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Matthias Neuber

1. Introduction

- 1 Among the advocates of American critical realism, George Santayana (1863-1952) is no doubt the most well received. Particularly his *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) contributed to his reputation as the main representative of the critical realist movement. Thus, for example, William Pepperell Montague, in his "The Story of American Realism" (1937), confined his discussion of critical realism almost entirely to Santayana's distinctive, "essentialist," approach (see Montague 1937: 155-9). Moreover, it is conspicuous that even in the context of more recent encompassing textbooks on the history of American philosophy critical realism is depicted very selectively. Thus, for instance, in Marsoobian and Ryder's seminal *Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy* (2004) it is only Santayana's essentialist version of critical realism that finds consideration. Exactly the same holds true of the treatment of critical realism in Cheryl Misak's influential *Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy* (2008).¹
- 2 It was Santayana's fellow critical realist Roy Wood Sellars who in his retrospective *Reflections on American Philosophy from Within* complained that "too much stress was laid on the essence wing of critical realism. Probably, Santayana's prestige had something to do with this outcome" (1969: 47).² As it appears, what Sellars calls the essence wing of critical realism, covering Santayana's particular approach as well, predominated the reception of the critical realist movement. It was a whole "wing," since there were other critical realist thinkers besides Santayana who committed themselves to essences in order to explain perception and cognition in general. We will come back to this point later. But what, in fact, is meant by "essences"? It is this question which will occupy us most intensively in this paper. In a first approximation, one could say that essences are something like Platonic forms. However, already the mentioning of Plato complicates the issue, since Santayana's indebtedness to the latter is rather intricate. Santayana expert Angus Kerr-Lawson points out in this connection:

Santayana's doctrine of essences is apt to be misunderstood, because it breaks unfamiliar ontological ground. One may be tempted to dismiss it as an objectionable form of Platonism, without sufficient consideration of his response to typical objections. (Kerr-Lawson 1985: 203)

- 3 More than that, even Santayana himself considers his overall outlook to be, at best, a “broken” version of Platonism. Thus, in his seminal *The Realm of Essence* (1927) he declares:

I might almost say that my theory is a variant of Platonism, designed to render Platonic logic and morals consistent with the facts of nature. I am afraid, however, that this readjustment unhinges Platonism so completely that I have no right to call my doctrine Platonic. (Santayana 1927/1957: 155)

- 4 Accordingly, caution is advised when talking about essences, Plato and Platonism in the context of Santayana's approach.
- 5 In what follows, I will focus on Santayana's conception of essences under the aspect of its application to the problem of perception. With the exception of a highly original paper by John Lachs (1967), no detailed work has been done on this topic so far. Most of the relevant interpretations concentrate on the genuinely ontological aspects of Santayana's doctrine of essences. By contrast, I will concentrate on the epistemological aspects. My central message is that Santayana failed to develop a sufficiently convincing essentialist view of perception, and that his actual significance in terms of the impact of the critical realist movement was, contrary to what is often claimed, quite limited.
- 6 The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly summarizes the central ingredients of the critical realist program. Section 3 gives an overview over Santayana's ontological approach to essences. Section 4 provides some context by contrasting the essence wing of critical realism, on the one hand, and the “empirical group” of critical realism around Sellars, on the other. Section 5 outlines Santayana's application of his doctrine of essences to the problem of perception. Section 6, the core of the present paper, critically discusses the resulting essentialist account of perceptual knowledge. Section 7 asks about Santayana's legacy within the history of American critical realism. Section 8 concludes the paper with a brief summary.

2. What is Critical Realism?

- 7 American critical realism emerged as a movement in the early 1920s. Anticipated by some of the works of the early Roy Wood Sellars (see, for example, Sellars 1908 and especially Sellars 1916), critical realism came into the public eye with the 1920 anthology *Essays in Critical Realism*. In the preface to that volume (see Drake *et al.* 1920: vi), the authors – besides Santayana and Sellars, Durant Drake, Arthur O. Lovejoy, James Bissett Pratt, Arthur K. Rogers and C. A. Strong – emphasize that critical realism is clearly distinguished from the American “new” realism, developed around 1910 by authors such as Ralph Barton Perry, Edwin B. Holt and the aforementioned William Pepperell Montague (see, in this connection, Holt *et al.* 1910 and especially Holt *et al.* 1912). As with the new realists, the critical realists proceeded from the assumption of a mind-independently existing world. That was the realist ingredient of their program. However, in contrast to the new realists, the critical realists committed themselves to an essentially *representationalist* account of perception. That is, they rejected the new

