

George Santayana (1863-1952)

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Biography

George Santayana was a philosopher, essayist, novelist and poet. Born in Spain, he moved to America as a child and attended Harvard, studying under William James and Josiah Royce. The philosophical world first took note of Santayana for his work in aesthetics. *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), his attempt to give a naturalistic account of the beautiful, remains influential. He wrote exquisitely crafted essays on literature and religion, viewing both as articulating important symbolic truths about the human condition. His mature philosophical system is a classical edifice constructed out of positions adopted from Plato and Aristotle, which he modified in light of the naturalistic insights of his beloved Lucretius and Spinoza and steeped in pessimism reminiscent of Schopenhauer. Although in close touch with the philosophical developments of his day, he always viewed human life and its problems in a calming cosmic perspective.

1. Life and works

George Santayana was born Jorge Augustin Nicolas Ruiz de Santayana in Madrid, Spain, on 16 December 1863. At nine years of age, he accompanied his mother on her move to Boston. He attended Harvard University and studied with William James and Josiah Royce. Upon receiving his doctorate, he joined his former teachers on the faculty and rose to professor of philosophy. He never married, took early retirement from his teaching post and spent the last forty years of his life travelling and writing in Europe. He died in Rome on 26 September 1952.

Santayana's philosophical work is best understood in the context of the rejection of idealism at the beginning of the twentieth century. He was a realist in every significant sense of the word, believing that the world exists independently of human cognitive efforts and that not even the themes of thought we entertain depend for their reality on the human mind. Although his early, five-volume *The Life of Reason* (1905–6) has been compared to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the two works are fundamentally different. Santayana's philosophical edifice lacks Hegel's optimistic teleology, his devotion to totality and his structuring commitment to the power of consciousness (see Hegel, G.W.F. §5).

Beginning around 1920, Santayana developed an ontology designed to identify fundamentally different types of being. In *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) and the much-misunderstood four-volume *Realms of Being* (1927–40), he attempted to show the ways in which essence, matter, truth and spirit differ from one another and are jointly adequate to account for everything in human experience and in the world. The terms in which Santayana cast his system derive from the great Western philosophical tradition. References to essence and substance may even make his writing appear scholastic. His message, however, is thoroughly modern, even postmodern, in its rejection of essentialism, of the possibility of certainty, and of a universal hierarchy of values.

2. Santayana's realism

Scepticism is irrefutable, Santayana argues, as long as knowledge is supposed to involve certain possession of its object. Such a stringent demand as this, however, commits us to a wrong-headed standard for cognition. In the affairs of life, we neither seek nor need assurance of the highest order. Accordingly, scepticism is defeated not by its logical weaknesses but by the irrelevance of the criterion it imposes on knowledge.

Santayana issues a call for honesty in philosophy, meaning by this the refusal to believe in our reflections what we would never countenance in daily life. This opens the door to a new method of doing philosophy and to a resultant system of ideas we might call 'the philosophy of animal faith'. The method consists of taking animal action as a starting point and attempting to disentangle the beliefs implicated in it. When animals eat, for example, they take the independent existence of their food for granted. Consciously or otherwise, they believe that what they eat is not a part of themselves, that it continues to exist even after it slips from sight, that they have the power to engulf it and that doing so is beneficial. The existence of a dynamic and enduring environment consisting of differentially powerful and desirable items is thus one of the beliefs involved in and justified by activities in which we all engage. The job of philosophy is to identify these beliefs and to present them as a coherent system of common sense.

What Santayana calls 'the discovery of essence', however, is often thought to be anything but common-sensical. But criticisms of the infinity of the forms of which the realm of essence consists are based largely on misunderstandings. The essences he distinguishes do not *exist*: they are the qualities and relations, the structures and the event-types that may gain embodiment in the world. Santayana focuses on the ways in which these forms are different from the flux of physical events. As objects of thought, features of existence and terminal points of change, they remain free of the ravages of time. Their eternal self-identity renders them beacons in the turning world: they make temporal process possible without sharing its fate.

Essences are what the tradition has called 'universals'. But since every distinguishable characteristic and the object of every possible thought is an essence, generic forms and the forms of natural kinds enjoy no privilege. This disintegrates the metaphysical, epistemic and axiological prerogatives of essences: if forms set the standards for being, knowing and the good, the infinity of essences means that we must choose which of a very large number of possible norms to embrace. Santayana accepts Aristotle's idea that nature determines perfection. He thinks, however, that human nature is not defined by a single generic form, consisting instead of a vast continuum of the variously resembling forms of individuals. This leaves ample room for diversity and calls for choice in deciding which essence to enact.

