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## The Dewey-Santayana Rivalry

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### ABSTRACT

John Dewey and George Santayana sparred with each other for almost fifty years. Their disputes concerning ontological and psychological issues reveal deep-seated disagreements about morals, politics, social progress, and the nature and role of art and philosophy in human life. This survey goes through their engagement chronologically, starting with Dewey's first review of *The Life of Reason* in 1906 and ending with a posthumously published essay by Santayana. It shows that the opposition of both philosophies is not just an abstract conflict between opposing theories but an active clash in which elemental misunderstanding combined with penetrating insight.

*Key-Words:* Naturalism, American Philosophy, John Dewey, George Santayana

### RESUMEN

John Dewey y George Santayana se batieron durante casi cincuenta años. Sus debates sobre cuestiones ontológicas y psicológicas muestran desacuerdos profundos en moral, política, progreso social, y en la naturaleza y el papel que el arte y la filosofía tienen en la vida humana. Este artículo aborda su relación cronológicamente, comenzando con la primera reseña de Dewey de *La vida de la razón* en 1906 y acaba con un ensayo póstumo de Santayana. Muestra que la oposición de ambas filosofías no es solo un

conflicto abstracto entre teorías opuestas sino un choque claro en el que se combinan malentendidos e intuiciones penetrantes.

*Palabras clave:* naturalismo, filosofía norteamericana, John Dewey, George Santayana

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John Dewey and George Santayana sparred with each other for almost fifty years. This rivalry between the two American philosophers most widely read in the first half of the twentieth century started with the promising tenor of Dewey's first review of *The Life of Reason* in 1906—he wrote two—and ended in 1953 with Santayana's posthumously published essay "Three American Philosophers." Although they met at least twice, their relationship was almost entirely in written form. Dewey reviewed many of Santayana's published books. Santayana reviewed only two of Dewey's, but his correspondence and his copious marginal notes in Dewey's books show that Dewey often inhabited Santayana's thoughts.

#### THE LIFE OF REASON

Dewey's enthusiasm for *The Life of Reason* emerged even before the full five volumes —*Reason in Common Sense, Society, Religion, Art, and Science* had appeared. Dewey reviewed the first two volumes in the February 1906 issue of the journal *Science*. He wrote:

Those who think, as does the present writer, that the really vital problem of present philosophy is the union of naturalism and idealism, must gratefully acknowledge the extraordinary force and simplicity with which Dr. Santayana has grasped this problem, and the rich and sure way in which he has interpreted, in its light, the intricacies and depths of our common experiences [Dewey (1906), p. 225].

Up to this moment Santayana had been known for his poetry and his writings on aesthetics, literature, and religion. Dewey now realized that he was a broad-ranging systematic philosopher. Santayana's program to describe, explain, and contextualize humanity's great achievements without a supernatural framework had approached the heights Dewey hoped philosophy might reach in the wake of Charles Darwin. Dewey's enthusiasm prompted him to send a copy of his review to Santayana. So did the poet Bliss Carman, who reviewed the first four volumes for the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> Santayana, who did not seek out reviews of his work, was surprised and delighted by both reviews and wrote to his publisher Scribner's that they "could furnish excellent sentences to quote in an advertising sheet" (4 April 1906) [Santayana (2001), p. 340].

It was Dewey's second review—this time of all five volumes—that furnished Scribner's a meaty quotation:

We are grateful to Mr. Santayana for what he has given us: the most adequate contribution America has yet made—always excepting Emerson—to moral philosophy [Dewey 1907], p. 128].

Dewey's fervent praise was tempered by some aspects of *The Life of Reason* that he found confusing. He was pleased to read Santayana saying human life had natural origins and ideal ends and that the source of error, not just in philosophy, but in all aspects of life is to ignore one or the other. Nevertheless, he was unsure whether Santayana saw art or science as the paramount feature of the life of reason. Dewey wrote that art should be regarded as

the recognition in intelligence of order and harmony in so far as that acknowledgment functions though action in the service of conscious excellence or happiness [Dewey (1907), p. 126].

Science is itself an art of this sort, but preliminary and preparatory to art's "ultimate destiny." This vision is Dewey's

philosophic program in a nutshell. He found “much in Mr. Santayana that bears out this conception.” He then labeled this philosophy “pragmatism—pragmatism of a noble and significant type” [*idem*].

But Dewey saw another side to Santayana, reflected in passages that declared “action to be servile and instrumental; the end of life to be contemplation” [Dewey (1907), p. 127]—conclusions that to Dewey were anathema.

#### SANTAYANA ON DEWEY’S PRAGMATISM

Santayana knew that they were not fully in sync, yet there might be something in Dewey worth tracking. Santayana noticed Dewey’s appreciation of the need to recognize human ideals in a letter to Horace Kallen, in which he compared Dewey to William James:

Pragmatism in a wider sense involves an ethical system, because we can’t determine what is useful or satisfactory without, to some extent, articulating our ideals. That is something which James doesn’t include in philosophy. Dewey is far better in that respect, and I notice he even begins to talk about the ideal object and the intent of ideas! (5 February 1908) [Santayana (2001a), p. 379].

