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# Categories and Consciousness

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Jessica Wahman, *Narrative Naturalism: An Alternative Framework for the Philosophy of Mind*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015, 190 pages.

George Santayana once described the four categories that comprise his ontological system of philosophy as *ordinary reflection systematized*. Although the names of his categories —essence, matter, spirit, and truth— suggest Greek or Medieval philosophy, they are intended to denote the broadest ontological realities discernible in daily life and thought. Since for Santayana philosophy should be consonant with how we actually live and think, his categories are in a sense unavoidable. He held that while they might be given different names and approached from various angles, the realities they indicate will conceptually frame the experiences and thoughts of any human being. In *Narrative Naturalism: An Alternative Framework for the Philosophy of Mind*, Jessica Wahman sets out to use Santayana's system of philosophy, as she puts it, to "reconstruct the philosophy of mind". More specifically, she presents Santayana's ontology as a neglected, naturalistic alternative to standard views in the philosophy of mind and, importantly for Wahman, one that exposes the "narrative elements in practices of gathering and communicating knowledge" (xii).

Wahman tries harder than most to relate Santayana's philosophy to the views of other writers and thinkers. An interesting mix of philosophers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, and even some figures

from popular American culture and politics (sadly, Karl Rove gets a mention) are drawn into the epistemic-ontological conversation. Those who have read Santayana and some critical commentary on his work might find much of what Wahman says about Santayana's relation to past thinkers (e.g. Aristotle and Descartes) familiar; but she nicely expands the usual range of references and the connections she makes between Santayana's ideas and contemporary philosophy of mind and psychology are new and interesting.

Throughout her book Wahman displays both a deep understanding and appreciation of Santayana's philosophy. However, she makes it clear that she does not always stick to standard descriptions of his system. She rightly states that scholars of Santayana's work may find "her characterization of his system as a type of ontological monism 'disputable" since there are four categories in his ontology (xiv). However, she clarifies her position by noting that Santayana is a monist about substance, meaning that for him the only thing that exists in space and time and is the sole source of power is matter or, more colloquially, "physical stuff" (66). Since he is a monist about matter, Wahman prefers to call him an ontological monist. Qualified in this way, she is not mistaken. However, this is perhaps not the most felicitous way to put the issue. The main reason is that for Santayana materialism implies ontological pluralism. As he pointed out, Democritus was obliged to admit the reality of a void in which his atoms moved. Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to call Santayana what he called himself, namely, a *materialist*. This term, for him, even if not for more recent "materialists", captures the singularity of substance as the sole source of power without precluding the being of non-material realities. That said, it is doubtful that anything substantive hangs on this essentially semantic issue.

The first few chapters of Wahman's book are mainly concerned with setting out the basic principles of Santayana's epistemology and ontology. In Chapter One, "Narrative", Wahman argues that philosophers have historically placed too much emphasis on an inflated view of human reason and too little on the role of the emo-

tions in our deliberations. As a corrective to Cartesian principles of inquiry, Wahman defends Santayana's view that a type of instinctive emotion is required for knowledge. This is because all knowledge rests on what Santayana calls *animal faith*: the biological attitude of an active animal that, when expressed in thought, is the brute presupposition that there exists a dynamic material reality of which we are living parts. Further, our knowledge of this reality is mediated by the idiosyncratic signs of human sensation and cognition. Knowledge for Santayana is thus a human symbol system in which our beliefs are justified not by pictorial resemblance but pragmatic warrant. In the first chapter, and the chapters that follow, Wahman nicely articulates and defends these core ideas of Santayana's epistemology.

Building on the claim that knowledge is non-literal or symbolic, Wahman turns to defending her thesis that "all knowledge is bound up with narrative" and that our "explanations of phenomena and events are kinds of stories" (1). She highlights the importance of metaphor in "the narrative character of knowledge" (11); discusses Santayana's notion of *literary psychology* or the art of imagining how others think and feel, and how this ability "is a kind of storytelling where we place others in the role of protagonist and imagine ourselves sharing the experience" (17); and she points toward the narrative elements in both science and philosophy (21). Much of what Wahman states in this chapter is further developed in later chapters, in particular the notion that if knowledge is inherently fallible and symbolic, then no science can ever claim to possess the one true explanation of anything, including and especially phenomenal consciousness. To be sure, it is not always easy to trace the lines of Wahman's argument. She moves quickly from the claim that knowledge is symbolic to the claim that all knowledge is narrative. The latter term suggests something richer than "symbolic" or "non-literal". And while some aspects of our knowledge, as Wahman ably shows, have "narrative elements", it would have been helpful to have a fuller defense of the generalized thesis that "everything from our basic

efforts at communication to the most technical sciences involves literary constructions" (21).

