiritual transformation. One thing that we could say at this point is that Santayana often uses the term “egotism” as the antithesis of the philosophical virtues he extols: humility, disillusionment and detachment.

Another preliminary point I want to mention is that contemporary psychological research has painstakingly studied in the last 30 years the systematic egotistic biases that people manifest in their self-appraisals. Although I obviously cannot delve here into the results of these studies, I allude to them because the prevalence of egotistic traits, self-serving attributions and biases they reflect is germane to the importance Santayana grants to egotism. For him, egotism, at least in one of its meanings, is a natural, universal, by default, characteristic of humans (and even of animals). The empirical results showing the extent of our egotistic tendencies would probably have amused, but not surprised, him.

A last preliminary that may have some bearing on an appraisal of *Egotism in German Philosophy* concerns the specific relation between egotism and violence that has been investigated in several recent psychology studies. In "Relation of Threatened Egotism to Violence and Aggression", Baumeister, Smart and Boden challenge the conventional wisdom that regards low self-esteem as an important cause of violence, and they examine, and confirm to their own satisfaction, an alternative hypothesis: that one main source of violence is threatened egotism, that is, highly favorable views of self that are disputed by some person or circumstance [Baumeister, Smart and Boden (1996)]. The results obviously depend on the reliability of measures of egotism; or rather, on a deeper level, on whether when the researchers believe they are measuring one single phenomenon, which they call egotism, they are in fact trying to assess a confused tangle of several analytically discriminable phenomena.

Be that as it may, it stands to reason that egotistic biases lead almost inevitably to conflicts, in particular when people work together in groups. People tend to overrate their own groups (teams, schools, nations, etc.) and discriminate against the out-group, even in controlled studies where participants are assigned randomly to one of two groups (distinguished by trivial differences such as T-shirt color). The fact that we are "meta-biased", that we systematically underestimate our own biases, also leads to potentially grave conflict with others: "to the extent that each person [or group] sees him- or herself as a relatively objective arbiter of the truth, any disagreement will be attributed to the biases of other people" [Leary (2007), p. 69].

All this is suggestive. But I wonder whether attempts such as Baumeister's to correlate egotism or self-esteem and violence are up to the task of throwing light on collective phenomena like nationalism or chauvinism (which seems also to have been a part of Santayana's aim in *Egotism in German Philosophy*, in spite of his disclaimers). It is largely a conceptual problem, as I have already

suggested. Baumeister, Smart and Boden (and Santayana) probably group too many different phenomena under the common generic name “egotism.” For example, it doesn’t seem possible to explain what Lovejoy calls “pooled self-esteem” (“the trait of human nature which has played the greatest and most disastrous part in the history of mankind in the first half of the twentieth century” [Lovejoy (1961), 118]), without making several analytical distinctions and tracing, as Lovejoy does, the interrelations between three varieties of desires or propensities associated with egotism or generic self-love (*amour-propre*), namely:

1. “approbativeness” (“the desire for the thought of oneself as an object of thoughts or feelings [...] on the part of other persons” [Lovejoy (1961), p. 88])
2. the desire for self-esteem
3. emulation or the desire for superiority.

The three *are* different, although they are easily confused because they tend to shade off into one another in practice. I actually think that Lovejoy’s book, which follows the “complex involutions” created by facts such as the large amounts of dissimulation produced by the incompatibility between approbativeness and the manifestations of self-esteem, contains a partially successful attempt to analyze and explain the pugnaciousness of pooled self-esteem. But it is way too intricate to fit into the format of the present article.

## II. EGOTISM IN SANTAYANA’S EARLY WORKS

Santayana famously wrote:

My naturalism or materialism is no academic opinion: it is not a survival of the alleged materialism of the nineteenth century, when all the professors of philosophy were idealists: it is an everyday conviction

which came to me, as it came to my father, from experience and observation of the world at large, and especially of my own feelings and passions [Santayana (1940a), p. 12].

Inasmuch as materialism (or naturalism) and the criticism of egotism work hand in hand in Santayana's philosophy, an anti-egotistic stance is clearly in place, even if not nominally, from very early on, for example in the impressive letter to Abbot written by the twenty-four-year-old Santayana:

"Is it worth while after all?" you ask. What a simple-hearted question! Of course it isn't worth while. Do you suppose when God made up his mind to create this world after his own image, he thought it was worth while? [...] Do you suppose the slow, painful, nasty, bloody process, by which things in this world grow, is worth having for the sake of this perfection of the moment? Did you come into this world because you thought it worth while? No more do you stay in it because you do. The idea of demanding that things should be worth doing is a human impertinence [Santayana (2001), p. 43].

