

## A COMMUNITY OF PSYCHES: SANTAYANA ON SOCIETY

*by John Lachs*

Readers of Santayana know frustration and delight. To the literate among us, little gives greater joy than to be borne by a rich current of words to insights that burst on us like the morning light. Yet much in Santayana's fabric of thought dissatisfies. Some think him too poetic, others too deeply devoted to reason and to science. Positivists find him too metaphysical, metaphysicians too positivistic. Stern moralists condemn him for having embraced an aesthetic or spiritual life; religious people bemoan that he is not spiritual enough.

Perhaps one could explain these frustrations as due mainly to our natural hope to find in others what *we* think is right. But there are two areas of Santayana's thought where his readers' pain is too universal to explain away. One is in literary criticism, the other in his social and political views. How can Santayana both condemn Emerson and praise him? How can he celebrate Shakespeare and also consider him a barbarian? And what does he really think about democracy? Which is the best form of government and the best community? How *should* the individual relate to the laws and the state and the international order that may come someday?

I will not discuss literary criticism here, although I think that what I will say about the source of our anger with Santayana over his political theories can also be applied in that area. I will develop Santayana's view of the relation of the individual to the community and do so in detail for two important reasons. The first is that there has been very little serious consideration of this part of his philosophy. More significantly, there is no problem more timely, more pressing, or more difficult than the precise nature and proper form of this relationship. Confusion about it has become a hallmark of American society even while other nations assume

---

John Lachs is Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University.

thoughtlessly that they have the right idea. I do not wish to flatter thought by saying that if only we had the intellectual answer, it would gain acceptance before long. But it is no joyous task to go stumbling without sight. It may be profitable to see more clearly about matters of such moment.

Why does Santayana seem indecisive about the good society? How can he describe widely divergent social arrangements with equal sympathy, seeing the point of each and refusing to condemn? He has been severely and perhaps unjustly criticized for his ready acceptance of fascist Italy. Yet he deplored his sister's love of fascist Spain, launched a searing attack on imperial Germany, freely publicized his admiration of Britain, and on occasion confessed a quiet love even for the imperfect democracy of the United States. I know no other thinker who could write equally eloquent defenses of a secular, cosmopolitan world order and of a society of fanatical monks.

Are such broad sympathies due to a lack of principle? To the contrary. They are the deliberate and adequate expression of Santayana's most deeply and sincerely held beliefs. For Santayana is a relativist concerning values and this naturally makes him a relativist about social arrangements.

We should not be distressed at hearing the word "relativist." Many of those who believe that values are absolute and unchanging do so because they think of them as relative to or dependent on the will of God. Relativism has received a bad name because Protagoras and selected undergraduates maintain that good and evil are created by what they or anyone thinks. This exalts the power of thought less than it insults the significance of evil and leads to a number of silly consequences. It is not the sort of relativism Santayana has in mind. He thinks values are relative to the established nature of individuals.

If we now ask "Why individuals?" we suddenly find ourselves at the level of Santayana's deepest metaphysical commitments. For he is convinced that value links up with desire, living tendency, and action, and he sees the individual as the only center and source of agency. Of course, the individual is not, for Santayana, some disembodied soul or amphibious person. All motion is in the end physical, and the meanings that convert motion into action are themselves the products of consciousness, which is physically based. The individual, then, is primarily a biological organism, an animal fighting for life and love in a violent world.

Attentive reading of Santayana reveals that the generative image in his mind is that of the single animal attempting by cunning and force to thrive or at least to survive. The world of space and time is a field of action, and substance, he says, is universal food. The best evidence for the unity and continuity of nature is the symmetry of action: all agencies are

capable of affecting each other, of aiding or impeding each other's activity. The final reality, then, is to eat or to be eaten, to prevail or to be annulled.

This ultimate rule of existence is converted into value with the emergence of special, self-maintaining vortices in the flux. These organisms, each a controlled and complex set of habits, have the capability of sustaining and restoring their activity. They are enduring, definite beings for whose perpetuation not all contingencies are equally welcome. It is the definite constitution, the established potentialities, the living momentum of organisms that ground value; all creatures seek and avoid, embrace or abhor on the basis of who they are and in what they are engaged.

