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Santayana's Epiphenomenalism Reconsidered

Robin Weiss

- 1 Recently, it has become increasingly common to question the extent to which Santayana's philosophy of mind can and should be identified as a kind of epiphenomenalism, as has traditionally been the case. Most scholars take Santayana's epiphenomenalism for granted, and either assert or deny that he gives an argument to support it.¹ However, others have questioned whether the evident similarities between Santayana's own views and those of modern-day epiphenomenalists obscure more significant differences. I will argue that, indeed, Santayana's views are potentially inaccurately captured by the term "epiphenomenalism." However, I shall argue that this is true for reasons other than other scholars have given for this view.
- 2 The issue turns on what Santayana means by a "cause" when he denies that ideas are causes of action. Here, I argue, it is necessary to distinguish causes and necessary conditions. While Santayana is consistent in denying that ideas are causes, taken in the usual sense of efficient or motor causes, he does not clearly deny that they are necessary conditions for some behavioral effects. In this way, Santayana is able to deny that ideas are causes in any standard sense of the term, without ruling out the possibility that, in some cases at least, they are necessary conditions for action.

1. Challenges to the Epiphenomenalist Label

- 3 Efforts to label Santayana an epiphenomenalist are complicated by the fact that he does not share with modern-day epiphenomenalists a strong predilection for either determinism or reductionism. As has been pointed out, Santayana is not a strict determinist because, at the level of matter, he allows for indeterminacy in the causal chain.² Nor, as has been pointed out, is he a typical reductionist because, at the level of psyche, Santayana endows living organisms with their own biological ends,³ which human beings pursue through a rational deliberative faculty, of whose operations they remain largely unconscious.

- 4 Yet Santayana also seems to share much in common with epiphenomenalists. Epiphenomenalists hold that mental ideas are determined by physical causes. Although, for Santayana, we cannot precisely predict which intuited essences will bubble up from material causes and appear to spirit – spirit is “volatile, evanescent, non-measurable, and non-traceable” (Santayana 1942: 138) – he would still agree that the *probability* that a given essence will appear under a given set of circumstances is fixed by material causes. When we add to this Santayana’s claim that intuited essences are not causes, then we appear to arrive at the standard epiphenomenalist position that, while ideas are determined by physical causes, they exert no causal power themselves: intuition is present only in the form of an epiphenomenal shadow that does no causal work.
- 5 Yet it has seemed implausible to some that Santayana could completely banish mind from his account of action given that the bulk of his work focuses on consciousness and its objects, and on the ontological realms to which each correspond: spirit and essence, respectively. However, of the two, scholars usually place far greater emphasis on spirit, and eagerly search for a role for it. For example, in her 2015 book, *Narrative Naturalism: An Alternative Framework for Philosophy of Mind*, Jessica Wahman argues against epiphenomenalism on two grounds: (1.) “spirit is not a product or phenomenal effect of matter,” i.e. the effect of a mechanical operation, and (2.) it is not “wholly passive or helpless” (Wahman 2015: 167, 105). By her first claim, Wahman means to stress that spirit cannot be reduced to matter because Santayana would not describe it as an “effect” of matter (that is, in the sense in which that term is usually taken by scientists). With her second claim, Wahman attributes to spirit the ability to focus on its objects. Thus, consciousness is not a mere “byproduct” because, she says, “the term byproduct fails to capture the full extent of its place and role” (*ibid.*: 105).
- 6 Other scholars, such as Michael Brodrick, have argued that, while Santayana’s ontology predisposed him to epiphenomenalism, and while there are certainly epiphenomenalist strains in Santayana’s thought, his philosophy could also be placed – perhaps with more profit – under another position in contemporary philosophy of mind that gives greater prominence to spirit. In this manner, Santayana could adopt a position that avoids the starkness of the distinction between matter and spirit, makes them two sides of the same coin, and assigns spirit a role co-equal with matter. If Santayana rejected this position in favor of epiphenomenalism, then Brodrick conjectures that, ironically, it was his emphasis on spirit and his desire to maintain its autonomy that led him in this direction (Brodrick 2013: 241-2). However, in focusing on Santayana’s conception of spirit, and arguing for a stronger role for it, these interpretations arguably miss the mark.
- 7 Although agreeing with these scholars in principle, we must argue that there is nothing about Santayana’s conception of spirit that seems to contradict epiphenomenalism, rather than support it. Contra Wahman, Santayana is always clear that spirit does not have the power to chose its objects; even when consciousness points its attention in a certain direction, it is pushed in this direction by the biological interests of the material organism seeking to satisfy its biological drives.⁴ So causal power is not properly assigned to consciousness, or spirit. For spirit’s “supposed effects are the effects of its causes” (Santayana 1942: 635). Instead, I would suggest that if we want to understand where Santayana’s thought differs from epiphenomenalism, we must examine, not consciousness, but the *objects* of consciousness. For it is these objects of

consciousness – intuited essences – that, in a sense, both *are* and *are not* causes on Santayana's account – or so I will argue.

- 8 My solution bears some similarity to Brodrick's in arguing that Santayana's thought could be placed under another category in contemporary philosophy of mind, and Santayana might have placed it there himself, had he been aware that an alternative to epiphenomenalism was available to him.⁵ Unlike Brodrick however, I think that if we more closely examine the role assigned to intuited essences in Santayana's philosophy, then we will discover that the contemporary philosophers with whom he has most in common are precisely those who would find no contradiction between the so-called "epiphenomenalist" strains in his thought and his tendency to assign ideas a limited, but not insignificant role in guiding action.