#### SANTAYANA AND DEWEY MEET AND CORRESPOND

By the summer of 1909, Dewey had become chairman of the Philosophy Department at Columbia University (DC 1909.07). He invited Santayana to give a series of lectures at Columbia in February of 1910—lectures that were published in the fall of that year as *Three Philosophical Poets*. Dewey’s wife, Alice Chipman Dewey, attended these lectures and talked to him afterward. This conversation resulted in what may be the definitive put-down of Santayana. She told her husband that Santayana “lived in the drawing room and

had never seen the kitchen” (Letter to WR Houston, 1944.05.21) [Dewey (1992) 10002].

A year later, in February of 1911, Santayana began to publish a series of articles on Bertrand Russell’s *Philosophic Essays* in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*. The first (in the issue of February 3) is entitled “The Study of Essence” and the second (in the issue of March 2) is called “The Critique of Pragmatism.” Both are important to what happened next.

One week after the publication of “The Critique of Pragmatism,” Dewey wrote a letter to Santayana that began, “I need hardly say that I have been intensely interested in your Journal articles.” Dewey first expressed hope that Santayana would “write something more definitive on the problem of ‘essences’ and their relation to existences” (1911.03.09 [Dewey (1992), 03608]). He was also concerned that Santayana had misinterpreted something in a conversation between them the year before [Santayana (1911), p. 116].

Dewey wrote to Santayana a week after the second article appeared. Santayana replied quickly (in a letter that has not survived) and Dewey immediately wrote again.<sup>2</sup> The gist of the exchange is twofold. After reading “The Study of Essence,” Dewey wanted Santayana to elaborate more. Dewey’s second concern had to do with Santayana’s report that Dewey had agreed that the mind of a mutual friend existed independently of their idea of him, “but it was not for philosophy to discuss that independent being; the business of philosophy was merely to fix the logic and system of our own knowledge” [Santayana (1911), p. 116]. Santayana took this assertion as a sign that pragmatic and empirical philosophy was concerned mainly with its own ideas and, thus, amounted to a kind of solipsism. Dewey argued that Santayana was focusing on a minor technical issue, while Dewey was raising the question of the nature and purpose of philosophy.

Santayana’s missing reply provided Dewey no clear answers. Santayana might have told him that he was indeed working on a fuller explanation of what he meant by essence. At that time, he

was developing his ontological categories—the realms of being, namely essence, matter, and consciousness or spirit. “The Study of Essence” was its debut, but the book he had in mind would not appear until 1923 as *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. In his reply to Dewey, Santayana must have raised several questions that Dewey found puzzling, for in his second letter Dewey wrote:

I am not going to try to answer any of the questions you raise, because, while very simple and direct, they do not spring up readily in the sort of question that more habitually preoccupies me, and I want to assimilate them. (1911.03.13) [Dewey (1992), 03609].

The developing system did not yet include the realm of truth, but Santayana’s missing letter<sup>3</sup> must have said something about truth, as Dewey wrote that he was enclosing a lecture he had given entitled “The Problem of Truth.” This essay contained observations Santayana would have looked at askance. For example:

Truth... is first of all... a social virtue... When mere matters of fact and mere happenings are promoted from the status of fact and event to the category of truth it is because some social consequence is seen to depend on their mode of presentation [Dewey (1899-1924), 6, pp. 14-15].

Around Easter, about a month later, Santayana met Dewey again at Columbia. It was the start of his valedictory trip across the United States.<sup>4</sup> Afterward, he wrote to his friend Charles Augustus Strong that there had been little progress in “mutual understanding—As Dewey said, we are all facing different problems when we seem to be discussing the same point” (29 April 1911) [Santayana (2001b), p. 35].

#### TWO BOOKS ON GERMAN PHILOSOPHY AND TWO REVIEWS

In January 1912, Santayana left the United States for the last time. At first, he was based in Paris in an apartment provided by

Strong. By 1913 he had published *Winds of Doctrine*, a collection of essays, including the ones on Bertrand Russell, but left out were the references to his conversation with Dewey. In the summer of 1914, while on what he thought was a brief visit to England, World War I broke out. He did not return to Paris for five years.

Inspired by the war, both Dewey and Santayana produced books on German philosophy. Each reviewed the other's book. Both books were critical of their subject. Both reviews praised the other writer but found that he had missed the chief cause of failure in German philosophy.

Dewey's book came out first, in 1915, and Santayana's review appeared in November of that year. Santayana chose several quotations from Dewey's *German Philosophy and Politics* to show how appalling German philosophy could be. An example is Dewey's summary of Fichte:

The Germans alone of all existing nations are a pure race. They alone have preserved unalloyed the divine deposit [Santayana (1915), p. 645].<sup>5</sup>

The title of the book Santayana was writing is *Egotism in German Philosophy*. This quotation is a stunning example of that egotism expanded into chauvinistic fervor. But the problem for Santayana was not just some egregious pronouncement, but a fundamental principle under which German philosophers took their own ideas, not just to represent reality, but to be reality. Santayana labelled this notion *transcendental* and said:

Professor Dewey skillfully avoids complicating his survey with any account of the transcendental theory of knowledge: yet that after all is the foundation of everything in this philosophy, and until it is radically abandoned we shall hardly emerge from the moral quicksands to which it leads [Santayana (195), p. 649].

