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Santayana's Spencer,
The Attempt to Revise Victorian Realism and Agnosticism

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ABSTRACT

Santayana adopted Spencer's realism, but opposed Spencer's idea that knowledge was limited to sensations and self-knowledge. Santayana objected to this limitation on two grounds. First, he believed that one could possess real knowledge about essences or other beings including God, and that this knowledge might take a spiritual or an aesthetic form rather than a scientific one. The different kinds of knowledge would all evolve over time as they came to more closely correspond to reality. Second, Santayana believed that Spencer was responsible for the fact that agnosticism in the nineteenth century had been excessively placid in face of the dangers and tensions in the universe. When revising agnosticism Santayana allowed for the possibility of unlimited and evolved knowledge both of matter and spiritual entities such as God or gods. This was a radical departure from Spencer's realism because it removed scientific knowledge from its pedestal and made it the equivalent of other kinds of knowledge. However, despite this departure, Santayana's philosophy remained a Spencerian and universalist one that privileged modern evolved knowledge over traditional knowledge.

Key Words: Realism, Agnosticism, Evolution, Knowledge, Individualism

RESUMEN

Santayana adoptó el realismo de Spencer, pero se opuso a la idea spenceriana de que el conocimiento quedaba limitado a las sensaciones y al autoconocimiento. Santayana rechazó esa limitación por dos razones. Primera, él creía que podemos poseer un conocimiento real de las esencias y de otros seres, incluyendo a Dios, y que ese conocimiento podría adoptar una forma estética o espiritual más que una científica. Los distintos tipos de conocimiento evolucionarían todos con el tiempo e irían correspondiendo cada vez más a la realidad. Segunda, Santayana creía que Spencer era el responsable de que el agnosticismo decimonónico estuviera excesivamente cómodo ante los peligros y las tensiones del universo. Al revisar el agnosticismo, Santayana tuvo en cuenta la posibilidad de un conocimiento ilimitado y evolutivo de la materia, de entidades espirituales como Dios o dioses. Esto supuso un alejamiento radical del realismo de Spencer porque bajaba el conocimiento científico de su pedestal y lo igualaba a otros tipos de conocimiento. Sin embargo, a pesar de ese alejamiento, la filosofía de Santayana era spenceriana y universalista en tanto que privilegiaba el conocimiento moderno evolutivo por encima del conocimiento tradicional.

Palabras clave: realismo, agnosticismo, evolución, conocimiento, individualismo

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Santayana began his Oxford lecture on Herbert Spencer by affirming that he belonged to Spencer's camp. While recognizing Spencer's Synthetic Philosophy had its faults, Santayana still found it preferable to contemporary evolutionary philosophy much of which followed the ideas of either Hegel or Bergson.¹ The followers of Hegel and Bergson, who had dominated philosophy in the years preceding World War I and were still a powerful force in the early 1920s, did little more than conceal the world behind mystic forces. In comparison with such sleight of hand, Santayana believed

that Spencer's dated and unfashionable philosophy was full of insight. The meshes in Spencer's net of words were crudely made but they caught the big fish. His philosophy had the merit of being "substantially true" [Santayana (1923a), p. 4]. This statement of approval was a textured one. On the surface, it was a straight-forward remark that the actual world was more like the picture of reality that Spencer had painted than it resembled images emanating from Hegel's Idea or Bergson 'creative evolutionism'. However, underneath the surface something else was going on; Santayana knew perfectly well that Spencer did not share his fascination with what was true in the universe and he was prefiguring his own claims about the relationship between truth and knowledge of reality.

After stating his allegiance to Spencer, Santayana mentioned that he had some qualifications or reservations about his declaration. These qualifications, which mostly referred to Spencer's metaphysics and to his position on religion, were considerable. In fact, they were so considerable that they call into question the veracity of Santayana's claim he was in Spencer's camp and make his intentions appear suspect. What, one is forced to ask, was he up to in claiming camp membership? Superficially this is easy to answer. Spencer's realism was useful as ballast in Santayana's campaign against idealist philosophy. The fact that Spencer was heavy-handed, philosophically naïve, and stood outside the traditions of academic discourse made him especially valuable. It bolstered Santayana's claim to be a philosopher of "daily life" as distinct from those philosophers trapped in esoteric theory. Spencer, with his evocation of everyday life and his reportage of first-hand scientific data, was an antidote to idealism. However, this explanation of why Santayana was in Spencer's camp is insufficient; it fails to account for the complexity and disingenuousness of Santayana's position. A fuller explanation must explore Santayana's sense of irony and satire. He delighted in employing Spencer as a foil to puncture the lack of reality in Idealist philosophy while covertly advancing an ontology which undermined the common form of existentialism, and which

