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Spirituality Understood: Santayana and the Spiritual Life

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MICHAEL BRODRICK. *The Ethics of Detachment in Santayana's Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 174 pp.

Michael Brodrick's book, *The Ethics of Detachment in Santayana's Philosophy* is a fascinating and sophisticated presentation of Santayana's philosophy taking as its central point of reference the spiritual life. However, it is more than that. It is also a discussion of spirituality itself and its place in human life with special application to the elderly. The notion of detachment or spirituality is brought into focus by carefully distinguishing it from a number of close relatives put forward in the contemporary psychological literature—the notion of flow developed by Csikszentmihalyi, and Seligman's happiness in the present moment. Detachment is an experience in which one becomes lost in immediacy. There is no valuing, no desiring and no striving. What presents itself to consciousness as such is the object. Here we are lost in a day-dream of floating qualities. As Brodrick puts it we completely overcome the means/end dichotomy. Detachment is not a means to anything else. More will be said about this point. And it is not an end in the sense of a culmination. Brodrick, following Aristotle, sees it as not just chosen for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else but as something that is complete having "no direct consequences." While this may be technically true, given Santayana's epiphenomenalism, it is misleading at best since being lost in moments of immediacy may have conse-

quences like being run over by a bus if you are not paying attention to the world of changing things. In fact, by the beginning of the third chapter Brodrick has dropped “direct” and asserts that detachment has no consequences but again this could be misleading (accept in the metaphysical sense). Being able to achieve detachment, while it can be spontaneous, generally requires training and the moments we spend in that state have costs at least in lost opportunity. Maybe Brodrick does not see that because he is focused on the elderly for whom there may not be an alternative.

Brodrick’s discussion also situates detachment in terms of religion and distinguishes it from various religious notions of spirit. Specifically, he considers dogmatic Christianity and other such religions, mysticism, Kierkegaardian faith and Zen practice. The central problem with Christianity and other religions which place dogma at the center is just that. Whatever transcendence is possible is only so at the cost of dogmatic belief and so religious access becomes limited. Mysticism, for Brodrick is not so much a sort of experience taken in its own right but an epistemology by which he seems to mean a theory about such experience--that it provides purported knowledge of what is experienced. This is certainly an issue for many who have such experiences but taken by themselves, they seem to fit the bill for spiritual experience. There is a fascinating discussion of Abraham and the Knight of Faith from which Brodrick concludes that the Knight of Faith in her joyful acceptance of the world as gift come very close to detachment (32). But this claim raises some issues. First, while there is a kind of immediacy, it is also mediated through a direct and unconditional relation to God. The God in question, it is true, is not the theoretical God of metaphysics but without that commitment the joy of the Knight of Faith makes no sense at least for Kierkegaard. Second, it is the finite and changing world that the Knight of faith recovers not the infinite and eternal realm of essence. He also discusses Zen in relation to detachment and rightly asserts a very close affinity between the two. The problem here is simply that Zen transcendence is tied with a disci-

pline without which it cannot be achieved and so it limits access again. I agree with him that Zen practice is not the only avenue to spirituality. Santayana point out others including skepticism and aesthetic experience but I think, for Brodrick, detachment can be achieved too easily and without discipline but this questionable and may stand in the way of the escape to transcendence for those who have not developed it in their lives. Many, if not most, are wedded to agency and can see nothing but loss in its termination and without practice—stopping to smell the roses—it will be out of reach just when it is needed.

Having clarified the notion of spirituality, Brodrick proceeds to place it carefully into Santayana's particular vocabulary, what he calls "an ontology." For Santayana the realms of being that he distinguishes are not separate existences, they are merely categories that he finds useful to clarify his own thought. Here he famously distinguishes essences from matter and spirit as well as the hybrid category of truth. "Essence" denotes the immediate qualities of all things and any other immediacy. But it would be a mistake to take that as a definition. It is accidental to essence whether awareness or "spirit" ever falls on it or whether it is ever embodied in matter. There is an infinite realm of essence (numbers will do as an example here) most of which has never been exemplified in matter or fallen under the view of spirit. The realm of truth is that portion of the realm of essence that has been touched by existence. Brodrick own discussion here is very helpful and, as an introduction to Santayana's ontology, as clear as can be. Anyone wanting an introduction to the central categories of Santayana's thought, could not do any better. But Brodrick's aim is wider. He wants to uses these fundamental categories to situate spirituality and by doing so give it a theoretical foundation. The real power of the book is the fact that it never strays far from its practical motivation, to develop a concept of spirituality that will do service in the clarification of the well lived life and death, for that matter. It is this union of theoretical rigor and clarity with practice that is a really admirable aspect of this work.