2. Essence and Existence

- 9 Let us first begin by examining how Santayana develops his position, so that we can better see in what this so-called "epiphenomenalism" consists. As the title of Santayana's *Scepticism and Animal Faith* suggests, the view that he begins to put forward in this book must be understood as arising from his *skepticism* concerning the possibility of asserting an equivalence between a set of oppositions, which can be elaborated as follows:

Essence	Existing Thing
Subjective Qualities	Objective Qualities
Stable Properties Abstracted From Spatial-Temporal Relations	Contingent Relations In Spatial and Temporal Relations
Sign of What is Sought or Desired	What is Sought or Desired
Perceptible Object Towards Which Impulse Appears to be Directed	Material Object Eliciting and Receiving Motor Response

- 10 It is important to begin with this set of distinctions. Often, the suggestion is made that Santayana has dogmatically defined the terms of the debate – be it spirit, psyche,⁶ or matter⁷ – to suit his own purposes. It is then supposed by scholars as various as Lachs, Kerr-Lawson, and Brodrick that his epiphenomenalism flows from these distinctions. However, the key distinction for Santayana, with respect to his philosophy of mind, is that between essence and existence. For the greater part of his career, Santayana had been preparing the way for this distinction between essences and existence by examining the way in which the objects of consciousness – variously termed "ideas," "ideals," or "intuitions," depending on the stage of his career – are formed. Santayana then carries forward these early insights into a rigorous distinction between essence and existence.
- 11 For the early Santayana, an important feature of ideas is that they are composite in their make-up. From the beginning, he describes ideas as unique constellations of sensory data from a variety of inputs, such that a single object of consciousness

emerges from a number of underlying physical causes (Santayana 2011: 66-7). As his thought develops, Santayana seems to increasingly view the process by which objects are brought to conscious awareness as taking place through the selective emphasis on certain qualities of the object which are brought to the fore, while others recede into the background. Before *Scepticism and Animal Faith* then, Santayana had *already* argued that ideas are constructed in a particular manner, so that they *include* certain features and *exclude* others. Later, in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, Santayana argues that this not simply as accident of human psychology, but is inherent in the nature of essence itself. The result is that, insofar as we intuit an essence, it captures certain features of the object and not others. Among the features of the object captured by the essence, Santayana mentions, in particular, the following:

1.) *The subjective and secondary qualities of an object.* In *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, Santayana argues that, in constructing an ideal, we focus on the qualities of the object that are experienced subjectively, such as “the quality of being hot or poisonous” (Santayana 1955: 88). Santayana thus argues that essences and “the intuition of them is just as personal as my pain, pleasure or hunger” (*ibid.*: 86). Because the same water can be hot to me and cold to you, the mind “has no capacity and no obligation to copy the world of matter or survey it impartially” (*ibid.*: 98).

2.) *The apparently stable and consistent properties of the object.* From very early on, Santayana argues that, through the process of idea-formation, we focus on the qualities of an object that appear to be stable.⁸ In *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, he continues to argue that this necessarily means excluding the contingent ways in which the object effects, or is effected by, other objects (*ibid.*: 34). The idea will not therefore accurately reflect or contain reference to the causal relation between its object and other objects. Hence Santayana’s early claim now reappears in the form of the insight that essence as such contains no necessary reference to the relationship in which an object stands to other things as cause or effect – except perhaps insofar as their essences are included in each other (as for example the essence of a caterpillar is included in the essence of butterfly).⁹ Since the essence is eternal, it tells us nothing about the cause-effect relationships in which an object may or may not be contingently situated.

3.) *The qualities that can be abstracted from spatio-temporal relations.* Due to the above, the Santayana of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* stresses that essences exclude spatio-temporal relations. Because essences contain reference to other essences, the contemplation of an actualized essence can lead me to contemplate its relation to other, un-actualized essences. But then I am contemplating the essential relations *between* essences, which of course have no direct equivalents in the causal domain; I am contemplating possibilities that may never be actualized in the causal domain. In this way, the way in which one essence stands in a relationship to another in the realm of essence is like a work of literary fiction, in that it is more or less internally coherent, but without connection to the real world, or any claim to “exist” in any meaningful sense (Santayana 1955: 99). In general then, an essence in and of itself “tells me nothing of its validity, nor of a world of fact to which it might apply” (*ibid.*: 91).

12 In *Scepticism and Animal Faith* then, essence is eventually stripped of all the features that it could share in common with existing things until essences have only limited bearing on the realm of existence, including the realm in which action is carried out.¹⁰ Santayana’s philosophy of mind flows from this distinction between essence and existence. We are not the first to argue that the key to Santayana’s position lies in his distinction between essence and existence, of course. This has been said before.¹¹

13 However, this distinction has sometimes contributed to a tendency to mischaracterize Santayana's position as standardly epiphenomenalist. For instance, the conclusion Santayana is usually supposed to draw from the above distinction is that essence by *definition* excludes existence, and therefore, essences, being unable to exist, are also deprived of causal power.¹² This fact has usually been supposed to contain the only premises Santayana needs to demonstrate his "epiphenomenalist" conclusion. Taken on its own, it has led scholars to conclude that the intuition of essence plays *no role* in determining behavior. However, we must not stop here, or we might presume, like many scholars, that Santayana has no further – or stronger – argument for his position, and that this, his final word on the subject precludes any more complicated role for essence. In fact, the claim that essence excludes existence is only one premise in the longer argument he provides for his position in his mature work.¹³ We examine that argument below.

3. The Argument of *Scepticism and Animal Faith*

14 Let us now lay out the argument in which Santayana's so-called "epiphenomenalism" consists as it appears in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. The claim that leads Santayana to his views on mental causation is not only the claim that, "Not existing at all, [essences] cannot be the causes of *their own* appearance," but also, and more specifically, the claim that essences cannot be the causes of their own hypostatization (Santayana 1955: 86).

15 Here, Santayana states that were an intuited essence to play a role in action, its existence would first have to be *posited*, or as Santayana sometimes says, *hypostatized*. (We leave aside of course the many forms of action that Santayana says can be carried out unconsciously.) This is to say, it must be believed in. For example, an essence can only be pursued insofar as it is taken to be the essence of an *existing object*, as the "hungry dog must believe that the bone before him is a substance, not an essence" (*ibid.*: 233). Here, we already see how important essences appear to be in action: the positing of an essence is the first stage in belief, and belief is the first stage in consciously directed action (Santayana 1942: 200-1). Here is where animal faith enters. It is by means of animal faith that we posit the existence of an essence, and in this capacity, intuited essences provide animal faith with its objects: "intuitions come to help it out and give it something to posit." (Santayana 1942: 107).¹⁴ This is important because, for Santayana, the primary phenomenon we are trying to explain when we attempt to explain human behavior is the hypostatizing of an essence through animal faith.