Humans are no different from other organisms in this respect. Their habits may cover a broader range, they may be more adaptive or more unstable. But in the last analysis each individual human being is just such a center of selectivity and agency. This swirling center of activity is what Santayana calls the "psyche"; it is simply the individual as a totality of dynamic tendencies. The unity of the psyche is, Santayana readily admits, mythological: it exists only for the observer who wishes to think of immensely complex affairs without having to focus on each complexity. In reality, the psyche is a moving spatio-temporal region that displays a staggering variety of loosely coordinated activities. I see a confirmation of this every time my toenail grows while I think of God.

In this conception of the soul or psyche, as in many other of his philosophical ideas, Santayana draws heavily on Aristotle. The insistence on activity, the language of potentiality (even of first and second act!), the ultimate unity of source of the vegetative, conative, and cognitive functions all remind us of Aristotle. There is one important difference. Aristotle thinks that the individual is a substance that engages in activities. Santayana, by contrast, maintains that the psyche is simply the sum total of its activities. If we insist on using the language of substance—and Santayana is by no means reluctant to do so—only the entirety of the field of action, the sum total of the physical world, is a substance. The psyche is a mode of matter.

But this last claim, while true, is seriously misleading. For although the psyche is a mode of the physical world, in another and very important respect it is a substance. Thoughts and values are modifications of this mode; with respect to them, the psyche functions as source and substratum. This means that the individual is a moral substance; it is the ultimate and only creator of the goodness of whatever is good and of the evil of what it abhors.

I find no significant argumentation in Santayana's works in support of this position. Perhaps this is not altogether surprising. For activity,

desire, and consciousness are primary conditions of value-creation. What beings other than individuals can display these properties? Surely not atoms or molecules. The only other candidate is some larger unity, such as the state. The Hegelians made much of this, but throughout the long years of Santayana's productive life, Hegel was thoroughly discredited. Santayana simply did not think it necessary to argue for a position that seemed to him as obvious as the moral ultimacy of the individual.

It is not difficult, however, to reconstruct the sorts of considerations that would have seemed persuasive to Santayana, had he bothered to array them and to develop them in detail. First of all, there is nothing in the state or society that could be read as a valid analogue of desire or consciousness. Collections of individuals simply lack the unity and the biological sensitivity necessary for awareness. Unless one defines consciousness in some excessively abstract metaphysical way—such as multiplicity-in-unity, in which case every modulated belch would have its attendant cognition—society lacks the organ for awareness and we lack all reasonable evidence for supposing that there is anything beyond individual perceptions and thoughts. As to desire, all we can detect in communities is the contagion of seeking and of wants. There is no indication of an added immediacy, of an experience of communal desire in some social mind.

Second, we note that each "action" of every community is in fact an action performed by individuals on its behalf. To say that on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the United States is shorthand for what a number of sailors and pilots did at Pearl Harbor *in the name of* the Emperor. To be sure, there are many things individuals would not do if they were not in the company of others, or if they did not think that what they propose is sanctioned or required by the rules that unite them. But this constitutes no evidence of agencies more cosmic than ordinary mortals. Whatever is done must be performed by men and women singly or in groups. It is just that one among the factors determining their will may be their perception of what the state or their community demands.

Let me say at once that this analysis appears to be correct. To maintain that Japan attacked the United States *by means of* its sailors and airmen, just as I scratch my nose with my fingers and thumb, is to lose sight of a critical condition of agency. Players in the field must be able to be found. There is no problem in locating me or my fingers. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to say that my fingers were not the ultimate source of agency when they wandered to relieve an itch. But in spite of the fervent testimony of sociologists that institutions are real, who has ever encountered a state? Is there more to General Motors than the patterned activities and possible activities of a large number of people? To explain the supposed efficacy of states, we need have reference to noth-

ing beyond what physical individuals do in the physical world and what meanings they perceive or what rules they find compelling.

I am not, of course, denying that institutions are in some sense real. But the task of the philosopher does not end—in fact it only begins—with this acknowledgment. For reality comes in many forms and it is a disastrous error to identify all of them with power. Mathematical relations are real, yet it would be silly to think that they bend the mind to compel recognition. Physical laws are real, but the *law* of gravity would never keep me tethered on the ground. The joy of sun that lingers into evening is real and beautiful and rare. But it is the rich expression of a healthy life, not the force that makes us carry on. The philosophical task is not to distinguish appearance from reality or truth from illusion. To do justice to the complexity of the world, we must sort out and learn to appreciate the different kinds of reality that surround us. Santayana undertakes this mission in a clear-headed and resolute way that could serve as a model for all of us. He sees the claim and place of every sort of being; concerning reality he is the greatest pluralist.