re-established agnosticism so it would conform to the twentieth-century needs. Santayana's Spencer Lecture was multi-layered and packed with so much philosophical content that it almost appears to be an abstract for a much larger work. Whether this work would have been a more serious reworking of Spencerian realism or an attempt to place Spencer in the historiography of Santayana's "new realism"² is unclear and cannot be clarified here. It would entail an investigation of Santayana's radical metaphysics that would dwarf my examination of his qualified Spencerianism and cause it to wink into non-existence. To avoid this, I will attempt to stolidly restrict my comments on Santayana's metaphysics to only those that relate to Spencer.

I will first deal more extensively with the background to Santayana's assertion to be in Spencer's camp; subsequently, I will discuss with his putative qualifications of this allegiance. Part of the complexity of the claim to be Spencerian is autobiographical. Santayana felt entitled to be a Spencerian because of his lengthy maturation process at Harvard University. He had done his journeyman work with two senior Harvard philosophers William James and Josiah Royce both of whom had expended considerable efforts in analysing Spencer. James had retooled Spencer's psychology so that it would serve as a support for his own philosophical idealism [Francis (2016), pp. 107-111]. Royce, who was more scholarly than James, correctly identified Spencer as a realist while noting that like all realists Spencer was more plagued by philosophical contradictions than idealists were [Francis (2016), pp. 111-115]. Between them James and Royce had placed Spencer in the middle of the dispute between dualism and monism as to whether spirit *or* matter was at the basis of our understanding of existence. Santayana believed that this debate was an unnecessary one and that his old colleagues had been mistaken to give it so much importance. In a tacit rebuke to James and Royce Santayana adopted the radical position of claiming that knowledge about spirit and/or matter was on the same footing. It was also a mistake to assume that either had priority over the oth-

er. In assisting Santayana to reach this position Spencer's realism had been invaluable. While Spencer's philosophy already seemed antiquated by the 1880s and 1890s, when James and Royce were at their peak, it had the merit being forged before the doctrines of dualism and monism had sucked most the oxygen out of metaphysical speculation.

Santayana's intention was not to restore Spencer's philosophy, he simply re-purposed it by focussing upon ontological questions that Spencer had never asked. What, he enquired, are we to make of statements such as "I exist", "other people exist", "matter exists", or even "God exists"? Unlike Spencer, Santayana was open to the suggestion that we might actually *know* the entities referred to in such statements. He brushed aside Spencer's own metaphysics which had limited knowledge to sensations and scientific laws. To Santayana it had been arbitrary for Spencer to restrict knowledge in this way. In restricting knowledge, Spencer had simply ignored many kinds of knowledge by categorising them as the "Unknown" which was a frontier beyond which nothing could be known. To Santayana this stance was absurd because human beings actually *know* their own existence, the existence of others, the existence of matter, or existence of God in the same way they *know* sensations. Spencer had mistakenly limited knowledge because he had credulously adopted a form of philosophical idealism from the writings of Sir William Hamilton and H. L. Mansel and this had obscured his own valuable realist insights into the nature of scientific knowledge [Santayana (1923a), p. 7].

Santayana's criticism of the weight that Spencer gave to knowledge obtained through sensations was linked to his rejection of Spencer's individualism. There was, Santayana argued, no good rationale for consistently privileging an individual's sense of his or her own existence over any other kind of existence. To put this another way, Santayana believed that there were insufficient reasons for believing that the products of some kinds of sensations were knowledge while others should be categorized and dismissed as aesthetic