*Egotism in German Philosophy* was published in 1916 and

Dewey's review came out in December. Dewey's initial celebration of Santayana's style soon gave way to what Dewey found lacking. Santayana saw the tension in German philosophy as between struggling instincts and divine will. The problem for Santayana was the failure to consider the natural source of those instincts. For Dewey, the problem was not here but in the way German philosophy provided justification for authoritarian government. The natural instincts, which Santayana thought were being ignored, were in Dewey's view "forced, from the start, into an apologetic justification of what is already established by the authorities which be." The result is that "Mr. Santayana has not noticed a fatal cleft in German thought between inner freedom and outer obedience" [Dewey (1916), p. 156].

For Dewey, the authoritative institutions themselves are what generate the egotism and the consequent metaphysical confusion. For Dewey, thought occurs within a social context. It is active. It is an exchange. It is communication. Santayana would not have denied the importance of social and historical context in shaping thought—they are, after all, part of the natural world. But for Santayana, thought is a vista—a vision (or, in philosophy, a system)—that enables the individual to come to terms with and to rise above the circumstances in which he finds himself.

#### TOWARD THE END OF THE WAR AND AFTER

Santayana's exile in England distracted him from fulfilling Dewey's request to say more about what he meant by essence. He gave a number of lectures. Seven of them were published in 1920 as *Character and Opinion in the United States*. He wrote a series of essays, many published first in the London literary magazine *The Athenaeum* and published in 1922 as *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*. The ones written during the war contain scattered references to the realm of essence. In the later soliloquies, the references to essences abound. In several of them he employs his special sense of the term, meaning any idea, sensory unit, shape, or possibility. By this time his delayed project to systematically formulate essence as one of the four realms of being was



underway, along with another project, *Dominations and Powers*, a work in political philosophy, to which he was equally devoted in 1920, but which would have to wait thirty more years to emerge.

In 1916, the year *Egotism in German Philosophy* came out, Dewey published one of his seminal works, *Democracy and Education*. Early in 1919, he gave a series of lectures at the Imperial University of Japan in Tokyo. These were published in 1920 as *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. During his stay in Japan, Dewey was invited to visit China, where he ended up staying for two years. Columbia University invited Santayana to consider offering a course in the winter of 1920 during Dewey's absence, but that did not happen.

#### SANTAYANA ANNOTATES *RECONSTRUCTION IN PHILOSOPHY*

Although Santayana did not review *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, his marginal notes reveal how Dewey appeared to him. Santayana was deeply distrustful of technology as a means of achieving human ideals. Dewey, explaining how possibilities become actual, wrote:

Invention proceeds, and at last we have the telegraph, the telephone, first through wires, and then with no artificial medium. The concrete environment is transformed in the desired direction; it is idealized in fact and not merely in fancy. The ideal is realized through its own use as a tool or method of inspection, experimentation, selection and combination of concrete natural operations [Dewey (1921), pp. 120-121].

Reading this, Santayana wrote in the margin: "Heaven made real by the radio!"<sup>6</sup>

#### DEWEY READS *SCEPTICISM AND ANIMAL FAITH*: SANTAYANA MUST SURRENDER

*Scepticism and Animal Faith*, Santayana's initial explication of his ontological system, appeared in 1923. In Santayana's account, essence,

the concept that puzzled Dewey, is what remains after all existence is doubted. Essences are eternal, but they don't exist. They do double duty: they are the content of intuition and they also are exemplified by the existing world, as when the Great War instantiated the idea of war. The notions that Santayana put forth in *Reason in Common Sense* of concretions in existence and concretions in discourse (he might have said concretions in experience) are brought together into one concept. Dewey, in his review, observed that the book was Santayana's answer to critics who accused him of being unsystematic and without logic. Here was logic with a vengeance: clear definitions and their implications assiduously followed. Yet clarity brought out something Dewey could not accept. He noted that while the focus of the book, unlike *The Life of Reason*, is metaphysical,<sup>7</sup> its moral implications are (as Santayana explicitly acknowledged), obvious. In describing this interplay between ontology and morals, Dewey made a technical error. He read Santayana to say, "All existence is physical." Students of Santayana know that he distinguishes two forms of existence: matter and spirit. Nevertheless, Dewey had put his finger on a fundamental divide between them. Although Dewey harped on the radical separation of existence and essence, his objection can be phrased in Santayana's vocabulary. Physical nature, matter, produces everything, including spirit. Spirit formulates ideals, but has no power to bring them about, but matter has no interests or ideal directions of its own. Dewey interpreted this to mean that "existence is meaningless," and therefore

what can be more comic than existence which is aimless meaningless and mechanical, and yet is the sole author of the only things worthwhile, the ideal forms that fill consciousness [Dewey (1923), p. 295].

The moral conclusion is the same one that made Dewey suspicious when he read *The Life of Reason*:

The moral... is to enjoy the contemplation of essence [*idem*].

The other side to skepticism in Santayana's book is animal faith—the beliefs that the demands of existence force upon us: that I need food, that something threatens me, that others are there. Dewey saw that side as tacit support for his own program. But how could Santayana balance his love of contemplation with practical concerns?

It is a delicate enterprise to discount the practical intent and the busy life of man in behalf of aesthetic essences and their contemplation, and then to rely upon the practical needs, acts and sufferings of man to make sure of the existence of anything, and to render essences applicable to things and expressive of their careers [Dewey (1923), p. 296].