16 This point must be emphasized because animal faith has usually been given short shrift in accounts of Santayana's philosophy of mind, as scholars have generally puzzled by the role of animal faith in Santayana's ontology more generally.¹⁵ However, we can now see that animal faith is not only the "glue" by means of which two ontological realms are bound together – for in positing the existence of an intuited essence through animal faith, we attempt to "close the gap" between the realm of essence and the realm of existence – it is the phenomenon for which Santayana seeks an explanation.

17 Santayana then illustrates the importance of essences in action by way of the example of a child who reaches out for the moon. Here the moon represents essence. In order to reach out for the moon, the child must first posit the existence of the moon by positing its existence as a graspable object in time and space.¹⁶ However, the very positing of an

essence seems to require the identification of an object of thought – an essence – with an object in the domain of existence. This can be said to occur in three senses, all of which expose the reasons it is problematic:

1. First, the essence must be identified with a spatial-temporal object “capable of being affected by action” (Santayana 1955: 214). But, as we have said, the essence is not the exact equivalent of any temporally and spatially located object upon which the subject could act “in the field of action” (*ibid.*). For an essence is never characterized by the same relations as the object with which we would attempt to equate it. We cannot equate an essence with an existing thing without attributing to the essence relations beyond those it itself already possesses (*ibid.*: 35, 56, 58).¹⁷

2. Second, the very positing of the essence seems to require the identification of the object of thought with an object that is capable of arousing and satisfying the subject's animalistic desires: “What is given becomes in this manner a sign for what is sought...” (*ibid.*: 85). But essence appears at most only as a fallible *sign* of the object that the human animals' impulses *truly* desire and which they are seeking to attain.

3. Finally, there are “existing things to which the animal is reacting and to which he is attributing essences as they arise” (*ibid.*: 93). The child's impulses are for example called out by some materially existing cause, which lead him to reach towards the moon. The child then attempts to retrospectively identify the moon (the essence) with the thing that elicited this motor response (the existence). By positing the moon's existence he “determines what particular thing, in the same space and time as with the child's body, was the object of that particular passion” (*ibid.*: 173).

18 In positing the existence of the essence we are asserting, first, that the essence can be identified with an object embedded in special-temporal relations; second, that the essence is identical with the object of desire; and third, that the essence is the essence of the thing that calls forth a motor response. Let us summarize all three points thus: *positing the existence of an essence involves the positing of an always false equivalency between an object of thought (an essence) and a material cause of action (an existence).*

19 We can now see why Santayana believes that, insofar as essence plays a role in action at all, it must be posited. The next question is, “What is the *cause* of this act of hypostatization?” In answer, Santayana now argues that the essence provides no motive or compulsion for its hypostatization. Hence when he attributes to human beings a “hypostatizing impulse,” he insists that the hypostatizing “can have no justification and no reason” (1915: 167). Santayana writes: “I have absolute assurance of nothing save the character of some essence,” and “the rest is arbitrary belief or interpretation *added by my animal impulse*” (1955: 110; italics mine). “If I hypostatize an essence into a fact, instinctively placing it in relations which are not given within it, I am putting my trust *in animal faith.*” (*Ibid.*: 99; italics mine).

20 To the casual observer, Santayana's conclusion might seem strange. With respect to the act of hypostatization, why does Santayana not locate its cause in the essence? Why, in other words, does he not assign the essence causal power? The reason is very simple. In doing so, Santayana would be making the same assumption that he criticized his predecessors for making: he would be assuming that the essence posited and that which causes it to be posited are the same thing.¹⁸ For, to assume that the essence causes *itself* to be hypostatized would *already* be to identify the essence with a causally efficacious object in the spatio-temporal domain (i.e. something capable of moving animal impulses, or triggering a response from them). In order to avoid making any

such unfounded assumption, *Santayana must refrain from asserting the identity of the object of thought with the cause of action.*

- 21 Ironically, to make this assumption would, in effect, be to presume the very identity of essence and existence which is in question, and which must – for that reason – be posited in *the act of hypostatization*. This is the core of Santayana's mature argument. Of course, he will give us additional reasons to doubt that essences exert causal power. For example, as he early on states in *Reason in Common Sense*, and maintains throughout his career, the intuited essence often appears to us as a foretaste or premonition of the object toward which animal impulses are *already* groping. It becomes an image or sign of an object the animal is already pursuing.¹⁹ Hence we can infer that it would be extremely unlikely if the intuited essence were able to turn around and exert power over those impulses of which it was itself a causal product. But Santayana's main argument in his mature work is that identifying essence with the cause of its positing requires making a much greater assumption than his skeptical philosophy can tolerate. All his skepticism will tolerate is the claim that, insofar as this hypostatizing impulse has a source, it must lie in some object *within* the causal domain. The only conclusion it allows one to draw is that the ultimate cause of the positing must be something residing within the causal domain, with which *the essence cannot be directly identified or treated as substitutable.*
- 22 This is why we must resign ourselves to the conclusion that the ultimate cause of our action lies in something besides the essence itself. The reason for this conclusion is, simply put, that we cannot conclude otherwise, except by assuming that the object of thought just *is* the cause of action – a conclusion for which we have no basis. *The idea therefore is not what causes us to act.*
- 23 As we shall state it, Santayana's argument for his so-called "epiphenomenalism," is as follows:
- (1) An essence would have to be hypostatized by a power external to itself before it could play a role in human action.
 - (2) The power that hypostatizes an essence may be moved by a cause external to itself.
 - (3) However, whatever causes it to hypostatize the essence cannot itself be equivalent to the essence in question.
- 24 To summarize: The first claim entails that, since ideas are, at most, signs of existing things, they do not lend themselves to being hypostatized, much less automatically hypostatize themselves. For this, another power is required, which has the capacity to hypostatize *them*: animal faith. Santayana next attempts to establish that, while animal faith is *itself* moved by a cause external to itself, this cause is not, and *cannot* itself be equivalent to the idea hypostatized. We have no basis on which to assert, and indeed every reason to deny that the causal agent is equivalent to the essence. So the cause of the hypostatization must be *something other than* the hypostatized idea. In sum, *the idea is neither the cause of its own appearance, nor of its own hypostatization.*