A thorough account of Santayana's use of the concept of egotism would have to take into account the fact that in the early works (notably in *The Sense of Beauty*, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, *Three Philosophical Poets* and *The Life of Reason*) the criticism of romanticism overlaps with that of egotism: Santayana attributes the origin of romanticism to self-indulgence, and self-indulgence emerges as an immediate consequence of egotism. But the association of egotism with romanticism goes deeper and lasts longer in Santayana's thought: one of the two main elements of romanticism, according to Isaiah Berlin's insightful analysis of the roots of that movement, is "the denial of the fact that there is a nature of things" [Berlin (2013), p. 136], a denial that coincides, as we shall see, with the very content of the "original sin" of egotism in Santayana's later philosophy.

### III. EGOTISM IN SANTAYANA'S LATER WRITINGS: ORIGINAL SIN AND THE DEVIL

Maurice Cohen provides a perceptive delineation of the rôle of “egotism” in Santayana’s thought, particularly in his later writings:

[I]f philosophy [...] is concerned with explicating, criticizing, and reconciling wherever possible the radical assumptions involved in living, the greatest obstacle to its end of achieving a salutary awareness of the inescapable limitations of life is, in [Santayana’s] opinion, pride or *egotism*—unwillingness to admit the contingency of all existence and the amorality of the cosmos. Just that admission, however, is crucial in Santayana’s philosophy, and it is from an attitude religious in its comprehensiveness and intended depth that his naturalism is most intimately derived. Thus “matter” is defined by him as the generative power upon which all life depends and is identified explicitly with traditional conceptions of God; wisdom is found to lie in recognizing the fact of dependency as dominant in human, as in all, finite existence; and the cardinal folly is, like Lucifer, to think it possible to ignore ultimate limitations. Informed throughout by complementary notions of *contingency* with respect to existence [...] and of *dependence* upon an essentially unknowable power, Santayana’s philosophy expresses his quest for a spiritual *modus vivendi* permitting a measure of solace in the face of suffering at once pervasive and cosmically groundless [Cohen (1966), pp. 264-5].

Cohen’s commentary resonates aptly with a well-known passage from the introduction of *Realms of Being*, where Santayana declares that

the great characteristic of the human spirit as I see it, is its helplessness and misery, most miserable and helpless when it fancies itself dominant and independent; and the great problem for it is salvation, purification, rebirth into a humble recognition of the powers on which



it depends, and into a sane enjoyment of its appropriate virtues [Santayana (1942), p. xxxii].

It is also faithful to the spirit that speaks forth in “Ultimate Religion”, a spirit that at last comes upon “the most important and radical of religious perceptions”, the perception that “at every instant and in every particular, [we are] in the hands of some alien and inscrutable power” [Santayana (1936), p. 284]. *That*, precisely, is the perception that egotism negates. Egotism thus plays the role of polar opposite of spirit. “The peculiarity [of spirit] once it exists, is not to be blind, and to be eternally ashamed of egotism” [Santayana (1942) p. 822]. The conclusion to *The Realm of Matter* is equally clear on the antinomy of egotism and the “disillusioned piety” that is the aspiration of spiritual transformation:

The study of nature and the equalizing blows of experience tend to establish the sort of regenerate and disillusioned piety in the place of the arrogant idealisms of the will. [...] [I]n so far as spirit takes the form of intelligence and of the love of truth [...] it must assume the presence of an alien universe and must humbly explore its ways, bowing to the strong wind of mutation [Santayana (1942), p. 398].

As Cohen writes,

“Spirit” is always the means of genuine salvation, and “matter” –external power—is always the ultimate that must be recognized. [...]. The significance of Santayana’s criticism of “egotism” [...] is that the term stands for the antithesis of just that cognizance of externality and power crucial to his philosophy. Precisely because it stems from an unwillingness to recognize the relativity of human standards and, depending on the form it takes, a refusal to admit the existence of “matter”, “the external world”, “efficacious reality” or “God”, egotism reveals not simply an error in judgement but a radical and *sinful* negation of true religiousness [Cohen (1966), p. 270].

In the later works, as Cohen further notes, one can detect “a definite tendency to increase the range of egotism as a moral category until it comes to stand for the satanic element in general in human thought and morals” [Cohen (1966), p. 270]. In fact, “egotism is readily translatable for Santayana into original sin” [Cohen (1966), p. 271]. As Santayana remarks in *Dominations and Powers*:

Our original unregenerate vitality was not madness—as solipsism would be—but only sin; not sin in yielding to any base or unworthy temptation, but that original sin of which Calderón speaks when he says that the greatest trespass of man is that he was ever born. It is the tragic sin of *hubris* or arrogance, in laying claim, by existing, on whatever we want, when nothing is really ours [Santayana (1951), p. 63].