The result is that Santayana had become hemmed in by his own logic and “having surrendered so much to a naturalistic pragmatism Mr. Santayana must surrender more [*idem*].

In 1911, Dewey had asked Santayana to elaborate on what he meant by essences. But having seen his answer twelve years later, Dewey was still unsatisfied and wrote that a “sequel is badly needed.” The sequel would come, but before it did, Dewey had produced a major work of his own.

#### EXPERIENCE AND NATURE

In March 1925, Frederick Woodbridge, the philosopher at Columbia who was editor of the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* (later *The Journal of Philosophy*; Santayana liked to call it “The Whited Sepulchre”) asked Santayana if he would review Dewey's recently published *Experience and Nature*. Santayana agreed right after receiving the book. He wrote Woodbridge, “The first chapter... suffices to show me that this is a far more thorough and elaborate presentation of his philosophy than any he has given us hitherto” (12 March 1925) [Santayana (2002), pp. 239-240]. It

took Santayana six struggling months to write the review. When it was ready, he wrote Woodbridge again:

I hope it may amuse Dewey and not offend him, because I have come away from reading his book—twice, most attentively—liking him better than ever. (29 September 1925) [Santayana (2002), p. 261].

The controversy that erupted over the review of *Experience and Nature* is the most well-known and most commented-about event in Dewey and Santayana's relationship. Dewey published a reply in 1927 that made it seem as if he had discovered that a fellow shipmate was at heart a mutineer. To delve into the details of their debate here would require at least as much space as this entire article. It would involve scoping out the ways in which they read past each other and the ways in which their discernment of the other was especially acute.

Examples of how they misread each other include Santayana's assertion that for Dewey "It is an axiom... that nothing but the immediate is real [Santayana (1925), p. 683]. "Imagine the shock I felt when I read that," wrote Dewey [Dewey (1927), p. 60]. Dewey, on the other hand, said Santayana "treats nature as a single substance whose parts and changes as such are illusory," which is about as far from Santayana's conception of the realm of matter as you can get. Santayana habitually interpreted American philosophers as spokesmen for American industrial enterprise. In his review, Santayana said that of Dewey, even more than William James, it could be said that "his philosophy is calculated to justify all the assumptions of American society" [Santayana (1925), p. 675]. Dewey did consider that a fundamental part of his program was to explore the conditions necessary for a democratic society, but as an ardent campaigner for social causes, he could hardly be accurately described as a champion of industry.

Nevertheless, the overall nature of the dispute is largely accurate. Santayana accused Dewey of being a "half-hearted and short-winded naturalist" because his metaphysics emphasizes the "dominance

of the foreground” of human experience. To Santayana, human experience is a tiny part of the cosmos, not its central feature. Dewey replied that if he was half-hearted then Santayana was broken-backed. From Dewey’s perspective, the separation of consciousness or spirit from its natural background is a fundamental error. For Santayana, spirit, even though it grows out of and always depends on matter, is an utterly different form of existence. Dewey argued that human experience is thoroughly enmeshed with its natural and social environment.

At bottom, there was no dispute about the facts. As Dewey quickly saw, the basic difference was one of moral emphasis. For Dewey, a central philosophic mission is to inquire into the ways in which people can co-operatively live together. For Santayana it is to show how one human being can come to terms with his or her place in the world.

Although Santayana seldom read what others wrote about him, Strong sent him Dewey’s reply. Here is part of what Santayana wrote back:

Many thanks for your letter and for Dewey’s explosion... I am sorry that Dewey should have been so much enraged by my article: I meant to be friendly and sympathetic, but *magis amica veritas* [more a friend of truth]. Yet I am not sorry that he wrote his reply, because I have gathered something from it, partly from his denial that he thinks the immediate alone real, and partly from his assumption that by substance I understand something not in space and time and not distributed as things are distributed, in other words, that I don’t think it is matter but is some metaphysical being. Would you have got the same impression from my book (Scepticism) or is it merely Dewey’s extraordinary intellectual deafness and blindness? He can’t think: he can only see things move: and for that reason he wonders how I, who sometimes see things moving too, can also think about them and see the dialectical and eternal relations of their essences. (12 April 1927) [Santayana (2002), p. 327].

DEWEY ON *THE REALM OF ESSENCE*

Santayana, having attained a clearer glimpse into where Dewey was coming from, became more suspicious of the depth of Dewey as a philosopher. Dewey's reaction to Santayana was almost exactly the same. When he came to review *The Realm of Essence* in 1928, he thought that Santayana's philosophy led to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Yet he could not help registering praise for Santayana's writing. The title of his review is "Philosophy as Fine Art." At first, he distinguished philosophy from the arts and wrote that even though Santayana's description of essences and their relationship to mind and nature is a product of his imagination, as philosophy it "demands trial by raising questions of matter-of-fact evidence and of internal logical consistency from which a poem or musical symphony is exempt" [Dewey (1928), p. 353]. Then, having found what he takes as a contradiction in Santayana's ontological categories, he advises the reader to think of Santayana's oeuvre in another light:

The works of art created by Mr. Santayana afford so much enjoyment of a high order in their embodiment of observation and reflection that the reader is well advised who... surrenders himself to their enjoyment. For in the end it is only the wisdom embodied in natural existence which counts, and the technical wisdom of the ontological and dialectical philosopher drops away. The affinity of mind to pure essence is disciplinary and preparatory; that intermediate and instrumental affinity having been developed, mind turns spontaneously to its proper object, meaning realized by art in natural existence [Dewey (1928), p. 354].