4. Assessing Santayana's Epiphenomenalism

- 25 This, it can be argued, is what Santayana's doctrine of "epiphenomenalism" amounts to. I would now like to argue that this position does not rule out possible a role for essence. My argument here shall be very simple: The hallmark of epiphenomenalism is

that it denies that ideas figure as necessary conditions in an account of action. Thus, if there is any possible sense in which Santayana allows that ideas *are* necessary for action, then he cannot be an epiphenomenalist. But he *does* seem to allow for this. Therefore, he is *not* an epiphenomenalist.

- 26 I should stress that in asserting this I am not denying that ideas are causally inefficacious, or assigning them the status of motor or efficient causes. Nor, for that matter, am I denying that essences cannot, under any circumstances, constitute a distinct chain of causes that intervenes in the chain of material causes. I am rather claiming that, without denying any of this, a range of positions are available to Santayana, all of which would make the appearance of essence a necessary condition for action:
- (1) Action must necessarily pass through the stage of intuition.
 - (2) Insofar as action must pass through the stage of intuition, intuition must necessarily take an essence as its object.
 - (3) Material causes must themselves either act towards, or upon, an intuited essence, for example in positing the existence of an essence.
- 27 All these positions would potentially allow Santayana to assert that, *although intuitions are not "causes" in the proper sense, they are "necessary conditions."* The first claim is the weakest and requires the fewest theoretical commitments. The second and third are similar to one another and require stronger theoretical commitments.
- 28 The first and least contentious position compares intuition to the tip of a wave which must crest before it breaks into action. The general picture Santayana gives us is one in which there is a chain of causality that passes from external causes to internal intuitions: "The continuity of these motions, outside of man, in through his senses, out through his impulses into his actions and influence is perfectly obvious. His senses and impulses will not be aroused without arousing his spirit..."²⁰ Here, Santayana does not explicitly say whether it is *necessary* for the process to pass through the stage of intuition in order for action to reach completion.
- 29 The question of whether the essence must appear or not may *not*, in fact, appear to him to be an easily answerable question. If the question is whether the essence is a necessary *cause* of action, Santayana would have to answer in the negative. The causes which necessitate the appearance of the essence also appear sufficient to account for the resulting action. Thus, on the one hand, it might at first seem that he would say the essence *is not necessary* because the essence could be removed, and the action would result in any case. On the other hand however, Santayana would probably *also* say that the question is misleading, and that material causes so strongly necessitate their spiritual effects in conscious beings that we cannot even hypothetically conceive a scenario in which the material cause is present without its spiritual effect, and thus, in which the spiritual effect is absent but the behavioral effect still results. Therefore, in answer to such a question, Santayana could plausibly maintain that the appearance of the essence is a necessary condition, in the sense that it must be present *in order for the action to result*. Santayana even could hold this position without denying that material causes are sufficient to determine action. More on this below.
- 30 The second two positions are stronger and have in common that they understand intuited essences as in some sense the "objects" of action. By "object," I mean that upon which action is performed, or that toward which action is directed (not the end or final aim of action). Here, it should not be forgotten that, although Santayana always

denies that ideas are active *causes*, he never avoids any language that implies that ideas are the passive *objects* action.²¹

- 31 One reason Santayana would have for holding a version of the second position, in addition to the first, is his Aristotelianism, which could potentially commit him to the view that intellection is not only necessary, but must necessarily take essence as its object. Over and over again, Santayana points to Aristotle as the model for his own thinking about spirit,²² because, for Aristotle, the activity of intellection involves the actualization of an intellectual faculty.²³ This faculty takes what it receives from the passive intellect and contemplates it in its intelligible form. The crucial point is that this faculty must exercise itself *on a particular object*: an object of intellection, which becomes the occasion for its activity. (Note that none of this implies that the intelligible object “exists” in any strong sense.) Yet Aristotle could describe the object as *necessary* to the activity insofar as the activity must have an object, if it is to be performed at all.²⁴ Indeed, Santayana says something to this effect:

In discerning any of these objects, whether they be essences or things, animal life becomes intuition, the synthesis of attention by which an essence appears; but this intellectual act is wholly focused on its object and unified only there. Taken as tension or potential perception, sensibility is diffused through indefinite time and through many vital functions; it would never exist actually and become sensation unless it became the sensation *of something*; the intuition of some essence, like a pain or a sound. (Santayana 1942: 41; italics mine)

- 32 Notice how Santayana stresses that the potential for sensation remains potential, and would not be actualized unless it became the perception “*of something*, the intuition of some essence.” This does not contradict Santayana’s previous claim that an idea is not a cause, because Aristotle would in no way describe the object of intellection as the *cause* of the intellectual activity, efficient or otherwise. In fact, like Santayana, Aristotle explicitly denies this.²⁵ Hence it is possible to assert that the essence is *necessary for*, without asserting that it is the *cause of* intellection.
- 33 Like the second position, the third asserts that essence is necessary as object, but this time, for the action of material causes. Santayana appears to approach this position whenever he suggests that an essence must be posited by a material impulse, where the material impulse is presented as the active agent and the essence the passive object of its activity. Here, the intuited essence is necessary because it is that without which impulses would have nothing to posit, and it produces behavior in being posited. Apparently combining this point with the previous point, Santayana writes in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* that essences make practical knowledge possible by providing it its object, without which, thought would be no more than “a bit of sentience without an object” (1955: 81).
- 34 This way of describing essences as the objects of material impulse can be found throughout Santayana’s corpus. This language is already present in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, when he speaks of essences as being posited by the animal (*ibid.*: 107), and also of essences as “used” by animal impulse for its own ends (*ibid.*: 179).
- 35 However, I would argue that it is particularly evident in Santayana’s description of essences as signs. For instance, in an important essay intended to clarify his position on mental causation, “The Efficacy of Thought,” Santayana continues to draw on the idea, already developed in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. Here, just as in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, he invokes an analogy between essences and sights and sounds, which “are signals to the animal of his dangers or chances” (*ibid.*: 102). Conscious reflection, he

explains, *does* effect behavior, but in a manner analogous to the way the sight of something can “effect” an animal’s behavior: imagine bird who takes the sight of a hawk’s shadow as a sign of danger. This occurs only because the sight is taken as a sign of danger by bodily habits and impulses, “without which the image would have signified no danger.”²⁶ Note the similarity of this claim to the claim in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* that interpretation must be “*added by my animal impulse*” (1967: 110; italics mine).