appreciation or religious experience. It was this last category, the religious one, that particularly intrigued Santayana because he was determined to supersede Spencer's Unknown. Spencer had suggested that only superficial sensations could be trusted as building blocks of knowledge. He had also argued that reactions to stimuli such as pain or intuitive responses to beauty were immediate and did not gesture at anything *essential* in the object be felt or observed. Santayana would not accept this. For him knowledge might very well include reactions to the essences of things, God, or even Nature. This is difficult to credit as a Spencerian statement as it was foreign to the range of ideas that Spencer had left in a completed or published state. It was probably an unauthorised extra. If Spencer had been able to complete the missing last portion of his evolutionary 'System of Philosophy' on 'The Principles of Knowledge, it is probable that he would have rejected Santayana's broad-ranging analogy between knowledge of matter and knowledge of God. Spencer's evolutionary theory was quite explicit that when it came to sensing things that might lie behind simple sensations such as the essence of matter or of God human beings could not acquire knowledge. Spencer's human beings were no better than lumps of clay when it came to recognizing essences. If Spencer had come across a metaphysics like Santayana's, he would have regarded it as profoundly unscientific in the way his friend T. H. Huxley had scorned the scientific Platonism that had corrupted the philosophical ideas of the great Victorian anatomist Richard Owen. The rejection of teleologically inspired Platonic ideas or essences was a mid-Victorian habit. However, in the twentieth-first century, when there are no evolutionary scientists who express teleological views, a teleological claim that includes evolutionary science is such a novelty that there can be no chorus of disapproval, but only a sense of surprise. Santayana's certainty about the direction of future knowledge seems more antique than Spencer's evolutionary realism that had offered nothing in the way of information about the goals that would direct change. Spencer may not have felt any of the angst that Santayana thought

was a plausible response to the dangers in the universe, but he had more doubts whether progress would occur.

There were other dissonances between Spencer's original philosophy and Santayana's. The latter's re-purposed Spencerianism by employing a philosophical language that would have been too recondite for Spencer. Santayana had reached into the history of philosophy for terms that he believed would better fortify an evolutionary metaphysics. In particular, he re-cycled the Aristotelian notion of *substance*³ when referring to entities or to matter in order to dispose of Spencer's Unknown which he regarded as a fake entity. This concept "substance" would have been foreign to Spencer, but Santayana would not have cared, because, at this point, he had momentarily moved beyond a qualified adhesion to Spence's evolutionary philosophy. His enquiry as to how much knowledge one could have of God or matter had moved close to the realm of theology. A Christian sense of being or a person's identity in Christ had become basically the same as one's knowledge of stuff or matter. This was a quite unusual doctrine because, while it would have been difficult to reconcile with orthodox Christianity, it was ill-adjusted to be compatible with the beliefs of most realists. Realists of a more orthodox Spencerian persuasion relied upon an evolutionary theory that contained a bias against traditional beliefs in favour of modern scientific ones which, it was presumed, were more likely to roughly correspond with the actual world. Traditional knowledge was relegated to the position of traditional wisdom of the kind that had been disposed of when scientific knowledge had become possible. Santayana had opened up the possibility that some traditional beliefs, such as the sensation of the presence of God or of non-Christian gods, might also have evolved and thus have standing as knowledge about reality.

There was something uneasy and portentously ambiguous in Santayana's stance that makes his argument sound as if he would easily switch sides in the philosophical battle. It was surprising that a member of Spencer's camp strayed so far from his companions and

made what should be, for a Spencerian, impermissible moves. The explanation lies in his personal belief that anyone living in the opening decades of the twentieth century should have necessarily felt the uncertainty of human existence. This was a problem of differing sorts of modernity. It was modern to believe in a form of evolutionary realism, but different kinds of modernism were in play: There was an intergenerational antagonism between the modernity of the 1920s and that of Spencer's circle of modernizing Victorians who exuded a smugness and certainty about the world. The agnosticism that Spencer and his contemporaries had adopted was, according to Santayana, a blindfold preventing its wearers from seeing the dangers lurking behind sensations. While Victorian agnosticism should be applauded for relying upon scientific knowledge gained through measurements and experiments, there was more knowledge to be experienced. "Nothing can be intrinsically unknowable ..." [Santayana (1923a), p. 8] While Kantian philosophers such as Sir William Hamilton and H. L. Mansel had misdirected Spencer into focusing upon the *unknowable*, this was as removed from reality, and as mischievous, as Hegel's speculations on pure Being had been [Santayana (1923a), p. 9]. It was also beside the point: Knowledge of reality was neither as benign or as man-centred as Victorians had supposed.⁴ At its heart Santayana's criticism of this form of agnosticism contained the surprising objection that in its limits of knowledge the form was too religious or Christocentric. This had made sense in a world where one could reply upon a Christian world view as a default setting, but Santayana had a more pluralistic or pagan approach in mind. In his revised agnosticism, God, gods, Nature and the individual were all subjects that could be known as *substance*. It was *substance* that lay behind sensations. These sensations could stem from different sources. Religious experience and aesthetic appreciation could provide knowledge, and, though such knowledge was unlikely to be as accurate as science knowledge, it was equally a response to reality. Santayana was proclaiming the equality of different kinds of knowledge, and this had the advantage of reinforcing