A further identification could be attempted. Isn't egotism the Devil himself, the third of Santayana's picturesque agencies of distraction of *The Realms of Spirit*, alongside the Flesh and the World? Not quite, because Santayana, by “the Devil”, understands something more general, namely, “any enemy of spirit that is internal to spirit” [Santayana (1942), p. 718]. However, the developments on the Devil, in chapter VII of *The Realm of Spirit*, fall squarely within the semantic fields of pride, rebellion and disobedience, thereby reinforcing the identification with the original sin of Abrahamic religions. Here are two examples of such developments:

.... spirit may easily be found speaking here for one incipient passion and there for another within the same soul. [...]. A mad world of quarrelling demons will have been hatched, in the *proud* intelligence that thought it beneath its dignity to *obey* the atoms or the stars [Santayana (1942), pp. 719-720], my italics].

The nerve of bedevilment is that it renders *any* harmony impossible either within a man or between man and nature. It is a *rebellion* of spirit against the sources of spirit; an attempt to be intelligent without

*docility*, spiritual without piety, and victorious without self-surrender [Santayana (1942), p. 720, my italics].

Thus, Santayana's use of the concept of egotism bears more than a distant family resemblance to one of the traditional Judeo-Christian interpretations of the Fall, where the forbidden fruit that hangs from the tree of knowledge is neither knowledge, nor sex as such, but rather something more general, that could be called the "erotic structure of disobedience"; the fact that, as Hume remarks, "we naturally desire what is forbid, and take a pleasure in performing actions, merely because they are unlawful" [Hume (1739), p. 421]. In this interpretation, biblical pride is the agency for "a kind of rebellion against being subject to a command" (actually against any imperative or command that the transgressive person would normally recognize) [Blackburn (2014), p.161]. And in this sense, pride is indeed *radix omnium malorum*, the root of all evils, something that can also be said of the concept of egotism in Santayana's philosophy (in its "diabolical" meaning) since it accounts, according to Cohen, "for evil in morals and politics and [is] the most serious single impediment to achieving detachment, spirituality, charity" [Cohen (1966), p.279].

But disobedience to what, rebellion against what, usurpation of what, specifically, in Santayana's case? More than one answer is possible. Disobedience to, rebellion against, usurpation of the "authority of things" (that wonderful expression from *Persons and Places*) [Santayana (1986), pp. 18 and 184] or *rerum natura*, the "nature of things", the "alien universe whose presence we must assume" and "whose ways we must humbly explore" [Santayana (1942), p. 398]. Egotism could be said to be the desperate and protean attempt to usurp *that* authority, the authority of the "omnificent power" that is Matter in Santayana's ontology. Or, to frame things somewhat differently: disobedience to, rebellion against the capital philosophical principle, that Hodges and Lachs attribute to Santayana, according to which "whatever has existential primacy should enjoy

epistemic prerogatives as well” [Hodges and Lachs (2000), p. 65] (the reader can complete the intended enthymeme by introducing the proposition that what enjoys “existential primacy” is necessarily determined by the “alien and inscrutable power” in whose hands we are [Santayana (1936), p. 284]). Finally, we should note how perfectly consonant this identification of egotism with disobedience to “the authority of things” is with Santayana’s early association of egotism and romanticism. The following quote from Isaiah Berlin’s *The Roots of Romanticism* may help us buttress this point:

Those are the fundamental bases of Romanticism: will, the fact that there is no structure to things, that you can mould things as you will – they come into being only as a result of your moulding activity – and therefore opposition to any view which tried to represent reality as having some kind of form which could be studied, written down, learnt, communicated to others, and in other respects treated in a scientific manner [Berlin (2013), p. 147].

As I mentioned at the beginning, Santayana does distinguish between an innocent, normal or animal egotism and a “diabolical” one. On the one hand, egotism is “a genuine expression of the pathetic situation in which any animal finds itself upon earth, and any intelligence in the universe. It is an inevitable and initial circumstance in life” [Santayana (1940), p. ix-x], “it is the inevitable presumption of a new-born healthy will” [Santayana (1951), p. 63]. As such it is understandable and forgivable. “But like every material accident, writes Santayana, it is a thing to abstract from and to discount as far as possible” [Santayana (1940), p. x]. It would be the mission of philosophy to help achieve this abstraction and discounting. Egotism becomes diabolical when, rather than abstracting from and discounting egotism, a person, a philosophy or a nation seeks to entrench or glorify it through “uncompromising self-assertion and metaphysical conceit” [Santayana (1940), p. x]. It can take many forms (Idealism, Solipsism, Transcendentalism, Speciesism, etc.),

all of which can pleasantly entertain (or scandalize) our common sense when leafing through any good History of Western Philosophy. In other words: *Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum*.