Dewey had been thinking for some time about the role of art in life, experience, and philosophy. To explain the pleasure he found in reading Santayana, he thought it better to regard his works as poetic expressions rather than as articulations of an ontology he himself could adopt. This view is not unfair, as Santayana explicitly said that

his categories were the ones that helped him to get by and might not be suitable for others.

SANTAYANA READS *THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY*

In 1929 Dewey published *The Quest for Certainty*, a book Santayana read with an ironic eye. Santayana made numerous marginal notes. The most memorable is where he comments on Dewey's observation that our view of the actual, however accurate, is colored by the possibilities we see in it. So, when Dewey wrote, "Whatever is discovered about actual existence ... could not touch the fact that we are capable of directing our affection and loyalty to the possibilities resident in the actualities discovered" [Dewey 1929], p. 289]. Santayana wrote in the margin, "Is the object of affection a possibility? A lady-love is the possibility of f\_\_\_\_\_g".

*THE GENTEEL TRADITION AT BAY AND  
SOME TURNS OF THOUGHT*

In 1930, Dewey retired from teaching, but his pursuit of social and political reform continued unabated as did his engagement in philosophic discussion. In his review of *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* in 1931, Dewey was inclined to take Santayana literally. He approved that "after the author's recent excursions into metaphysics" Santayana had returned, "with ripened insight, to the manner of the earlier *Life of Reason*" [Dewey (1931), p. 529]. Dewey said the most "constructive" part was the concluding section on the moral adequacy of naturalism, especially as it closed by saying that "only a morality frankly relative to man's nature is worthy of man" [Santayana (1931), p. 577].<sup>8</sup>

Dewey did not review any of the three volumes of the *Realms of Being* that followed *The Realm of Essence* and which described, in turn, the realms of matter, truth, and spirit. In his next review, he preferred to read Santayana as giving creative expression to a

personal vision. Dewey reviewed *Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy* in 1934, the same year he published *Art as Experience*. In that work, he argued that an identifiable experience is one that is sifted from the continuum of what we do and undergo by some binding emotion and art is the production of objects that express an experience. These objects (these works of art), even when not explicitly aimed at communication) enable others to re-experience something of the original experience that went into them. The artist works on his chosen material to refine the emotional character so that it ends up communicable. Taking Santayana's observation that all perception is imaginative, you might come to regard philosophy as a form of expression, not just of ideas floating in an intellectual vacuum, but of the life and times of the philosopher. Philosophy and criticism can be thought of as modes of artistic expression with ideas and their history as the medium.

*Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy* contains five essays on five thinkers: John Locke, FH Bradley, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and Julian Benda. From the essay on Locke Dewey gleans the notion that even though all philosophies are frail because they are products of the "reactive, spontaneous, and volatile human mind"—an observation that supports the idea that philosophies are imaginative and expressive. There is a philosophic orthodoxy that persists through the ages. Aristotle and Spinoza are exemplars. Locke is a hybrid, being both orthodox and heretical. According to Dewey, Santayana "likes to think of himself as one of the relatively few among modern philosophers with the sanity and simple candor to adhere to that orthodoxy." Dewey, however, read Santayana's "dualism of mind and matter" as a "heretical departure" from his admired orthodoxy and said that this heresy "runs through every essay in the volume." In his conclusion, Dewey quotes from the essay on Freud:

The ineptitude of our aesthetic minds to unravel the nature of mechanism does not deprive these minds of their own clearness and euphony. Besides sounding their various musical notes, they have the cognitive



function of indicating the hour and catching the echoes of distant events or of maturing inward dispositions [Santayana (1933), pp. 97-98].<sup>9</sup>

Dewey draws from this two of Santayana's key ideas and wonders if they even need to be thought of as orthodox:

Here in two sentences are his fundamental skepticism, his purely practical justification of knowledge, and his unfailing sense of the significance of the poetic and the moral. Why should this deeply personal vision be offered as a contemporary restatement of Aristotle and Spinoza? [Dewey (1934)].

#### CHALLENGES TO SANTAYANA IN *ART AS EXPERIENCE*

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey explicitly criticized Santayana's analysis of aesthetic experience and the role of art. He looked at several quotes from *The Realm of Essence*, including this one:

The most material thing in as far as it is felt to be beautiful, is instantly immaterialized, raised above external personal relations, concentrated and deepened in its proper being, in a word sublimated into an essence [Santayana (1942), p. 8].<sup>10</sup>

Dewey's direct response includes the following account of what happens in developing or appreciating a work of art:

Instead of fleeing from experience to a metaphysical realm, the material of experiences is so rendered that it becomes the pregnant matter of a new experience [Dewey (1934), p. 294].

For Dewey artistic experience is not escape from a burdensome world. Instead it colors and shapes all our other experiences. It teaches us to interpret what we perceive:

The sense we now have of the essential characteristics of person and objects is very largely the result of art [*idem* —Dewey’s emphasis].

Here Dewey played with the term essence that had long troubled him in Santayana’s vocabulary. He reverted from Santayana’s technical use in the passage quoted, where *essence* referred to eternal ideas, images, and impressions to its more common meaning as the gist of something.