ing his objection to Victorian agnosticism which had conceived of the universe as tame and non-threatening. That agnostic knowledge had been circumscribed by the frontiers of science. These frontiers were transitory and the Victorian "Unknown" would disappear in the course of progress of science. To Santayana this was an absurd way of making Nature appear comfortable when it was an enormous, mysterious force that was only half friendly. "This is our experience in the dilemmas of conduct, in religion, in science, and in the arts, ..." [Santayana (1923a), p. 10] With an aside directed at the fool in Anselm's proof for the existence of God, Santayana remarked that it was folly to deny the existence of a limitless entity when we were so small and marginal. A human life would always be at the mercy of things that were urgent, imperious, and terrifying. At this point Santayana abandoned the Christian universe, which he thought was tangled up in Victorian agnosticism, in favour of a pagan one. Like the Greeks of the Homeric age and the Vikings he believed that human beings were at the mercy of natural forces, but Santayana was in a worse position than an ancient pagan because for him the forces of nature included internal forces as well as external ones. In both its guises nature was uncontrolled and wild.

What was most terrifying about a natural world which contained *substances* was that instead of a person being peculiarly certain of their own existence, they were only conscious of it in the same way they comprehended other people, or the "environing presence", or *substance*. Knowledge was never pure knowledge, rather it was the product of individuals' interactions with their environment. In addition, a person's self-knowledge did not arise in a vacuum, it was dependent upon their understanding of power and distance in the universe as well as upon their understanding of the things they were trying to discuss. Self-knowledge was not an initial process but an on-going one. Further, there was no necessary limit to the knowledge we might acquire. Humanity might eventually explore and *know* the remoter parts of time and space as well as the depths of matter [Santayana (1923a), p. 9]. Unlike Spencer's individual, San-

tayana's individual was not at the centre of existence. It seems clear that Santayana is not a proto-existentialist who took his bearings from a person's sense of his own being. An individual's knowledge of his or her own existence was no more special than knowledge of the existence of other beings or things. This last point seems startling as it suggests that actual knowledge of material things was possible. Unlike the person in Plato's cave, Santayana's person could truly know a thing. Santayana presumably would have regarded H. D. Thoreau's desire to really *know* beans as an achievable goal, and as a prosaic rather than a mystical desire. Santayana did not want to surprise his audience with mysticism.

In essence, Santayana's claim about how we acquire knowledge was prosaic. That is, it is not other-worldly to assert that human beings acquire knowledge over the passage of time and through social interactions with other people. However, his development of this assertion was very radical and threatened the idea of scientific objectivity. Santayana refused to accept conventional cast-iron distinctions such as those between matter and God or between scientific observations of the natural world and emotional reactions to it. To him they all acknowledge reality in more or less the same way, and varied only in the sense that some contained more truth than others. "Intrinsically they are all poetic ideas, fictions of the fancy; a fact that does not prevent them being true symbolically or even literally, if they are so happily framed as to attribute to substance no character which substance does not actually possess." [Santayana (1923a), p. 24] Poetic ideas, he believed, should be more or less accurate comments about reality. They did not include the products of madness, but, aside from that, there were few restrictions on what could pass for knowledge. Santayana had given himself artistic licence and crossed over some of the boundaries of Spencer's realism.

Spencer would have been astonished at the presence of poetic ideas in his philosophical camp, but his naïve realism was vulnerable to being adapted in this way. All that Santayana had done in the way of modification was to jettison Spencer's limitation of knowl-

edge so that additional beings or *substance* could be known. Knowledge of these, like scientific knowledge, would be refined over time so it would correspond more closely to the external environment. If knowledge was chiefly the result of the evolutionary correspondence between thoughts and reality there is no reason why truths were necessarily restricted to notions of personal identity or to scientific and mathematical laws. They could also be the result of other evolutionary processes.