## CONCLUSION

Among philosophers of the last century, Santayana is surely the one who most insisted on the idea that detachment and disillusionment — escape from egotism — remain *living* possibilities for a human being. For him, one of the essential functions of philosophy has always been, and should continue to be, to help us loosen, “abstract from”, “discount”, at least intermittently, the grip of our inevitable egotism. But was Santayana truly the detached and disinterested looker-on at the spectacle of his own life he claimed to be? And wasn't he, paradoxically, ever so slightly proud of his own proclaimed detachment? As Lovejoy remarks, “To *proclaim* your freedom from approbateness is plainly to manifest approbateness—to make it evident that you wish to be admired by others for your indifference to their admiration” [Lovejoy (1961), p. 102]. Lovejoy seems to have Santayana in mind in this connection, since a few pages later he writes, maliciously: “...diligent reading of nearly all of the philosophical writings of Santayana, who had an acute mind, has not left me with the impression that he was wholly unaware that he wrote in an original and brilliant style or that he took no pleasure in doing so, or that he did not intend or expect to affect the opinions and the physical behavior of others by the publication of his books” [Lovejoy (1961), p. 108].

Lovejoy is reacting here somewhat as Plato and others apparently reacted to Diogenes' ostentatious declarations of contempt regarding the opinions of others: he points out that professing one's indifference to approbation is itself a manifestation, twisted yet ostensible, of approbateness. Professing scorn of other men's opinion can also be a way of “showing off”. This paradox of detachment as a motive of pride inclines me to think that pride is ineradicable, given that it manag-

es to feed on its polar opposite. Santayana contemplates an “integrative maneuver” for the distractions of Flesh: “In regard to the flesh, the enemy to be taken captive is no accidental vice, like gambling or drunkenness, that might be thoroughly extirpated. It is a force intrinsic to human nature; you must make peace with it somehow, or be perpetually distracted. You must tame it, transmute it, employ it to warm your affections and light up your painted world” [Santayana (1942), p. 692]. It seems to me that a similar integrative maneuver is necessary in relation to the Devil of egotism, which seems no less “a force intrinsic to human nature”: those who propose a thorough extirpation of egotism are proposing something analogous to what, in the context of surgery, would be an ablation of the brain.

The main point I have been labouring toward is that Santayana may be justified in using “egotism” as he does, in a quasi theological fashion, aiming (like the users of the concept of sin) at spiritual transformation; the aversion his philosophy so eloquently manifests from what he considers the antithesis of the philosophical virtues of humility, disillusionment and detachment, makes his philosophy significant for those of us who have come to feel that “society is a web of merciless ambitions and jealousies, mitigated by a quite subsidiary kindness” [Santayana (1922), p. 118] and that “the whole psyche is a burden to herself, a terrible inner compulsion to care, to watch, to pursue, and to possess” [Santayana (1942), p. 341]. But it is doubtful that this sweeping concept can figure usefully in explanations of warlike national propensities: it simply does not have (as Wittgenstein would say) the proper logical multiplicity for the job. By parity of reasoning, a related objection can probably be addressed to the psychological studies on “egotism” I mentioned earlier, which start off from a wholesale concept of “egotism” or self-esteem. “Egotism” lumps together several distinct psychological phenomena that, although they can be analytically differentiated, are easily confused because they tend to shade off into one another in practice. Original sin cannot explain why pooled self-esteem becomes pugnacious.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Edward L. Schaub argues in "Santayana's Contentions Respecting German Philosophy", published in *The Library of Living Philosophers: The Philosophy of George Santayana* (Schilpp, P. A., ed.), 1940. [Schaub (1940)].

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these studies see Mark Leary, *The Curse of the Ego: Self-Awareness, Egotism and the Quality of Human life*, Oxford, 2007, chapter 3. The choice of the term "egotism" in recent empirical psychology is probably a consequence of the fact that "self-esteem" is preempted by an overabundant self-help literature.

<sup>3</sup> See Lovejoy (1961), pp. 95-121.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Maurice Cohen's excellent and largely forgotten "Santayana on Romanticism and Egotism" (1966).

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