realists' main thesis of a direct relation between perceiver and the object perceived and argued instead in favor of a more indirect, mediated, form of perceptual knowledge. This, in turn, was the critical – “non-naïve” – ingredient of their program. Or, as they put it in the preface to their 1920 cooperative volume: “Our realism is not a physically monistic realism, or a merely logical realism, and escapes the many difficulties which have prevented the general acceptance of the ‘new’ realism” (Drake *et al.* 1920: vi). The trickiest of these “many difficulties” was the problem of error, which from a representationalist point of view seemed quite elegantly manageable. Be that as it may, the critical realists agreed in postulating a representationally and thus mediately perceivable mind-independent world of physical objects and events.

- 8 However, as the authors further stated in the preface to the 1920 volume, there was also some tension among them. In their own words: “the members of our group hold somewhat different ontological views” (*ibid.*: vii). This difference in ontology revolved around the notion of essence, and it was clearly Santayana who was at the head of the corresponding essence wing of critical realism.

3. Santayana on Essences

- 9 So, what is Santayana's ontological account of essences? As already indicated, there is a certain leaning to Platonic forms (or ideas). However, in contrast to Platonic forms, Santayana's essences are free from any compulsion or metaphysical necessity. They are not what a thing *must* have, but rather the collection of all the thing's properties. Consequently, Santayana's account is an anti-essentialist position in that it does not impute essential properties to things. Or, as he himself points out in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*:

The realm of essence is not peopled by choice forms or magic powers. It is simply the unwritten catalogue, prosaic and infinite, of all the characters possessed by such things as happen to exist, together with the characters which all different things would possess if they existed. It is the sum of mentionable objects, of terms about which, or in which, something might be said. Thus although essences have the texture and ontological status of Platonic ideas, they can lay claim to none of the cosmological, metaphysical, or moral prerogatives attributed to those ideas. They are infinite in number and neutral in value. (Santayana 1923/1955: 77-8)

- 10 On the other hand, Santayana posits an autonomous *realm* of essences that logically precedes the realm of matter (and of things). In this sense, his position is indeed “a strong form of essentialism” (Kerr-Lawson 1985: 202) implying that essences possess their own ontological status, namely that of eternal, inefficient being. In contrast, particular things (or “substances”) exist in space and time and causally act upon each other. So, while things are active and dynamic, essences are passive and powerless. Santayana writes:

[T]he discernment of essence, while confirming Platonic logic in the ideal status which it assigns to the terms of discourse (and discourse includes all that is mental in sensation and perception), destroys the illusions of Platonism, because it shows that essences, being non-existent and omnimodal, can exercise no domination over matter, but themselves come to light in nature or in thought only as material exigencies may call them forth and select them. (Santayana 1923/1955: 79-80)

- 11 Accordingly, essences do not exist, but can get instantiated by existing things from the realm of matter. While these things, e.g., a particular flower, will cease to exist again

one day, the instantiated essences, e.g., the yellow of the flower, will remain forever. The essence with the thing passing through it, in turn, forms what might be called a fact. Without the existing thing, the essence has the status of autonomous eternal being.³

- 12 Now, as Timothy Sprigge (1995: 69-72) has correctly emphasized, for Santayana there are two categorically different *sorts of exemplification* of essences. First, essences can occur as characters of things, as just described. This is what Sprigge calls “formal” exemplification. Secondly, however, essences may also occur as the immediate data of consciousness and vehicles of perception and belief. This is what Sprigge calls “imaginative” exemplification. While formal exemplification is ontologically relevant, imaginative exemplification is epistemologically relevant. I will focus on the latter in the remainder of this paper. Before going into the details, however, I would like to return briefly to the two factions within the critical realist camp.

4. The “Essence Wing” versus the “Empirical Group”

- 13 Roy Wood Sellars, in an essay he published in 1939, distinguished between two different articulations or forms of the critical realist program, the “essence-wing” and the “empirical group” (see Sellars 1939: 495-6). Specifically, Santayana, Drake, and Strong belonged to the essence wing, while Sellars, Lovejoy, Pratt, and Rogers belonged to the empirical group. Both of these two forms of American critical realism were representationalist in outlook and thus opposed to American new (or “direct”) realism. However, as already mentioned, they were divided over issues of ontology. While the members of the essence wing invoked the notion of essence to provide ontological support for their epistemological ideas, the members of the empirical group attempted a more science-oriented approach, particularly one based on evolution. Sellars was most explicit in this regard when he already in an essay of 1924 declared:

I cannot help feeling that the Santayana-Strong doctrine of essence has very much complicated the situation. This doctrine raises ontological questions which seem to me gratuitous. I can quite appreciate the motivation of the theory of essence, which, of course goes back to Plato and Aristotle and was further developed by the mediaeval schoolmen. We must, in knowledge, grasp something about the object. [However], the epistemological situation seems to me to demand only that the content of knowledge reveal the characteristics of the objects of knowledge, or, to put it the other way, that the object appear in the content. (Sellars 1924: 383)

- 14 Thus Santayana’s (and Strong’s) doctrine is rejected as being anachronistic. Instead, it is the distinction between “object” and “content” on which the focus is placed.
- 15 In his *The Philosophy of Physical Realism* (1932), Sellars backs up his criticism of Santayana and the essence wing of critical realism by pointing out that it “has always seemed to me that the term, essence, was something of a verbal short-cut. [...] How can the essence in the object get to the mind? It appeared to me that the apprehension of the right essence at the right moment was left somewhat of a miracle” (*ibid.*: 60). Elsewhere in the book, Sellars complains that Santayana’s ontology of essences is hopelessly unclear. And he immediately adds: “It is, I take it, only an emergent evolutionist who can develop such an ontology” (*ibid.*: 195). In point of fact, however, the entire account of essences is discarded by Sellars after all, and the “emergent evolutionist” conception is substituted for it.

- 16 To be more concrete, the resulting Sellarsian alternative to the theory of essences is best characterized as an attempt to combine *semantics* (as the theory of meaning) with an evolution-based approach to cognition. Sellars calls the corresponding position “conceptualistic nominalism” (*ibid.*: 205) and explains:

The human mind-brain is creative, and this creativity is causally controlled and socially conditioned. New patterns signify new meanings. Meanings are not entities of an eternal sort subsisting in a realm of essences somehow waiting to be intuited or embodied. They arise only as their physical foundation arises. It is physical organization, and not the ingression of eternal objects, which explains the repetition of meanings. (*ibid.*)

- 17 Accordingly, essences are replaced by meanings, which in turn are considered to carry distinguishable contents. We will return to this alternative – Sellarsian – account in our critical discussion of Santayana’s approach to perception. For now, it may suffice to note that the empirical group around Sellars had to offer a serious counter-theory to Santayana’s essence theory and that the critical realist movement must therefore by no means be reduced to its essence wing.⁴

5. Essences in Perception

- 18 With all that said, the problem to be dealt with next is how Santayana’s ontology of essences is related to the theory of perception. In order to do so, some preliminary consideration should be given to Santayana’s distinctive understanding of the term “realism.” Thus, in his contribution to the 1920 *Critical Realism* volume, he begins with a “Definition of Realism,” in which he states:

Realism in regard to knowledge has various degrees. The minimum of realism is the presumption that there is such a thing as knowledge; in other words, that perception and thought refer to some object not the mere experience of perceiving and thinking. The maximum of realism would be the assurance that everything ever perceived or thought of existed apart from apprehension and exactly in the form in which it is believed to exist: in other words, that perception and conception are always direct and literal revelations, and that there is no such thing as error. If this is the range of realism, I think we may say that any reasonable theory of knowledge – any theory that does not abolish its own subject-matter – will occupy some point between these extremes, and will be more or less realistic. (Santayana 1920: 163)

- 19 As already indicated, Santayana’s own account of realism revolves around the notion of essence. In his 1920 contribution, he speaks of the “key to the problem of knowledge” (*ibid.*: 168) in this connection. Quite importantly, he distinguishes between the “ideal status” and the “material status” of an essence (*ibid.*). This distinction roughly squares with Sprigge’s talk of formal and imaginative exemplification mentioned earlier. Indeed, according to Santayana, a purely intuited essence may *become embodied* as soon as it is applied to a particular thing. Then it has what he calls material status. Otherwise, it remains an immediately given *universal*. Santayana explains: “This object of pure sense or pure thought, with no belief superadded, an object inwardly complete and individual, but without external relations or physical status, is what I call an essence” (*ibid.*: 168, fn. 1).
- 20 Regarding the material status of essences, Santayana employs the further characterization of a “sensible essence” (*ibid.*: 172) and states that “such essences are the apparent qualities of the thing perceived” (*ibid.*). However, it is only essences in

their ideal status that deserve Santayana's metaphysical appreciation. For only these purely intuited essences, in contrast to material things, are to be regarded "indefeasible" (*ibid.*: 181). Unlike the latter, they do not exist (in spatio-temporal terms) but are nevertheless "ontologically far more necessary and fundamental than are physical things or pulses of feeling" (*ibid.*: 182). Understood that way, pure intuition of essences (or immediate acquaintance with them) is "pre-eminently realistic knowledge" (*ibid.*).