Santayana's attempt to realign Spencer's realism so as to include poetic truths was reasonable in the sense it did not stray outside boundaries that Spencer could have defended. However, it might have also been disingenuous. It amused Santayana to be in Spencer's camp; it appealed to his puckish and playful sensibilities. Santayana's cast of mind was such that it would be excessively credulous to accept his statements of affiliation at face value. He was too alert to the ambiguities and opportunities of language to express simple statements of fealty. Often his words convey mocking and competing meanings. For example, the beginning of his Santayana's lecture which simply asserts that Spencer's philosophy had the merit of being "substantially true" was not simple, but artful. Santayana enjoyed employing the adverb "substantially" to cover both the common and archaic or literal senses of the word so as to prefigure the later presence of "substance" in his lecture. A similar cleverness accompanied his attempt to diminish the supposed tension in Spencer's agnosticism where a person seeking re-assurance hovered between a faith in science and the ineffable presence beyond the realm of accurate knowledge. Santayana obviously felt that a Victorian claim to feel tension would lack earnestness; it would be too intellectual and insufficiently suffused with a sense of angst. However, he does not say this. Instead, he suggests that Victorians were haunted by "ghosts of substance." [Santayana (1923a), p. 11] This is amusing if one knows that the weakest portion of Spencer's *Principles of Sociology* was its ghost theory which assigned the evolutionary origin of all religious belief to a fear of ghosts. This humour was

misplaced as Santayana was not discussing the sociology of religion and there were no ghosts in Spencer's metaphysics. However, misplaced or not, humour still functioned to project Santayana's self-conscious and deliberate ambiguity onto the stage. Wit was not just a display of literary prowess; it helped transform his metaphysics into personal experience. Abstract philosophical argument was less important than a discussion how he personally had recognized himself. He had avoided the idea of a person recognizing himself through struggle with an opponent or with the environment. He refrained from re-cycling the time-honoured example from Hegel's phenomenology of the master/slave relationship where a hero, perhaps an Achilles or a Hector, gained self-knowledge through recognizing himself while fighting with another. By extension, such conflict was supposed to represent an ego struggling to achieve to achieve self-consciousness.

Santayana wanted nothing to do with heroes who recognized none as their equal so he broadened his attack on German phenomenology so as to include its Greek origin. It was not just self-recognition that was targeted, but its basis which was the Socratic belief that knowledge in general began with recognition. [Santayana (1923a), p. 13] This attack on phenomenology took Santayana far outside Spencer's camp, but his assault on the individualism inherent in Greek philosophy necessitated this succession. Though Spencer's individualism was not based on an individual gaining consciousness through struggling with others or with Nature, it was clear to Santayana that quite a few liberals had subscribed to this ideal. Spencer was to serve as a whipping boy here. He stood for what Santayana felt was wrong with the Victorian ethos in general and its worship of the individual in particular. Whether or not Spencer subscribed to the kind of individualist beliefs that irritated Santayana was beside the point, Spencer was guilty by association with those who did hold such beliefs,

It is always puzzling to think about Santayana's intentions. His statements about his intentions are not to be relied upon. Moti-

vations should be examined. One needs to ask, what is Santayana really trying to accomplish in his arguments about Spencer's evolutionary philosophy? His claim to be Spencerian was both disingenuous and challenging; emphatically, it was not an attempt to re-establish Spencer's reputation or to support some central Spencerian dogmas. It would have been contrary to Santayana's instincts as a modernizing twentieth-century philosopher to regurgitate Victorian agnosticism or to reconcile a nineteenth-century philosophy of science with Christian speculation on the nature of the cosmos. As he insisted, Victorian metaphysical efforts mostly relied upon an idea of the limitation of knowledge and this limitation needed to be abandoned. Rather than resurrecting this limitation, Santayana was open to the possibility that perceptions of *Unknown* could be recognized as knowledge. This would bring about a reconciliation between matter and spirit, but not of the kind of unfeeling reconciliation that had been imagined by Victorians. The updated reconciliation could not be a philosophical balancing act performed by people who were smugly unaware of the genuine tensions inherent in the human condition. That form of agnosticism was archaic; the reconstituted version would import truths from religious awareness, scientific understanding, and aesthetic appreciation. These were different ways of reacting to *substance* or being, each was a distinct kind of comprehension. That being said, there seemed to be no way of ranking these kinds of comprehension in order of priority. Santayana had no hierarchy of reliability in which a particular form of comprehension of *substance* was more truthful than another. This is a very unusual stance and it went far beyond any synthesis of philosophy that Spencer would have been capable of conceiving. Rather than being Spencerian, its main function was to disrupt philosophical dualism. Not only did Santayana blur the distinction between spirit and matter, he introduced a third category of knowledge, the aesthetic dimension, which was more or less the equivalent to either scientific knowledge or religious experience. In taking this step Santayana was responding to twentieth-century