#### DEWEY ON *THE LAST PURITAN*

Dewey’s notion that art conveys character carried over into his highly appreciative review of Santayana’s novel *The Last Puritan*. His most effusive praise is for Santayana’s rendition of character, as Dewey found his portrayals, even when they are recognizable types, to have such richness that they are fully alive. Taking this further and looking at the novel in the context of Santayana’s explicitly philosophic output, he wrote that “this volume stands above his other writings.” Dewey quotes from Santayana’s epilogue—“the argument is dramatized, the views become human persuasions” — and concludes: “This novel shows that his particular artistic sensitivity is to character, so that in this novel his poetic gifts have freer play than when he is writing the poetry of ideas” [Dewey (1936), p. 51].

Santayana received a copy of Dewey’s review from Milton Munitz, to whom he wrote back:

Thank you for sending me... Dewey’s truly admirable criticism of my novel. He is penetrating and generous. The only thing that perhaps I miss, as in almost all the reviews that have reached me, is a feeling for the radical cause of Oliver’s worldly failures. Dewey at least goes half way towards explaining them when he says that Oliver<sup>11</sup> was a Puritan, not by education or tradition, but by nature. (21 August 1936) [Santayana (2003), p. 370].

NUMBER ONE AND NUMBER TWO IN  
*THE LIBRARY OF LIVING PHILOSOPHERS*

THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN DEWEY

A sign of their prominence is that in 1938, as Paul Arthur Schilpp was planning the series known as the *Library of Living Philosophers*, Dewey was the first philosopher he asked to participate and Santayana the second. Santayana was also asked to be a critic in the Dewey volume. He hesitantly agreed to both proposals as long as he did not have to write anything new, other than his reply to his critics. For his contribution to the Dewey book, he sent “Dewey’s Natural Metaphysics,” his review of *Experience and Nature*. This was a rather cavalier choice, as Dewey had responded in detail (his explosion),<sup>12</sup> Santayana had in correspondence appreciated some of Dewey’s corrections, Santayana had already allowed his review to be reprinted in the 1936 collection of essays called *Obiter Scripta* (which Dewey did not review), and neither there nor in the Dewey Schilpp volume did Santayana acknowledge Dewey’s response to his *Experience and Nature* review. In Dewey’s reply to his Schilpp critics, he dutifully replied to Santayana’s review again, sometimes addressing comments he had already addressed (and in a footnote referring the reader to his 1927 reply), but often providing further elaboration of his ideas of experience and how perception is organically embedded in, derived from, and revealing of a creature’s environment.

Santayana’s desire to minimize his participation in the Schilpp projects was partly because he was busy writing *The Realm of Spirit* and did not want the distraction. During this time and while the preparations for the Dewey Schilpp volume were underway, Santayana received a copy of Dewey’s *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (published in 1938). In this book, Dewey, in an explicit objection to Santayana’s assertion in “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics” that

for Dewey “nothing but the immediate is real,” made clear that “all knowledge involves mediation” and denied forthrightly that “there is such a thing as immediate knowledge” (Dewey (1938). p. 142). But Santayana was in no frame of mind to plough through Dewey’s difficult work. He wrote to Daniel Cory:

Would you like “Dewey’s Logic?” I see The Times Lit. Sup. calls it a major work, I find it utterly unreadable. Perhaps it is important, at any rate it is a ponderous tome, and you shall have it if you want it. (3 May 1939) [Santayana (2004), p. 235].

Santayana received *The Philosophy of John Dewey* in November 1939 and wrote to Daniel Cory about it twice within four days. At first, he lamented that he was

a little ashamed of having allowed my paper to be reprinted, not because I don’t think it good enough in itself, but because it is explicitly a translation of Dewey into my own categories, which naturally don’t fit. (17 November 1939) [Santayana (2004), p. 289].

But in the second letter, he wrote:

In Dewey’s replies I have found some light. I begin to see how he conceives the continuum of physical and mental qualities all in one flux. It is not far from my own view, if you add the transcendental spirit looking on and the matter distributing and connecting the qualities. (20 November 1939) [Santayana 2004), pp. 289-290].

To Schilpp he wrote:

I am almost sorry that I allowed you to print that old review of mine about Dewey... However, this book has been very useful to me: if I could have read it before contributing to it, and had had time and energy then to write about Dewey again, I should have been more

sympathetic. I agree with him in his own field: the difficulty is that I find that field framed in, in my own mind, with much nearer and much wider realities—the spirit, the truth, and the universe. (26 November 1939) [Santayana (2004), p. 291].

#### THE PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE SANTAYANA

Santayana's Schilpp volume appeared at the end of 1940. In preparing his reply ("Apologia pro Mente Sua"), Santayana wrote to Cory: "I am glad that Schilpp included me in his rogue's gallery. It has caused me to write an exposition of my philosophy very different from the others, and perhaps better" (21 October 1940) [Santayana (2004), p. 411]. Dewey was not asked to participate in the Santayana volume, but in November 1941, he published a review where he acknowledged that he might have been "assuming, uninvited, the position of a further contributor" [Dewey (1941), p. 375].