In Chapter 4, he turns to providing a careful description of spirituality from both inside and out. Perhaps the most important point here is to distinguish between the role of essences in knowledge and in detachment. For us in our practical mode of awareness essences are signs of what is to come. We hardly pay attention to their intrinsic character but “see through” them to what is coming to us. In spirituality we are absorbed by the immediate and take no interest in what is to come. Essences are not signs of anything here and are just what they are. Brodrick usefully contrasts James’s account of consciousness with Santayana’s and finds the latter better able to give voice to spirituality. Finally, he attempts to characterize the inner experience which is spirituality and concludes that “it is the peace of harkening”. (82) In the moment it can have no particular texture since there is no self present in the experience, that is part of what we mean, but in retrospect it can be described.

One of the most interesting chapter, at least for philosophers with an interest in the history of philosophy, is the one in which he develops a detailed comparison between Santayana’s spirituality and Schopenhauer’s “aesthetic knowledge.” The contention is that Schopenhauer had a substantial influence on Santayana’s thought in this area, and combining historical and biographical material with a very insightful and clear development of the parallels between their views, he makes his case. This is a particularly philosophically motivated chapter but even here Brodrick comes back to the ethical implications of what he has said at the end of the chapter and tries to sum up. He says “moments of transcendence create the ‘general sense of steadfastness and resource’ that enable and motivate us to continue our journey” (104). But this sounds very much like recommending the spiritual life on the basis of what it brings with it and that seems inconsistent with all that he has said about it before.

In the penultimate chapter, Brodrick turns to critics of Santayana and demonstrates his own philosophical capacity by very carefully dissecting a variety of argument against Santayana mainly on the basis of showing how they depend on misreadings. This

include mostly new critics since he contents the classical concerns have been well discussed in the literature. I confess that I do not recognize William James under what the Brodrick calls the banner of "moralism." It would be correct to say that Royce was such a moralist and perhaps spiritualism is incompatible with what James called the "strenuous mood" but more about that later. Brodrick says of Santayana's contemporary critics. "As a rule [they] join him in the view that values are ideal posited by living being...not absolutes that command or powers that dominate" (107-8). But surely James is with Santayana on this point. In any case, he reviews several critics including Anthony Woodward, Edward Lovely, Angus Kerr-Lawson and John Lachs. One line of criticism depends on not taking Santayana seriously as a technical philosopher, which is not unusual, but that is to misread his style for a lack of rigor. Lachs and Kerr-Lawson both discuss a certain ambiguity in the notion of the "spiritual life" which Brodrick contend Santayana is also not clear about. Of course, there is no such thing as the "spiritual life" taken literally, namely a whole life taken up with moments of spirituality. However, one might describe a life dedicated to maximizing such experience as a spiritual life as opposed to a life in which incidences of spirituality occur and are appreciated but do not figure in the general fabric of its plan. A hermit who minimizes the externalities of life to be open to as much immediacy as possible could be said to live a spiritual life although much of it would be taken up with mundane things while one who threw him/her self into finance or teaching without a thought about immediacy might none the less experience moments of spiritual tranquility. Santayana himself makes this point in *Skepticism and Animal Faith*.

In the final chapter, Brodrick relates the issue of spirituality to that of human finitude. He argues we have lost sight of the fact that our very existence is limited and essentially so. While we can stave off death for a while and make living more than just tolerable, we do die and we cannot have everything that we might want. In such a world, spirituality becomes very important as a place of peace for

those who can no longer participate in the world of agency and success. This seems an unquestionable truth but not one that is always taken with the seriousness that Brodrick recommends. Here is both a strength and a weakness in the overall argument. If we are to be able to escape the rat race of constant striving and find peace in losing ourselves in immediacy, we must practice that skill. It does not come naturally to humans who are caught up in animal faith and we must devote some serious time to cultivating our capacity. This fact is not clearly focused on by Brodrick and as a result he leaves us a bit short.

However, when we consider the work over all, it is a very rewarding piece of writing. It is engaging and seems to encourage dialogue throughout. It offers technical clarity and insight into the philosophical defensibility of Santayana's notion of the spiritual life and his philosophy generally. There are insightful comparisons of Santayana with others and Brodrick never fails to show the reader the value of Santayana's thought both to the philosopher and to anyone seeking wisdom. At all times, it is dominated by a deep concern to clarify the human condition. And his interest in Santayana is motivated by that thinker's capacity to do just that. It is hard to imagine a more laudable or interesting project.

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