The next two chapters discuss and defend Santayana's ontology with an eye toward the philosophy of mind. In Chapter Two, "The Physicalist Trap", Wahman largely lays the blame at the feet of Descartes for the misguided notion that physics provides a literal picture of reality; one in which there is no place for consciousness that must instead exist as a discrete mental substance with its share of power over the body it temporarily inhabits. Given the claim of non-literal knowledge, Wahman describes "mechanistic" science as simply one amongst many narrative "accounts" of the universe that is a "more and less constructive means of comprehending our experiences of the natural world" (30). Instead of trying to see how (to quote Owen Flanagan) the water of the brain turns into the wine of consciousness —an impossible puzzle given Cartesian assumptions— Wahman proposes we accept Santayana's naturalistic view that there is "only one substance, but at the same time there is a multiplicity of distinct and mutually irresolvable attributes by which it may be described" (50). Similarly, in Chapter Three, "Naturalism", she maintains that consciousness is not literally generated by brains or bodies, but rather that matter "generates or gives rise to consciousness in a metaphorical sense, as when we say that some event gives rise to one kind of description rather than another" (70). Thus we can be monist naturalists, since there is only one source of power, namely, the substrative material reality recognized in animal faith, and pluralists at the same time since matter has non-material "attributes".

Wahman's interpretation of Santayana on this last point might push him a little too far in the direction of Spinoza, Santayana's self-declared "master" in philosophy. For it is not clear that Santayana's realms are attributes in the way Wahman suggests. Essence is not an attribute of matter since for Santayana, although not for Spinoza, its being is independent of matter and it ontologically exceeds material existence. Similarly, for Santayana, but contrary to Spino-

za, the realm of matter ontologically exceeds the realm of spirit insofar as not all matter has a mental aspect. This naturally raises the question of why consciousness is "actualized" only in certain animal bodies. In Chapter Four, "The Essence(s) Of the Matter", Wahman shies away from calling consciousness an emergent reality since she identifies emergent realities with "properties" which are powers "in a given mode of substance to act on me…in such a way as that quality, or essence, is reliably experienced when I interact with it" and for Santayana spirit is actual but has no power (83). The claim that spirit is inefficacious would seem to make Santayana an epiphenomenalist. Of course, an epiphenomenalist could accept emergence, but Wahman objects that the "phenomena by which consciousness tends to be described are so heterogeneous with those that characterize physical properties that it is hard to conceive what it would mean for even highly complex neurological functioning to be able to produce them" (93). Again, Wahman prefers to see spirit as an aspect of matter, no less natural and no more "mysterious" than matter itself (144). However, Santayana often seems closer to the emergentists than the attributists. For instance, in "A General Confession", he wrote that he had "not seen much new light" —not that new light was *a priori* impossible— as to how matter generates immediate experience. Not seeing any new light, he confessed that he was "constrained to merely register as a brute fact the emergence of consciousness in animal bodies." Given this and similar pronouncements, it is perhaps closer to the truth to regard Santayana as an emergentist rather than an attributist, one who contentedly admits that how consciousness is actualized in animal bodies is something we will likely never comprehend.

In later chapters Wahman discusses some of the practical implication of Santayana's ontology for philosophy of mind and psychology. In Chapter Five, "Why Psyche Matters", she calls for a psychological theory of what Santayana terms the *psyche* or the "organizing principle of life" to bring together the various areas of inquiry in psychology (99). She also argues that Santayana's ontology demon-

strates the importance of both medicinal and talk or "literary" therapy. This is because the awareness of spirit (perhaps nurtured through cognitive therapy) of the state of the psyche "can enable [an] individual to modify existing habits of thinking…into more functionally adaptive ones" (112); and this is true, Wahman claims, despite the fact that spirit is powerless or "just along for the ride" (113). In Chapter Six, "Expressive Truth", she discusses how Santayana's ontological view of truth fits together with our non-literal descriptions of matter. It is a nice change to see a defense of Santayana's ontological account of truth, given the widespread popularity of epistemic and semantic accounts of truth.

In the final Chapter, "The Irreducible Spirit", Wahman further argues for Santayana's account of spirit as an appealing alternative to reductionist theories of mind. Since she leans towards an attributist account of consciousness, she effectively dissolves the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness. As she sees it, "there is no special hard problem for consciousness". Instead, we should recognize that physics and all other sciences, as well as literary psychology, are "co-existing narratives" (152). Rather than attempting to explain the mental in terms of the physical, we should simply accept the reality of both types of description or "narrative". Once we do this, Wahman claims, "we can have a wholly natural conception of the mind, that is, we can account for mental life without reducing it to physical mechanical properties if we alter our story of what sorts of things count as natural" (153). On this point she finds some affinity between Santayana's view of irreducible spirit and Chalmers's "basic concept of reality" view and with Alva Noë's theory of "extended mind" (154). Indeed, for Wahman, once we take the "narrative" turn we achieve a sort of philosophical liberation since we at once "become open to a plurality of reasonable ontological frameworks and speculative paradigms" (156).

In addition to its scholarship, a definite merit of *Narrative Naturalism* is that Wahman is never dogmatic in her presentation of Santayana's philosophy or the ideas she aims to develop. In the book's

introduction she notes how simply exploring a different system of philosophy with an open mind can "spark imaginative reconstructions of problems" (xv). Readers of Wahman's book, even if they do not accept all that it contains, will benefit by exploring philosophy from a Santayana-inspired perspective.

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