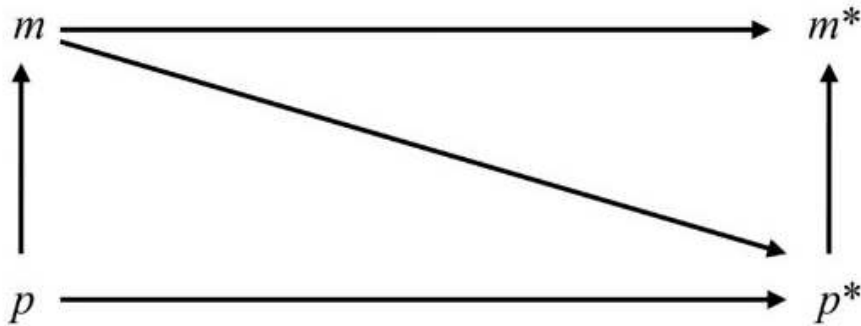
- 36 There are several points to be noted here. First, Santayana seems specifically concerned with refuting the possible objection that, as Kerr-Lawson states it, the functions of reason are always performed by unconscious forces, “and can function without our awareness” (Kerr-Lawson 1986: 423). Santayana is pointing out that the animal could not react appropriately to signs unless it were conscious of them. Second, the sign does not interpret itself, or cause the impulses to interpret it in a certain way; it has to be “interpreted” by the animal impulses.²⁷ Third, the sign would play no role whatsoever, were it not for the impulses, “without which the image would [not] have signified.”²⁸ In other words, the sign is by itself inert and insufficient to produce the behavioral effect: it is an insufficient cause.²⁹
- 37 In sum, when Santayana insists that essences are “impotent” or “inefficacious,” he plausibly means that they are not active causes, motor causes, or sufficient causes of action. This does not exclude the possibility that Santayana might have called essences necessary conditions, or indeed, that he might have been willing to venture so far as to call the intuited essence a “cause,” albeit an insufficient one. The important point however, is that in denying essence these roles, *he does not deny that essences are necessary conditions for action.*
- 38 Let me now suggest that the role of essence in Santayana’s philosophy can be best explained by an analogy: Imagine you see a sign for a restaurant and walk towards it. Now, in everyday language it would be common to say the sign “causes” you to walk. But is the sign a cause of your walking? Yes and no. Technically, the sign is not the a cause of your walking because you are the active causal agent, and all the action has been performed by you upon the sign, while the sign itself has not *done* anything. It appears to have exerted no causal power at all. And yet we would not therefore deny that the sign is necessary in some sense, because the sign provided an occasion for the true causes of your action, and provided the *object* upon which those causes did their work. Strictly speaking though, you walked because your eyes caught sight of the sign, and then, your stomach, being hungry and looking for food, led you to focus on the sign, to read it, and to take it in particular way, i.e. to take it as a sign of something that could satisfy hunger.
- 39 To add to this thought experiment, imagine the sign is a mirage produced by heat and hunger, and which exists no more than essence. Now, we have even *less* reason to assign it the status of a cause. Yet arguably, the mirage, as such, is just as necessary for what follows, in the sense that there still has to be something there *to be seen* in the swirling mists – something to be interpreted as a sign of food. Indeed even though the sign doesn’t strictly “exist,” the agent still has to see *something*, in order to posit *that* it exists.
- 40 In other words, in declaring essences “impotent” or “inefficacious,” Santayana means many things: they are not substances, active causes, motor causes, or sufficient causes. But he has not completely ruled out the possibility that they are in some general sense

necessary conditions for action. Moreover, the last two positions have in common that they strongly imply that we cannot explain why action is channeled in one direction rather than another without citing the fact that certain essences rather than others appear to intuition. Nonetheless, some interpreters might still sooner reject the claim that essences are necessary conditions than attempt to argue for the compatibility of this claim with the claim that essences are causally inert. In what follows however, I will show that Santayana is not alone in considering these assertions compatible, and therefore his position should be classed among those of contemporary philosophers who also assert their compatibility.

5. Modern Epiphenomenalist or Not?

- 41 The peculiarity of Santayana's position is that he seems to embrace two positions, apparently without awareness of the contradiction between them: He seemingly begins by committing himself to the view that material causes are sufficient, first, to account for the appearance of an essence, and second, to account for any action that results from the positing of said essence. However, Santayana then surprises us by seemingly continuing to argue that such an account of action would be incomplete unless it *also* mentioned essences. This commits him to the odd – and apparently contradictory – view that, although the material causes should in theory be sufficient to account for the behavioral effect, we could not remove essences from our causal account and still have an *adequate* account.
- 42 Many contemporary philosophers would say that these two positions are mutually contradictory: *either* we assert that intuitions are reducible to their material constituents and that material causes are sufficient to explain human behavior (in which case intuitions as such play no important causal role), *or* intuitions *do* have a causal role in human action (in which case the material causes are *not* sufficient to explain action). In other words, Santayana's position might be construed as stating that material causes both *are* and *are not* sufficient causes.
- 43 Indeed, Santayana could seemingly be accused of violating the Causal Exclusion Principle. According to this principle, if an effect *E* has a sufficient cause *C*, then no other property *C** distinct from *C* can be a cause of *E*.³⁰ As the principle applies to mental causation, it appears to mean that a behavioral event cannot have a sufficient material cause as well as an additional mental cause. For if *C* is causally sufficient for *E*, then when *C* is present the effect *E* must follow, whether or not *C** is present. It will then be argued that behavior cannot have sufficient physical causes and a distinct mental cause. The physical causes exclude the mental cause of the same effect.
- 44 However, in recent years both the Principle of Causal Exclusion, and the way it has been applied to challenge views like Santayana's, have come under criticism from many philosophers of mind.³¹ Some have rejected the principle outright, while others have argued that views that appear to violate this principle, and lead to overdetermination, do not in fact do so.³² Some have pointed out that the principle rules out two sufficient causes, but not a sufficient and insufficient cause. The same logic would state that it does not rule out a sufficient cause and a necessary condition. Santayana's view could therefore fit comfortably under this heading. And this would put him in league with many like-minded non-reductive physicalists.