cultural aspirations and uncertainty that could not have been in the purview of Victorian metaphysicians.

Santayana's rejection of the Victorian agnosticism that he believed to be represented by Spencer was very thorough-going, and, to an extent, it was a product of his own imagination. Spencer and his generation would not have considered they were forging a resolution of the tensions between science and religion, nor would they have yearned for security in a way that Santayana felt was appropriate when facing the uncertainties of existence. In addition, Victorians would not have recognized Santayana's views on evolution as scientific ones, but would have seen them as a projection of religious values. At heart, Santayana's analysis of Victorians was anachronistic. Spencer's circle did not feel the tensions and insecurities that troubled Santayana in the 1920s, nor did it wish to populate the universe with re-assuring entities. Two of Spencer's acquaintances G. J. Holyoake and T. H. Huxley who both claimed to have invented the term "agnosticism" were impervious to religious sentiments. They could not have felt the need to reconcile religion with science. The same could be said for Spencer's most devoted scientific follower, Alfred Russel Wallace, or for his philosophical successor Leslie Stephen who popularized the term "agnosticism". The people who composed Spencer's circle did not sense a tension between science and religion. Their Unknown was merely an *unsubstantial* depository of shared intellectual speculations. They looked upon the universe with dispassion, not fright. They were secularly-minded, but even if they had experienced some religious stirrings, they might have abhorred passion because they shared the conventional distrust of enthusiasm in worship. There was a crass toughness to many mid-Victorians that meant that they could adjust to the notion that the evolutionary process was blind without feeling anxiety. Santayana, who was more tender-minded than these Victorians, re-wrote evolutionary theory so that it resembled a teleology. For him, evolution could not be an endless flux; it "must have a goal, it must unfold a germ in a determined direction towards an implic-

it ideal".⁵ This idea of a directed evolution had no point of contact with the evolutionary views of Spencer and his circle. For them, as for Darwin, evolution proceeded *from* an origin, not *towards* a goal.

The urgency of Santayana's response to the early twentieth-century feeling of uncertainty set him further apart from Spencer than any philosophical differences had done. Spencer's aesthetic compass had been set to give directions within a European world that had evolved away from danger, cruelty and superstition. While outside the metropolitan centres of empire, there was much harshness and violence these were ugly truths that could be ignored because, eventually, progress and civilisation would cause them to disappear. Spencer took his aesthetic bearings from the first volume of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, and relied upon customary notions of beauty when responding to an art work. In a similar tempo, Spencer's other cultural insights echoed the conventional morals of George Eliot, Charles Dickens and W. M. Thackeray whose heroes, after a few vicissitudes, found a resolution to their difficulties. There was no persistent uncertainty or angst about the world in these fictions. For Spencer, when knowledge about existence or the universe became unreliable it could be safely relegated to the Unknown. Everything one could actually know was on the surface; Spencer did not dabble in deeper questions of the essential meaning(s) of existence.

On an ontological level Santayana did not just belong to a different century than Spencer, he might as well have belonged to a different universe. His artistic insights were into an uncertain world imagined by painters such as Egon Schiele, Marcel Duchamp, and Pablo Picasso. Santayana's literary sensibilities were forced to jostle with contemporaries such as James Joyce, Robert Musil and Virginia Woolf. Where Spencer's realism had been fortified by his culture, the same could not be said for Santayana. Instead of the display of beauty and the adventures of imaginary heroes, there were ugly truths, uncertainty and hidden dangers within the psyche. For an inhabitant of this world the prospect of finding comfort in Victori-

an agnosticism was grotesque. No joy could be found in proclaiming that one was satisfied with ignorance about hidden realities that one could neither see nor easily understand. The suspended beliefs of Victorian agnostics were useless to Santayana, and, to replace them, he created a revised agnosticism that would posit some reality in each unrelated fragment of human experience, or, at least, in each fragment that was evolved enough to offer a glimpse of reality.