Our culture, interested in power without responsibility, is insensibly turning Hegelian. We see power everywhere and want to exercise our own namelessly, as though it were a part of the nature of things and hence could never be called into account. People now widely subscribe to the fiction that true agency, and therefore responsibility, resides in institutions or “the system.” As a result, we readily blame government, big business, or the oil companies, while we insist that in our role as employees of these institutions we must not be blamed. If ever there was an inverted moral order, we live it: we say the fictive system does it all, while the true agents hide behind their roles or seek innocence through committees and the collective act. Santayana saw the early stages of this trend and recognized it as a sad inversion. It is time for us to unmask it and to take corrective steps. The trouble with our society is not that we are excessively individualistic, but that we are not individualistic enough. For the individual as single agent carries knowledge of his acts, or at least responsibility for their consequences. Only such persons can constitute a community, a human world that is not a mere social machine.

Santayana's view that values are relative to psyches and his conviction that individuals are ontologically ultimate in the social world should give us at least the beginnings of an understanding of why he appears to be elusive about the good society. For, to him, no society is good simply because of its structures or processes. Such formal features promote the possibility of certain perfections, but all perfections presuppose underlying natural organisms. The value of a community, therefore, is largely a function of the nature of its constituent psyches. Since human nature is neither stable nor uniform, psyches can differ widely, though not inde-

finitely, within changing parameters. As a result, a society that permits ideal self-expression to one sort of psyche may be the paradigm of evil to another type. There is no one good or best society, because there are many good ones, each best for a certain type of soul.

Let me now develop Santayana's criteria for the goodness of communities in somewhat greater detail and more systematically than he did. His central and most general idea here, once again, has Aristotelian overtones. Psyches have definite potentialities. By and large, it is these potentialities that determine what the psyche desires and what in fact would satisfy it. The notion of the good life is thus the notion of discharging what is latent in us. The good society, in turn, is that which enables or allows all or a very large number of its members to lead the good life. Given the essential interdependence of human beings, the community functions as a condition of individual self-fulfillment.

The matter is, of course, not quite so simple as this would suggest. For there are significant problems in determining the individual's good and there are nagging difficulties in the treatment of minority psyches. The individual soul is not, for the most part, a rationally or even neatly structured unity. Long-term constitutive interests vie for dominance with stray impulses directed upon momentary but very real goods. None but the most impoverished psyche may hope for fulfillment by the satisfaction of all its desires; for those of us in whom life runs hot and thick, internal strife is a daily spectacle. Hence we must distinguish the "real" from the "apparent" good of every creature, and for someone with Santayana's sensitivity for the reality even of the apparent, this can be done only in terms of the contrast between narrow short-range and richer long-range goods. The good life for an individual, then, is one in which he or she is able to satisfy the richest set of most intense desires or attain the largest number of fervently sought compossible goods.

The interest in this harmonious maximization is what Santayana calls "reason." To be sure, there is nothing compulsory about reason or uniform about its products. Those in whom the impulse for harmony is weak may live and die, as did Aristippus, in a golden haze. We can say of them perhaps that they had a good time, but not that it amounted to a satisfying life. There is no legitimate moral criticism of those who opt against reason, so long as we are not asked to bear the cost of their choice. Fortunately, of course, we would not have to criticize for long, in any case: those who steadfastly reject maximization have no reason to embrace the life-enhancing and soon expire of a passing passion.

That reason is uniformly the impulse for harmony may mislead us into supposing that it yields uniform results. But maximization is a formal principle. It orders our desires without determining what they shall be and without creating new ones, which, in some abstract way, it might

be better to fulfill or to possess. Reason, like married love, works with what there is. It was reason that shaped the life of Casanova no less than it rules the latest pope. Achilles and the Ayatollah abide by it to varying degrees; in each it is the gardener that trims natural growths. The man of reason who leads the good life, therefore, is not limited to any one kind of man. It is anyone who brings unity to his soul, no matter what flowers his native soil may grow.