- 45 Indeed, Santayana's position appears to resemble many supervenience models championed by compatibilists of this stripe, in which the material cause is sufficient but the mental cause also necessary. This kind of model is often depicted with the help of the following diagram:



- 46 Here, p is a physical cause and m a mental cause, while p^* is a physical effect, and m^* a mental effect. Vertical arrows represent a relation of supervenience. The others represent a causal relation. The physical event p is a cause of the physical effect p^* because p necessitates m , and m causes p^* . Indeed, p is a *sufficient cause* of the effect, but only because it is sufficient to cause the mental effect, which then, *in combination with* the original material cause, is able to produce the physical result. Santayana could then be interpreted as stating that a material state of affairs p first determines the intuition of an essence m , and then, the same material state of affairs produces an impulse which, in combination with the intuition of essence m , produces a physical result p^* .
- 47 Notice that the advantage of this model is that it denies that mental ideas are causes in any real sense, since any causal power they might be assigned must ultimately be traced to their underlying material conditions. The view that mental ideas cannot be causes in the normal sense because they inherit all their power from their causes is strikingly similar to Santayana's claim that theirs is a "borrowed power"³³ and that "their effects are the effects of [their] causes."³⁴ In this model, m has an ambiguous status. Many physical determinists would argue that if p is in fact a sufficient cause, then m is not necessary, and can have no causal role.³⁵ However, many compatibilists would argue that, although m inherits the efficacy of its material basis, on which it both supervenes and remains closely dependent, mental effects, as well as physical, *are* necessary.³⁶ Indeed, both physical causes and their dependent mental causes must converge on their effects.³⁷
- 48 This analysis shows that if Santayana ever, at some time in his career, adopted a strong version of epiphenomenalism, he need not have done so. Santayana's view, in its clearest formulation, therefore plausibly seems to resemble, not epiphenomenalism, but a form of compatibilism – one asserting that, a material state gives rise to a corresponding mental state, but behavioral effects do not follow unless the mental state is present.

6. Conclusions

- 49 Taking a longer view of Santayana's philosophical development has thus allowed us to advance a new interpretation of his so-called epiphenomenalism. We can now see that the designation "epiphenomenalism" is accurate insofar as Santayana's train of logic compels him to argue that mental phenomena has its origin in the material realm and "it is tethered to its starting place except by its intent in leaping" (1955: 165). In this sense, he deprives ideas of causal agency: ideas are not causal agents in the sense that they cannot be the causes of their own appearance nor the causes of their own hypostatization. Yet as Santayana repeatedly stresses, ideas *are* in some sense acted upon by forces with causal agency when they are posit-*ed*, and to this extent, they can play a role in determining behavior. This leads us to tentatively suggest, in contradistinction to many commentators, that Santayana's so-called epiphenomenalism were perhaps better classified as a form of compatibilism, alongside some modern forms of compatibilism it resembles.

Postscript

Intimations of Santayana's Mature View in *Egotism in German Philosophy*

- 50 Perhaps one of the reasons that Santayana is not more specific about his position is that he has already sketched out the outlines in his early works. In closing therefore, it will be useful to turn to the final pages of Santayana's *Egoism in German Philosophy*. For it is arguably here that he first articulates the ideas that will become central for his philosophy of mind, and if we look closely, we can see that his views remain largely unchanged through his mature work. Indeed, I shall argue that the interpretation I have just provided is anticipated by this early work.
- 51 Here, Santayana observes that, before they can take ideals as objects of practical pursuit, German Idealists must assume that their ideals exist *qua* objects of desire and pursuit. To this end, they have to assume that ideals *can* be instantiated in the world – in a word, that they can *exist*. Further, they must believe that, if their ideal were instantiated in the world, then this would correspond to a moral good worthy of pursuit, i.e. one that would satisfy a desire. But this, according to Santayana, is usually an erroneous assumption. (Later, Santayana will explain that this is because essence is not existence.)
- 52 What Idealists do next tells us not just about them, but about the human condition more generally. According to Santayana, Idealists eventually learn that no possible justification can be given for treating ideals *as existing*. Thankfully, Idealism correctly discerns that the only reason that the subject posits any ideal's existence is the Will: "All reasons, all justifications must be posterior to my will; my will itself can have no justification and no reason." (1915: 167). Here Santayana sees Protestant faith as a precursor to the Will, and its role in German thought (*ibid.*: 22). It is this Protestant faith, or Will, which Santayana already refers to as "the vital self-trust or faith of the animal will" that will become animal faith in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (*ibid.*: 31).