Santayana had moved a long way from Spencer's philosophy. While the latter restricted progress to evolutionary knowledge gained in the sciences, Santayana had expanded evolution so as to include non-scientific ways of parsing the universe. At first sight, this shift in the use of evolutionary language seems so great as to make Santayana's claim to be in Spencer's camp appear completely frivolous. It seems nothing more than a disingenuous way of attacking idealistic philosophers. However, at a fundamental level and despite his distaste for the comfortable sensibilities of Victorians, Santayana, like Spencer, belonged to the forces combatting Cartesian rationalism that had taken over so much territory in the European intellect.⁶ Santayana reinforced Spencer's offensive against the supremacy of the rational will over parts of the psyche where it should not be governing. Spencer, who had been in tune with Victorian sentimentalism, had complained that the whole of human consciousness was in danger of being subsumed by the will, and that this was likely to encourage the growth of negative emotions such as cruelty. Spencer's desire to rescue the 'softer' emotions so that they would have more sway in decision-making led him to employ a political language to offer a republican solution to rescue ignored emotions.⁷ Santayana's portrait of the human mind was less political and more chaotic than this. Instead of fear of a mental tyranny exercised by the will, there were the everlasting contradictions in both the human spirit and society. While Santayana agreed with Spencer that that it had been a mistake to elevate the rational will, he did not want to replace its dictates with scientific knowledge. Such a substitution would let Cartesian rationalism in through the

back door. Further, Santayana could think of no compelling argument for adopting rationalism as the sole or primary evolutionary force directing human society. Aspects of human life that appeared in its aesthetic and religious spheres could also be progressive: That is, over time activities in these spheres had increased truthful knowledge of reality.

For Santayana evolutionary truth was not restricted to the kind of truth that was discovered by scientific experiment, nor that which was confirmed by mathematical proof: It extended to cover psychological and artistic reactions to the nature of the universe. This truth could take many forms —even that of ecstatic revelation. Rather than being contained in scientific laws, truth could be present in a vision of God, gods, or an artistic creation. All that was required for truth was a recognition of *substance* which was the reality behind the superficial impressions received by the senses of human beings. In reaching this point Santayana's realism lost some of its connection with Spencer's philosophy. The latter had deliberately kept his gaze fixed upon the surfaces of real things and never attempted to penetrate to their essences. If he thought of truth in the abstract it would have been the kind of truth that Thomas Reid had imagined while defending it against the scepticism of David Hume. Spencer had adopted Reid's ideas by incorporating them in an evolutionary psychology which insisted that both animal and human brains had developed an approximately truthful or accurate picture of its environment. Rather than being the result of a special human experience, the human mind was a brain which was the product of a general organic evolution. From a Spencerian perspective the mind could not be sceptical about reality, nor could it be claimed that the knowledge the mind possessed was more than approximately true.

The fact that Spencer's realism was paired with a notion of approximate truth was seized upon by Santayana. It indicated to him that while non-scientific ways of understanding reality might be less accurate than scientific perceptions they might still be as true as scientific ones. In following the idea of evolutionary approximation

through to this implication Santayana became a most unorthodox member of Spencer's camp though he remained distantly affiliated. At its basis Santayana's philosophical stance remained similar to that of Spencer. Both men advanced a humane philosophy in order to rescue the human beings from the narrowing effects of an overly rational way of contemplating their relations with the universe. This shared humanity did not stem from a common liberalism; Santayana did not subscribe to Spencer's liberal agenda which based social philosophy upon the primacy of individuals, and the need to defend the adventitious gains, such as privacy, which evolution had provided to individuals. On the contrary, Santayana was suspicious of classical liberal ideals as excessively individualistic. He would not have cantered his humanity on the need to protect a benefit such as privacy. His humanism was broader than this, and based upon a belief in the value of all forms of human expression.