This discussion of reason and the good life gives us the clue to a fuller development of Santayana's view of social authority and the proper treatment of divergent psyches. Ideally, the good society facilitates the fulfillment of all its constituent psyches. Such social harmony has been a human ideal since Plato's time or before. But, once again, it would be a mistake to be rigid about the specific features of such a society. It may operate by inflexible rules and demand unconditional self-sacrifice, if that is what its citizens expect and enjoy. It may, on the other hand, be an association of anarchic sybarites, each psyche a lovely note but the whole composing only a loose, uncertain melody. Santayana has no quarrel with the varieties of life, so long as they are authentic and fulfilling to those who lead them.

But such universal fulfillment is an ideal not only in the sense that it would be good to have. It is also beyond the pale of reality. Under the best of circumstances, some souls are left out; even in the bravest new world, deviants and malcontents abound. What will a good society do about them? First of all, it will try to keep their number as low as possible. And second, it will leave them as much room to fulfill themselves in their own way as it can without abandoning its grounding principles. Toleration, the maximal bending of rules consistent with the genius of a community, then, is a necessary feature of any good society. Let me stress at once that no precise or determinate amount of toleration is necessary. Different social organizations can and should permit differing magnitudes of dissent and deviance. Santayana's point is not that toleration should be infinite, but that intolerance should not be unchecked and gratuitous. His condemnation of militancy is founded precisely on this point. For a militant society is less concerned with assuring the fulfillment of its faithful than with frustrating the will of everyone else. Militancy always involves the effort to impose an alien will. This pursued on a small scale is lamentable; when it becomes a way of social life, it always yields disaster.

But why is a society of total toleration not better than all others? Because the very notion of such a community is a meaningless abstraction. Human nature is so varied that the desires and operations of the people in a community are never completely compatible. Conflicts naturally arise, wills cross in the process of seeking private goods. Those who

think that we would grow like flowers without social rules, never had a garden to observe. Without rules, toleration would be restricted to the strong or crafty; everyone else would soon be oppressed or dead. Toleration must, therefore, always remain a limited and relative matter, for from the standpoint of the leaders of a society there is no difference between tolerating intolerance and perpetrating it.

Must we then suppose that militancy is unconditionally bad? This would at once destroy Santayana's moral relativism. And, I must admit, the deep respect I feel for individual autonomy inclines me to think—better, to feel—that imposing an alien will by force is always evil. But the moment we reflect on the great militant spirits of history and view their actions from their own perspective, the pervasiveness of evil disappears. Attila and the Grand Inquisitor, Stalin and Savonarola all had a perfectly good time attacking or persecuting. But do not let me hang the matter on how they felt. Only an external unsympathetic view can overlook the inner cogency and justification of the militant. We may call his reasons rationalizations, but from his own point of view they are valid and compelling. For the true enthusiast, militancy is not a pose; it is the only form in which his nature gains expression. To condemn him, we must compare his views with ours and find them wanting. Or we must be able to show that his nature is depraved or worse than ours. Such comparisons are not impossible. But they take place in the private imagination, an organ notoriously bathed in prejudice. They all presuppose standards and perspectives that are far from neutral, so that their results become predictable.

Militancy is, indeed, bad from the standpoint of the person overwhelmed. But it is the only form of life worth the effort for some vigorous wills. This is as far as argument can go; the rest is left to physical encounter. For moral—and political—arguments soon come to an end and we face each other with guns or at the ballot box. But preferably at the ballot box? Clearly—for you and me, today. But with guns if circumstances change, if not to impose our will on others, then at least to prevent them from forcing theirs on us.

The outbound militancy of a state is aggression; when directed inward, it becomes oppression. There are good societies, Santayana thinks, that are natively aggressive. They offer their citizens not balanced lives but glorious demise. But no good society is oppressive to any significant extent. For there is a subtle but important difference between not allowing people to do what they want and forcing them to do what we desire. The former is best done by such rules as the criminal law, the latter by force or ruthless terror. A good society, then, will try to make room for deviant psyches. If it comes to the point where deviants must be con-



trolled, it will proscribe rather than prescribe, stop harmful behavior instead of twisting natures.

What renders groups of people true communities is the kinship of their natures or their souls. It is not, of course, that communities are accidents of nature. On the contrary, the native bent of every society carries it to communion. We all tend to create replicas of ourselves in our children. The process of socialization reinforces our similarities. The power of a society in defining wants and channeling efforts, in creating desires and providing for their satisfaction, is unparalleled. The result is a staggering though largely unnoticed uniformity among the psyches that constitute a nation. In spite of individual differences, our habits and values are confined within modest parameters: Jones of Jonestown fame resembles a self-effacing U.S. hermit more than he resembles a mad Ayatollah.