- 53 The phrase “animal faith” is most memorably used in the context of an elaborate metaphor that closes the book, in which the idealist is compared to a bull, and one of his ideals to a red flag waved by a matador. The bull charges the red cloth, heedless of the fact that it is an illusory and “with no suspicion that a hidden agency is mocking him.” Moreover, the bull is unaware that he is pressed forward by forces outside his own control, by “his own strength, rage, and courage” (*ibid.*: 149). The metaphor is designed to show that the “will is the expression of some animal body.”³⁸
- 54 In other words, the metaphor is designed to illustrate that, just as the bull chases the red flag in the mistaken belief that it is a real object with material value, so the Idealist chases ideals in the mistaken belief that they are real objects with real worth. But what causes the chase? The bull’s own animal reflexes are responsible for this reaction. In a similar way, the idealist chases his ideals because his material impulses are so effected as to (a.) direct him toward certain ideals; (b.) believe in them and posit their existence; and (c.) pursue them as if they were adequate substitutes for material goods in the real world. This is what Idealists do not understand.
- 55 Further, the analogy illustrates a point that Santayana will make over the course of his career, namely that Idealist philosophers mistakenly take ideas to be causes of action (1942: 151). Idealist philosophers seem to assume that, when the will posits the existence of an idea, it is because there is something about the idea *itself* that demands that it be posited. In this way they seem to speak as if the idea were the cause: the idea, they think, *causes* the will to posit it. Contrary to this, Santayana argues that, in reality, it is the *will* that takes an idea and posits its existence. This can be seen in the analogy in the fact that the bull believes the flag has provoked it. In fact, it is the other way around. It would be more accurate to say the bull’s raging impulses are responsible for the way it has focused its attention on the flag, and has taken it, rightly or wrongly, as the object on which it will unleash its rage.
- 56 It must be admitted, of course, that to the person pursuing an ideal it sincerely *feels* as if the ideal itself had power over the subject, and was calling forth this action from the agent – and the agent also has faith that this is the case. Animal faith then turns out to be not just the will’s faith in the reality of the ideas that it pursues, but also its faith that these ideas are themselves the origin of the pursuing activity, the cause which sets it in motion (i.e. that these ideas are not just the *objects* but the *efficient cause* of the pursuing activity). In reality, the person is urged on by the kind of faith the will has “in its ends because it is pursuing them” – a kind of “animal faith” (1915: 149).
- 57 I would argue that we can find here, in this early work, all the ideas which I have just attributed to Santayana. First, animal faith arises from material impulses and posits the existence of ideas. Second, ideas are not illusory in the sense of being complete non-entities, but in the sense of appearing to have more substantial existence and causal efficacy than they in fact do (when Santayana uses the analogy, it is not in order to stress that the red flag is an “illusion” in the sense of a complete non-entity, or that it does not exist even qua object of the bull’s action. Rather, the red flag is an “illusion” in the sense that it presents itself to the bull as more substantial and efficacious than it in fact is). Third, we can see that Santayana’s point is to stress that ideas cannot be identified with the material or efficient causes of action. Fourth, Santayana is concerned to stress that it is the will that is *active*, whereas the ideal is the *passive object* of the will’s action. However, it must also be noted that none of these claims are incompatible with describing ideals as the *objects* upon which human behavior acts, nor

does Santayana avoid doing so. I would argue that this pattern continues throughout his later work, and that what he denies is that ideas are material or efficient causes, but that *he never rules out that intuitions of essence serve as objects of belief and action.*

- 58 *Egoism in German Philosophy*, I would therefore argue, already contains the essence of Santayana's mature philosophy of mind. In *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, Santayana merely reiterates what he had previously stated in *Egoism in German Philosophy* – only that now Santayana speaks not of ideals but of intuited essences. Here, Santayana revises his view only in order to state that it is not just German philosophers, but *all* human beings who have animal faith. In other words, he simply universalizes his previous claim, as he now realizes the prevalence of the phenomenon that afflicts German thinkers so that, far from being bereft of truth, German philosophy “is a genuine expression of the pathetic situation in which any animal finds itself upon the earth, and any intelligence in the universe” (Santayana 1915: 7).

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NOTES

1. Taking the latter view, Lachs proposes that Santayana's epiphenomenalism be viewed as a product of its overall compatibility with his philosophy, ie. his dualism, his belief in mind's dependence on physical causes, and his apparent preference for a material realm "exempt from interference by non-physical agencies" (Lachs 1967: 273).

2. According to Matthew Flamm, Santayana's epiphenomenalism is non-standard in that it tolerates indeterminacy at the level of material causes (Flamm 2014: 26), and allows for something like free will at the level of the psyche (*ibid.*: 27).
3. See especially Wahman (2015: 99-105).
4. Santayana, "The Realm of Spirit," (1942: 565). "Even its rebellions and contrary dreams are dictated by its animal predicaments." (*ibid.*: 597). See also Santayana (1955: 68).
5. Brodrick argues that Santayana was on the verge of articulating the contemporary theory that a single event has two strata, a material one and a spiritual one (Brodrick 2013: 243). However, the advantage of this view championing so-called "total natural events" is not clear as it seems to fall back into a view that closely resembling epiphenomenalism. For Brodrick would presumably still maintain that events cause in virtue of their physical, not their mental properties.
6. Some have argued, for example, that he has defined spirit in such a way as to rule out the possibility of causal interaction between it and psyche. According to Angus Kerr-Lawson, Santayana's epiphenomenalism follows logically from the manner in which he defines spirit (Kerr-Lawson 1986: 422; cf. 420). Brodrick claims, by contrast, that the key to the mind-body problem is to be found in Santayana's concept of the psyche (Brodrick 2013: 239, 247-8). See also Lachs (1967: 257; cf. 268).
7. Lachs sometimes relies on the claim that, since only matter is defined as cause, mind must have its cause in matter (Lachs 1967: 263).
8. In *The Sense of Beauty* Santayana states that the recurring and stable qualities that we associate with an object constitute our idea of it (Santayana 1955b: §29, §38). However, he already argues here that so-called "secondary qualities" can make such a lasting impression and present such a "clear and steady" picture to the mind (*ibid.*: §46), that they sometimes seem to us to inhere within the object itself and to constitute its "essential qualities." The result is a special class of ideas called "aesthetic ideals" (*ibid.*: §11, §46). Here, we see an early intimation of Santayana's mature view that essence comprises both stable *and* subjective properties.
9. Santayana's argument seems to be that, since essences are formed by abstracting away from the material substrate in which they subsist and which is potentially continuous among different objects, and since it is presumably due to precisely such a material substrate that objects "assume relations external to their respective essences," we cannot retrospectively infer anything from an essence about its causal relation to other essences: "for the internal or logical relations between these essences will never establish any succession or continuity between them." (Santayana 1942: 208). Thus, fire is in some way intrinsic to smoke's essence, but this is not to establish the underlying causal link between smoke and fire. Here, the way an essence contains reference to other essences is complicated. For instance, Santayana distinguishes between a "pure" essence whose elements are mutually "implied," and the essence of an existing thing, which unites irrelevant essences, and whose elements are merely "conjoined" (Santayana 1967: 165).
10. The connection between the realm of existence and practical action is made most explicit in "Note on Morality versus Spirit" (Santayana 1967: 300-1).
11. In arguing for the centrality of the distinction between essence and existence to Santayana's philosophy I am preceded by Donald Williams (1967).
12. Most scholars move directly from the premise that essences do not exist to the conclusion that they therefore have no causal power. In Lachs' rendition, essences do not exist "because neither special nor temporal properties may be predicated of them." Hence, because they do not exist, they do exist "in a space-time network with the consequent possibility of causal action" (Lachs 1967: 255). A similar argument is repeated in Brodrick (2013: 239-40).
13. Here, I do not wish to deny that Santayana makes many epiphenomenalist statements in his early work, in particular, *The Life of Reason* (2011). However, as I explain below, the few arguments