In addition to a degree of overlap between their humanistic philosophies, Santayana shared Spencer's preference for the developed and sophisticated knowledge acquired by Europeans and other civilised peoples instead of the more "organic" knowledge possessed by less developed people. Such a preference had been a commonplace among Spencer's contemporaries who had often referred to the less-developed as primitives. However, in Santayana's era, which was populated with modern social anthropologists, it was jarring to adopt this preference. In the 1920s it was becoming unfashionable to defend a notion of evolutionary truth. Santayana, who had posited that there were distinct categories of truthful knowledge (scientific, knowledge, religious knowledge, and aesthetic knowledge), was completely at odds with the modern anthropological treatment of knowledge as an 'organic' or holistic projection of a people's culture. It was the era of Bronislaw Malinowski and Ruth Benedict. They and their many companions believed that knowledge could not be separated from culture. Typical was the anthropologist Edward S. C. Handy who, writing about the Marquesas Islands, argued that "subjective and objective reactions" included visions, dreams,

and divinations as well as “verifiable facts” and all these were unified in the mind of Marquesans. From their point of view no useful distinctions could be drawn between the different kinds of reaction.⁸ Such holistic knowledge could not be corrected by evolutionary process; this knowledge was incommensurate with Santayana’s evolutionary realism. It would have seemed pointless for an exponent of holistic knowledge to assess portions of an organic culture as containing more or less truth. That would be the application of a judgement that would external to the culture. The gap between cultural relativism and evolution was huge as the latter relied upon universal judgements in order to measure evolutionary progress. Santayana, like Spencer, was a universalist; his progressive idea of truthful knowledge was not culturally specific. While Santayana accepted that there would be tensions between different methods of grasping knowledge, he did not take into account that some societies would consistently fail to distinguish between different categories of human experience. While he was writing as a member of Spencer’s camp, his basic assumption remained the Spencerian one that, in order to avoid remaining in a static culture, people would have to develop distinctions between different kinds of knowledge. This uncompromising evolutionary stance meant that Santayana’s goal of revising Spencerism enjoyed only limited success. While he had revised Victorian agnosticism, in the domain of evolutionary realism he did not stray far from Victorian beliefs. His new realism did not represent a break from the Victorian model, but a continuation. Perhaps realism was impervious to modification and Santayana was compelled to stay somewhat faithful to a metaphysics about which he had doubts.

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NOTES

¹ George Santayana, *The Unknowable, The Herbert Spencer Lecture delivered at Oxford, 24 October, 1923*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1923, p. 3. (This lecture was also published in George Santayana, *Obiter Scripta*, ed. Julius Buchler and Benjamin Schwartz, London, Constable, 1936, pp. 122-41.)

² On “new realism” see Daniel Moreno, (2015), pp. 32-34.

³ Santayana had no intention of reviving Aristotle’s idea, and used the term *substance* in a way that would have been as far outside the consciousness of The Stagirite as it was outside Spencer’s. On Santayana’s use of *substance* see Santayana (1923b), pp. 202-3 and Santayana (1942) pp. 202-217.

⁴ Santayana had always believed this was a fault in Spencer’s philosophy. Decades before his Spencer Lecture he had written to his friend Henry Ward Abbot about Spencer’s “Unknown” being beyond comprehension. Santayana thought that Spencer was mistaken to focus upon what the human mind could conceive. The problem was simply that part of reality was unintelligible because our intelligence was not at the centre of things but only at one point of their circumference. See Santayana (1955), p. 27.

⁵ See Santayana (1923a), p. 5. Santayana expanded on his teleological evolutionary theory in Santayana (1942), pp. 322-3.

⁶ It is unclear if Santayana would have seen Spencer as a philosopher who was battling against Cartesian rationalism in a similar way to himself. He had classed Spencer together with the scientific enlightenment [Santayana (1923a) p. 7] which might mean that he thought that Spencer was a rationalist in the way that many enlightenment scientists were supposed to have been.

⁷ In order to reduce the dominance of the rational will Spencer summoned up an analogy between the will as governor and an absolute monarchy, or an all-powerful president, who consistently excluded other members of the ruling council from decision making. In the place of this Spencer wanted to institute a more republican psyche where different emotions would take turns with the will in chairing the council.

⁸ On Handy see Christina Thompson (2019), pp. 130-1.

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