Embodiment is the work of matter – a restless, mindless, impersonal force. Existence consists of a jostle of miscellaneous events: its external relations result from instantiating a shifting and arbitrary collection of essences. Santayana refers to the force of embodiment as a 'whirlwind' that creates 'an insane emphasis'. Why there is something rather than nothing and why this world exists rather than some other are, therefore, questions that admit of no intelligible answer. Existence is a surd whose ultimacy cannot be eliminated by imagining a God who confers it as an expression of benevolence.

The realm of truth consists of all the essences that have been, are being and will be actualized in the history of the world. Truth is, in this way, a complete record of the agency of matter. Even if this realm contains an infinite number of forms, there remains an infinity never actualized. For if there is a monstrosly complex essence that contains the form of everything that ever happened in the history of the world, there is another, unembodied essence differing from it in a tiny particular. In addition, there is an infinity of other forms that differ from it in indefinitely many ways.

Although this view of truth makes it eternal and unchanging, Santayana thinks that its tie to time cannot be severed. All truths relate to the changing world: only those essences that matter endows with external relations are members of the realm of truth. Santayana calls the truth about a fact its 'standard, comprehensive description'. He does not mean by this, however, that it involves some actual description by a living being and thus that it belongs in the sphere of language or discourse. On the contrary, though it may be difficult to know, it is altogether objective and independent of what anyone says or thinks. It is the standard against which such thoughts are measured and is a 'description' only in the sense of being the total embodied form that may be described.

3. Values and spirituality

'Spirit' is Santayana's word for consciousness, which he thinks is a product of biological causes. The immediate objects of consciousness are the nontemporal qualities and relations that belong to the realm of essence. Animal eagerness takes the presence of such themes in consciousness as signs of surrounding things. Perception and the knowledge of the world it makes possible are, therefore, always symbolic: they involve the use of present essences in deciphering the nature and causal powers of the substances on which our weal and woe depend. Such knowledge is never certain. Continued experience can correct it and successful action serves as its final criterion. The growth of knowledge in this way expresses the interests of the animal and not the intrinsic nature of awareness.

Consciousness in its purity pays no heed to animal life and knowledge. It finds no essences more worthy of attention than any others; it enjoys the presence of every form with equal readiness. By the claim that spirit is intrinsically spiritual Santayana means that it naturally transcends the concerns of daily life to engage in the carefree contemplation of eternal forms. This is 'pure intuition', a moment of aesthetic vision in which, as he puts it, the ultimate becomes immediate.

The spiritual life is not an existence that rivals successful rational life in this world. It consists of pure intuitions that can be had anywhere because their objects may be any of the infinity of essences. The only requirement of this achievement is that we liberate ourselves from animal concern and attend to the intrinsic features of what is present, rather than to its causal or cognitive properties. This stress on the enjoyment of immediacies connects Santayana to the long history of spirituality and to such modern advocates of aesthetic immediacy as Schopenhauer (see Schopenhauer, A. §5).

What generates and justifies this account of ultimate human satisfaction is Santayana's view of the impotence of consciousness. He thinks that awareness is epiphenomenal, a 'lyric cry in the

midst of business'. Although a product of the human nervous system, it is ontologically different from anything material and can wield no formative power. Its only function is to light up the realm of forms and, in the process, to enable us to enjoy things under the form of eternity. The transcendence it offers has a material ground and natural limits: spirituality is a perfection of this life, not the promise of another (see Epiphenomenalism).

Intuition of essence does not yield knowledge. The immediate objects of consciousness are universals and it takes animal faith to convert the colours and sounds that appear to us into signs of a surrounding world. Perception is veracious when the direct object of mind is an apt symbol of the features and movements of matter. This critical realism sees the identity of the essence we intuit with the essence embodied as a limiting case of knowledge; it is not necessary for cognition, we can probably not achieve it, and even if we did, we could have no valid evidence of it. There is little need of literal knowledge so long as the symbols we use help us live successfully.

Santayana's conviction that one's good is determined by one's nature is not enough to lead him back to Greek virtue ethics. He rejects the tidy universality that imposes a single perfection on all humans or even on all the members of a community. Working on the assumption that the role of the moral philosopher is to understand, not to condemn, he insists on the internal justification of every coherent life and unified set of values. The personal good is relative to the nature of the individual and the social good to the natures with which a community endows its members. The great problems of human life derive not from wickedness but from the clash of incompatible commitments, from internal confusion about the good and from the militancy that attempts to impose alien values.

By the time of his death, the loss of interest in systematic philosophy fostered by logical empiricism sent Santayana's popularity into decline. But the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rediscovery of his thought. He is valued not only for his sharp insights, but also for his tolerant understanding of the varieties of human perfection. His naturalistic ontology is strikingly contemporary and his realism can serve as a welcome counterweight to prevailing historicist and constructivist positions. His categories offer a sensible and unified picture of the world, along with an account of human life that is free of illusions. His greatest contribution may be the way in which he combined an uncompromising naturalism with the highest demands of spirituality.

List of works

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