he provides for these views are relatively conjectural and cursory as compared with the more definitive argument he provides in his mature work, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1955).

14. Here, Santayana is consistent in maintaining throughout his late work that belief always takes an object, and that the object is necessarily an essence: "its terms are invariably the essences present to intuition." (Santayana 1942: 198).

15. For example, John Lachs (2009) claims there is no connection between the doctrine of animal faith and Santayana's ontology. Similarly, Dilworth identifies a tension between his doctrine of animal faith and his skeptical Platonism (Dilworth 2014: 71).

16. Santayana (1955: 173).

17. A consequence of this is that, when we posit that an essence exists, we place it in a set of causal relations, which are extrinsic to it (*ibid.*: 48).

18. See further the below postscript.

19. Santayana (2011: 223-4; 1955: 85; 1942: 624).

20. Santayana, General Review, (1942: 834).

21. It should be noted of course that the term "object" is ambiguous, and that this ambiguity sometimes leads Santayana to deny that intuitions are the objects of perception and action. At one point, Santayana says of intuitions, "none can become an object of pursuit or perception." However, in this case, he means that intuitions are not the ultimate objects of desire, since as he goes on to explain, only particular things are "the existing things or events to which the animal is reacting and to which he is attributing the essences which arise" (Santayana 1955: 93).

22. Santayana (2011: 223-4; 1942: 600, 749, 816-7).

23. Santayana (1942:749).

24. For Aristotle, an intelligible structure, or form, must exist *qua* capable of being received by the passive intellect and *qua* capable of being contemplated by the active intellect. *De Anima* III.5 430a10-25. Compare Santayana's claim that, "as Aristotle says, the mind can only absorb the forms of things. It is for the body to deal with their matter." Santayana, "Apologia Pro Mente Sua," (1951: 542).

25. This is because Aristotle explicitly states that the active intellect is unaffected (*De Anima* III.5, 430a23).

26. Santayana, "The Efficacy of Thought," (1967: 249).

27. Santayana (1955: 63). In this vein, Santayana writes: "In order to reach existences, intent must transcend intuition and take data for what they mean, not for what they are; it must credit them, as understanding credits word." (*Ibid.*: 65).

28. Santayana, "The Efficacy of Thought" (1967: 249).

29. The above suggests that Santayana's solution to the problem of mental causation could be related to the contemporary observation that behavioural effects can have one sufficient physical cause and a distinct but insufficient mental cause. It has been pointed out that this type of scenario would not violate the causal exclusion principle, which I address further below, and which, in its most common form, states that behavioral events cannot have two sufficient causes (Kim 2005: 17). See further, Arnadottir & Crane (2013).

30. Kim (2001: 276). Kim gives various other formulations of the principle, for example that no event can be given more than one complete and independent causal explanation (Kim 1998: 45).

31. Block (2003).

32. Kallestrup argues that we can reject the Exclusion Principle and accept overdetermination (Kallestrup 2006: 471, 478).

33. Santayana "Maxims" (1967: 166).

34. Santayana (1942: 635).

35. Moreover, if m^* is fully determined by p^* , m is excluded as a cause of m^* (Kim 2005: 39ff.).

36. Kallestrup (2006: 472), Arnadottir & Crane (2013: 255), Bennett (2003: 488-9).

37. Loewer (2002: 658).

38. It shows, as Santayana says, that German philosophers have underestimated the extent to which “the environment in which the will finds itself controls and rewards its various movements.” Santayana defines animal faith, his version of the will, as “a wager or demand made beyond all evidence, and in contempt of all evidence, in obedience to an innate impulse” (*ibid.*: 167, cf. 28, 103).

ABSTRACTS

The present essay argues against the view that Santayana's philosophy can unproblematically be classified as epiphenomenalist. To this end, it examines the central tenets that provide the foundation for his position on mental causation as developed in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. This analysis shows that a range of positions are available to Santayana that are compatible with his prohibition on invoking ideas as motor causes, perhaps even demanded by it. While Santayana is consistent in denying that ideas are causes, taken in the usual sense of efficient or motor causes, he does not clearly deny that they are necessary conditions for some behavioral effects. The essay then responds to the objection that we should sooner reject the claim that essences are necessary conditions for action than attempt to argue for the compatibility of this claim with the claim that essences are causally inert. It is argued that Santayana is not alone in considering these assertions compatible, and therefore his position should be classed alongside those of contemporary philosophers who also assert their compatibility. The essay closes by examining some similarities between Santayana's view and those of contemporary compatibilists.

AUTHOR

ROBIN WEISS

American University in Cairo
robin.weiss[at]aucegypt.edu