The similarity of psyches, once it is sensed, establishes the foundation of legitimate authority in the state. Those who speak for alien goods receive no hearing in the soul. Authority has a vital basis: only when the voice of our own values calls are we impelled to action or sacrifice. Yet even this voice, spoken through the laws or government, is inadequate to integrate us into a community so long as we think we can do it all alone. Santayana is less eloquent on this point than many of the great proponents of human unity. But he sees it clearly enough: to make a community, we must view each other as necessary friends. This means that each must regard the others as having legitimate claims to fulfillment, and his own welfare as organically tied to theirs. We must see the free self-expression of all, to rewrite Marx, as a condition of the free self-expression of each.

There are many ways in which political philosophies may fail. They have the usual difficulties attendant on description, generalization, and the avoidance of contradiction in complexity. But, in addition, they also face special problems associated with the fact that they have normative elements and stand, as does any theory about society, a good chance of being self-falsifying. In writing of values, Santayana is a devoted follower of Spinoza: he attempts to give a calm, descriptive account of human valuation, instead of telling us how everything should be. Yet we find that with the growth of the organic state, Santayana's claims about the primacy of the individual recede from the descriptive to the normative level. It is as if we found human history bent on convincing us that Hegel was right, after all, that ultimate agency resides in units much larger than the individual. Individual agency is now ever more difficult to trace and personal responsibility is turned away; what used to be obvious fact must now be disentangled by analysis. In a world like this, Santayana's claim that the community is built of single units, that its legi-

timacy derives from you and me, is more of a call to action than a true account. I agree with the call, but it is important to see how easily even a descriptive naturalist can find himself in the pulpit preaching of threatened values to a yawning world.

Political thought may be self-falsifying, as well. It would be easy to overstate the social impact of Santayana's thought; I certainly do not wish to do so. Yet it has made some small contribution to public knowledge of the cost of relativistic individualism. And this cost is high. A serious commitment to the primacy of the individual puts choice and accountability on our reluctant shoulders. And if we believe in the relativity of values, we rob ourselves of the joy of condemnation. Responsibility without solace is what we face if Santayana and his soul mates are correct; is it surprising, then, that we do what we can to render their thoughts false?

Yet these are not the ultimate problems with Santayana's view. There is one issue that grows out of the essence of his project that presents a nagging, gaping failure. Santayana's attempt is to understand all without passing judgment. This cognitive ideal has been deeply embedded in philosophy. It was profoundly attractive to Santayana, who was by nature reflective, a spectator. But understanding is not the only function of thought; we cannot leave the physical world to brute, untutored action. Santayana's own master, the great Peripatetic, taught that in addition to the pure joys of intellectual life, there is also moral virtue guided by reason through sound habits and the practical syllogism. Here Santayana has little to offer. There is understanding but no guidance for life. If anything, we understand so much that we do not know where to turn. The legitimacy of all styles calls our own in doubt.

Let me be clear about what I have in mind. Schopenhauer thought that all life was equally legitimate. He inevitably concluded that we must never impede the will of any other creature and hence should choose a course of resignation and saintly death. Santayana refuses to draw even this conclusion. For the psyche, he thinks, is primed to live and act; even after, as philosophers, we understand, it is best to leave it to do its thing. But this presupposes that the potentiality of the psyche is fully formed and unchangeable. And it commits us to the view that thought either makes no difference or can create no improvement.

I think these assumptions are false. There is no better way to demonstrate the problem than by focusing on children. Every community's future is locked up in its children and each wants to control it through education. To parents, raising children is a world-creative act. Obviously, we cannot make our children into anything we want. But there are options, there are futures to consider, there are choices to make. In doing so we seek, perhaps more than we ever sought for our-

selves, what is rational and good and satisfying. What shall we make of our children? On what principle shall we choose the psyches with which we endow them for life? It is inadequate to say that we must do what our psyches now demand. For in such soul-making we transcend our ken, and as the future opens, our own values lose sacred primacy.

I know that soon enough we learn how we shall have raised our children. But that is not to know how we should do or should have done it. In raising children the value of our own psyches and of our whole community is what needs to be questioned first of all. How shall we ground our judgment? Moral and political philosophy must have an answer. Santayana's, unfortunately, does not.