Dewey makes three fundamental points in his essay. The first has to do with the value of Santayana's writings, the second with the many strains that seem to run through Santayana's philosophy, and the third with the role of morals in his philosophy. Regarding the first it is the poetic and even religious character of his writing, both his literary style and the poetic interplay of ideas, that make Santayana's work compelling:

I believe that his phase of his philosophy is that which has given so many readers that which I myself have derived from it: instruction, added insight, and the kind of "inspiration" that enables one to face the conditions of life more happily [Dewey (1941), p. 376].

That his writing makes it possible to live better is enough to indicate the moral character of Santayana's philosophy. Nevertheless, Dewey extracts from several of the Schilpp volume

critics an insight into the multitude of philosophers whose influence Santayana is under. This leads to a problem in that Santayana's realms of being "turn out to be in Santayana's philosophy water-tight compartments" [Dewey (1941), p. 378]. This reading is, I am sure, a misreading of Santayana, yet it is an exaggeration that Dewey uses to drive home a point. That point is that Santayana's rigid separation of—here I'll use Santayana's terms—matter and spirit does not address what Dewey calls "the central problem of modern thought." That problem is "the connection between the pre-human and pre-moral base and the moral interests that play so large a part in human life" [Dewey (1941), p. 379]. Santayana's philosophy leads to some confusion in this regard. For example, there is the "denial of the efficacy of thought as consciousness and spirit, although in some passages efficacy is ascribed to reflection and reason" [Dewey (1941), p. 380].

As Dewey starts to wrap up his discussion he writes:

The problem of morals... is central in the interpretation of Santayana... When... I say "problem of morals", I do not mean the problem as to what is the genuine nature of morals, but the question of what is the attitude of Santayana's philosophy toward morals. Put as briefly as possible: Is Santayana's philosophy as a whole fundamentally a theory of morals? Is what many writers call his metaphysics... fundamentally a part of his doctrine of morals or is it independent of the latter? [Dewey (1941), p. 383].

Dewey does not answer the question, but says that there are two ways of looking at it. If what Santayana calls the spiritual life is a departure from moral life—or worldly concerns—then morality is given "a secondary and derived place." Yet if the spiritual life is a supreme good then its conception stands as a model for moral thinking and a vision of how to live. One could interpret it, not as a departure from natural instinct, but "the consummate flowering of the highest impulse of *pre-rational* morality" [Dewey (1941), p. 384]

—in other words, the flowering of pre-human natural instincts. In this case, Santayana would be exemplifying Dewey's insistence that consciousness is not something distinct from the rest of nature, but an intimate part of it and that consciousness is nature's awareness of itself.

Dewey does not spell it out in this essay, but Santayana's description of spiritual life, though it might be an ideal for Santayana is not one that Dewey himself would find inspiring. Nevertheless, by 1948, Santayana's remembrance of Dewey's remarks was that they were quite buoyant. During the writing of his "Apologia" and in the time just after publication Santayana's feelings about the volume went back and forth. At first, he grumbled about the quality of the criticisms, but then told Cory that what he was writing was perhaps a "better exposition" of his philosophy than his other works. That was in October 1940. In February 1941, after receiving a copy of the published book, he wrote Cory: "I have read a little here and there in the criticisms, and like them better than I did originally." In April 1941 he wrote Schilpp:

Thank you for your warm words about my Apologia. The occasion naturally stirred me up, and I wrote with more spirit than if I had had no criticisms before me; yet as a reply to criticisms, I feel that my Apologia was very defective. I hadn't the patience to take up point after point in order [Santayana (2006), p. 30].

Seven years later, in August 1948, when Santayana received from Schilpp a "richly bound volume" of *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, he had become quite sanguine about himself, his critics, and Dewey's review. He wrote to Schilpp:

I remember that Prof. Dewey said that this account of my philosophy would be the one to be most convenient for any student who wished to understand it; and I think myself that my part of the book is a more lively and intelligible exposition of my views than my other versions of them: so that, as Prof. Dewey also said, it was to your enterprise that

I owed the occasion and stimulus to explain myself best. These are not his words (in either passage) and perhaps he meant that the other critics had helped me to clear up my thoughts: but that was not the case. I find that at present I am better understood than I was at that time, the self-confidence of modern philosophy having yielded a little in the public mind with late events [Santayana (2008), p. 86].

#### FROM DEWEY'S CORRESPONDENCE

Although Santayana was mellowing toward Dewey, Dewey had become rather frustrated with Santayana's later developments. In his public comments he often promoted the value he could still draw from Santayana's later works, but in private he revealed disappointment with the way his theories had evolved. Already in 1931, he wrote in a letter to Joseph Ratner:

In rereading Santayana I've been surprised to see how he separates matter and form; he is obsessed by the older psychology and frequently reduces expressiveness of material to association and suggestion, which leaves his fundamental psychology sensationalistic. I have a hunch his whole theory of essence is due to his sensational psychology [Dewey (1992, 07397)].

Then in May 1944, while Santayana was incommunicado in Rome during the war and the first volume of his autobiography *Persons and Places* had become a best seller, Dewey wrote to a correspondent who had described *Persons and Places* to him:

I haven't read Santayana's book—in fact I've read almost nothing—save detective stories and the SRL doublecrossics—for months. But I think you have reported it—and him—with thorough insight... There is a lot of wisdom and insight scattered through his *Life of Reason*, based on a shaky psychological foundation—I don't suppose it's a proper figure



of speech to have foundations grow or swell but in his case they have come in recent years to absorb his whole philosophy —aided by his unfortunate acquaintance with East Indian philosophy... His account of his own philosophy bears out what you say about its juvenile origin and fixity—save that the least desirable features of it have grown at the expense of the humane elements in it (to W. R. Houston, 1944.05.21) [Dewey (1992) [10022]].<sup>13</sup>

It could be argued that the shaky psychology Dewey attributed to Santayana was closer to his own than he suspected, but that would require more detailed exposition than this survey allows.

#### AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS

The last artifact in this account comes from Santayana. John Dewey died on 1 June 1952. George Santayana died nearly four months later, on 26 September. The following summer, a short essay by Santayana appeared in *American Scholar* entitled “Three American Philosophers,” the three being John Dewey, William James, and himself. For our mission here, we can leave James aside.

About himself, Santayana explained that he belonged among American philosophers “by accident,” but no other class would be appropriate, “since I write in English and taught for many years at Harvard.” About his philosophy, he gave support to Dewey’s preference for reading his later philosophy as fine art:

My later writings have been devoted to discovering the natural categories of my spontaneous thought, and restating my opinion in those honest terms. It is essentially a literary labour, a form of art; and I do not attempt to drive other people to think as I do. Let them be their own poets [Santayana (1953), p. 134].

Of Dewey, he gave a brief biography noting that he came from Vermont, “the most rural and retired of New England states” and

having rejected the “myth or dogma” of the preachers of his youth, “he adopted the general outlook of Hegel.” Dewey’s affinity for Hegel helps explain “how society and history may be regarded as composing the reality ultimately to be appealed to in philosophy.” But Dewey turned Hegel around. Santayana would not say that he became a naturalist, as that would concede too much. He explained the transition this way:

For Hegel, society and History composed the “Phenomenology of Spirit”; but Spirit is not mentioned by Dewey, and the panorama of the world remains the ever varying subject of knowledge, a panorama floating and growing in its own medium [Santayana (1953), p. 131].

Santayana then talked about Dewey’s world-ranging concerns and his leadership in humanitarian and political causes. Here, he gave a more accurate characterization of Dewey’s worldview than when he called him the spokesman for American enterprise:

From the centre of capitalist and imperialist America he seemed to diffuse a contrary purely humanitarian influence; yet with a special qualification. Luxury and inequality were indeed to be deprecated: on the other hand, ignorance and poverty were to be extirpated the world over [Santayana (1953), p. 131].

Santayana read this not as the promotion of universal goals, for he added: “The whole world must be raised to American standards”.

His assessment of Dewey’s philosophy follows from this classification:

In Dewey, devotion to the distinctly modern and American subject matter of social experience has caused him to ignore two prior realities which the existence of that experience presupposes. One reality is the material world, in which this experience arises and by which its development is controlled. The other reality is the transcendental

spirit by which the whole dramatic process is witnessed, reconsidered, and judged. His system may therefore be called a social moralism, without cosmology and without psychological analysis [Santayana (1953), pp. 131-132].

## CONCLUSION

In the end, nothing is resolved. As we leave them, Dewey is accusing Santayana of having a faulty psychology and Santayana is accusing Dewey of having none at all. This dispute, however, is but an outward manifestation of other deep-seated differences in morals and politics. It would be a mistake, however, to think that because their difference was moral each thought of the other as being a bad person. We have seen how from time to time Dewey and Santayana each had a glimpse of the light of the other shining through. Moreover, they both had a commitment, and this a moral one, to the fundamental contribution philosophy makes to living human life.

In this brief survey of a forty-seven-year engagement, I have tried to show that the opposition of Dewey and Santayana is not just an abstract conflict between opposing theories—as when we might compare, say, Aristotle and Confucius—but an active clash in which elemental misunderstanding combined with penetrating insight. In each of the encounters described here, I have tried to find something revelatory or at least of immediate interest. To explain each of these in detail would require, in several cases, as much exposition for each as this entire survey. And these are projects for another time.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Carman, in his long appreciation, pointed out the pessimism that pervades *The Life of Reason*, something Dewey did not note in his review.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss their meeting and the letters in detail in Rubin (2010).

<sup>3</sup> For a speculation as to what Santayana's letter said, go to [http://georgesantayanasociety.org/Presentations/Santayana\\_and\\_Dewey\\_Meet/Letters/1911-03-11\\_Santayana's%20omissing%20letter.pdf](http://georgesantayanasociety.org/Presentations/Santayana_and_Dewey_Meet/Letters/1911-03-11_Santayana's%20omissing%20letter.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Santayana left the United States for what turned out to be the rest of his life in January 1912.

<sup>5</sup> Quoting Dewey's *German Philosophy and Politics*, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> Citations from Santayana's marginalia can be located in Santayana (2011) with the author, book and page number of the work Santayana annotated.

<sup>7</sup> In the sense of defining ontological categories, not in the sense that Santayana explicitly rejected of determining with finality the nature of reality.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Dewey (1931), p. 531.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Dewey (1934).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Dewey (1934).

<sup>11</sup> The main character in *The Last Puritan*.

<sup>12</sup> See *infra* page x.

<sup>13</sup> This is the same letter where Dewey recounted the story of his wife saying Santayana "lived in the drawing room and had never seen the kitchen." See page x.

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