- 21 So far, so good. But what about sensible essences, *viz.*, perception? In this regard, it is advisable to take a closer look at *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. There, Santayana explicitly asserts that "nothing given exists" (1923/1955: 42), but that only the data of pure intuition are given. Percepts, the data of perception, pertain to the realm of existing things and are therefore fundamentally defeasible. That is, perception is always in danger of falling prey to skepticism and can ultimately be "rescued" only by what Santayana calls *animal faith*. In his own words:

Not the data of intuition, but the objects of animal faith, are the particulars perceived: they alone are the existing things or events to which the animal is reacting and to which he is attributing the essences which arise, as he does so, before his fancy. These data of intuition are universals. (*ibid.*: 93)

- 22 Thus, it is by animal faith that spatio-temporally existing things are made accessible to the perceiving organism and its bodily needs. Essences, on the other hand, are required to describe those things in terms of their properties.

- 23 Now it is important to see that essences, conceived as universals, are, in Santayana's view, in no way *abstracted* from existing things. Rather, they become *instantiated* (or embodied). Once again, in Santayana's words:

Essences are not drawn out or abstracted from things; they are given before the thing can be clearly perceived, since they are the terms used in perception; but they are not given until attention is stretched upon the thing, which is posited blindly in action; and they come as revelations, or oracles, delivered by that thing to the mind, and symbolizing it there. (*ibid.*: 93-4)

- 24 Thus, essences, being the "terms" used in perception, fulfill an eminently *symbolic function*: they do not directly present the things perceived in a literal sense but rather re-present them (see, in this connection, also Lachs 1967: 286, and Sprigge 1995: 143-4). In this way, Santayana's account contributes to the critical, *i.e.*, representationalist aspect of the overarching critical realist program.

- 25 However, the question now immediately arises how it should be possible to perceive things and not only their representations. Or to put it slightly differently: How is it that we acquire perceptual *knowledge* about things and their apparent qualities, *i.e.*, particular facts? According to Santayana, it is important here to make a strict distinction between perception as a form of knowledge and intuition as something other than knowledge. He writes:

The experience of essences is direct; the expression of natural facts through that medium is indirect. But this indirection is no obstacle to expression, rather its condition; and this vehicular manifestation of things may be knowledge of them, which intuition of essence is not. (Santayana 1923/1955: 102)

- 26 Accordingly, perceptual knowledge is always indirect or mediated, whereas intuition is not. Yet, how do purely intuited essences, as the symbolic terms or means used in perception, come into contact with particular things? As mentioned before, according to Santayana, animal faith – the "voice of hunger" (*ibid.*: 191) – does the crucial work in

this regard. Being “only pragmatic” (*ibid.*), animal faith, when engaged in the perceptual context, is always accompanied by some specific *intent*. Indeed, the latter is supposed to close the cognitive gap between the realm of material things on the one hand and the realm of pure essences on the other. It is therefore plausible to distinguish, as Sprigge does, between pure intuition and “intent-laden” (1995: 118) intuition. Only the latter supplements, as it were, on the property side animal faith and thus pertains to perception.

- 27 In summary, then, perception for Santayana always consists of two components: 1) action-driven animal faith toward particular things and 2) intent-laden intuition of essences. With respect to 1), Santayana elaborates:

Animal faith, being an expression of hunger, pursuit, shock, or fear, is directed upon *things*; that is, it assumes the existence of alien self-developing beings, independent of knowledge, but capable of being affected by action. [...] In other words, animal faith posits substances, and indicates their locus in the field of action of which the animal occupies the center. Being faith in action and inspired by action, it logically presupposes that the agent is a substance himself, that can act on other things and be affected by them [...]. (Santayana 1923/1955: 214)

- 28 Pragmatism in the vein of William James, John Dewey, and others clearly shines through here (for details, see Misak 2013: 144-50). However, Santayana goes not so far as to *reduce* perceptual knowledge to its pragmatic aspect. Rather, he combines the pragmatic aspect provided by animal faith with intent-laden intuition of essences. Thus regarding 2), he points out that animal faith, if it is to become knowledge, must be necessarily supplemented by this kind of intuition. In his own words: “Animal faith being a sort of expectation and open-mouthedness, is earlier than intuition; intuitions come to help it out and lend it something to posit” (Santayana 1923/1955: 107). As a result, *perception* enters the scene. Santayana writes:

Perception is a stretching forth of intent beyond intuition; it is an exercise of intelligence. Intelligence, the most ideal function of spirit, is precisely its point of closest intimacy with matter, of most evident subservice to material modes of being. The life of matter (at least on the human scale, if not at every depth) is a flux, a passage from this to that, almost forbidding anything to be simply itself, by immediately turning it, in some respect, into something different. [The psyche] must hunt, fight, find a mate, protect the offspring, defend the den and the treasure. Perception, intelligence, knowledge accurately transcribe this mode of being, profoundly alien to repose in intuition or to drifting reverie. (*Ibid.*: 282-3)

- 29 It is more than obvious that Santayana runs the risk of assimilating perception and *thought* (or *conception*) in this context (see Sprigge 1995: 77). We will see in a moment, however, that his account in fact presents far greater difficulties than this.

6. Critical Discussion

- 30 Up to this point, our discussion has been mainly exegetical. We will now turn to the critical part. First of all, we should touch again on the question of what Santayana's concept of realism is all about. Remember that, for Santayana, pure intuition of essences is “pre-eminently realistic.” But what about intent-laden intuition, i.e., perception? Here his position is significantly weaker. As he sees it, perceptual knowledge primarily serves the individual's survival in its environment. To become “pre-eminently” realistic, intuition must again be freed from its entanglement with intent and animal faith, for instance by contemplating the beautiful (see already

Santayana 1896 in this connection). Beauty as the “liberator of essences” (Sprigge 1995: 86) leads us to contemplate the given essence as an eternal object and thus detached from a network of external relations between things and the respective “fluctuations of existence” (*ibid.*: 74). It is mainly in this area, namely in the field of aesthetics, that Santayana’s realism comes to grip. However, the critical realist movement had actually set out to be active in the context of epistemology and thus aimed at establishing a stable theory of *perceptual* realism that was free of the alleged shortcomings of neo-realism (for details, see Neuber 2020: 77-83). It is difficult to see how Santayana’s understanding of realism was intended to contribute to the realization of this goal. In fact, his entire approach amounts to a variant of medieval realism regarding universals,⁵ but not perceptual realism in the required sense.

- 31 It might be objected that Santayana’s understanding of realism is relativized, i.e., that realism comes in degrees for him. Accordingly, it might still be possible to interpret perception in realistic terms, albeit weaker ones compared to the intuition of pure essences. Although tempting, this maneuver does not stand up to closer scrutiny. For a more careful reading reveals that Santayana’s account of perception is ultimately doomed to fail. Consequently, he is not in a position to establish a convincing form of perceptual realism at all.
- 32 To begin with, Santayana’s account of the relation of pure essences to substances is hopelessly unclear in its application to the issue of perception. Thus, Lachs rhetorically asks: “Can we disentangle any positive account of what it means for an essence to be a sign or symbol of existence, from Santayana’s cryptic and perplexing suggestions?” (Lachs 1967: 290). The answer must be definitely: No. For even on a charitable reading, Santayana’s view of essences as symbols suffers from serious flaws. In point of fact, his theory of symbols does not work. Why? As Lachs points out, when Santayana speaks of essences as symbols, he seems to have in mind a “structural correspondence” (*ibid.*: 291). More precisely, relations obtaining between symbols in perception are supposed to match “point to point” (*ibid.*) relations in existing things. However, exactly this sort of one-to-one correspondence cannot be established at all under the premises of Santayana’s theory. In his view, nothing given exists. Accordingly, all the immediate objects of our experience are non-existent essences. Still, in order to account for the requirements of symbolization, symbol and symbolized thing must somehow be brought into contact with each other. Since, according to Santayana, existing things are not given, our perceptual symbol system apparently runs into the void. There is nothing given to be symbolized. The substances “out there” and the pure essences, as we use them as symbols, remain separate from each other without being related to each other, and thus do not enter into a relationship of symbolization. Or, as Lachs puts it: “The system of our perceptions forms a charmed circle: no symbol can break out of it to touch the ebbing flux, and no substance can break in without being turned, as if by magic, into the bloodless essence of itself” (*ibid.*: 293). Can animal faith help out? It can, but not in terms of epistemology. That is, Santayana’s approach could be radicalized in purely pragmatic terms; but then it would qualify as a contribution not to critical realism but to pragmatism. When evaluated in genuinely epistemic terms, the premises of Santayana’s theory hinder a plausible understanding of the interplay of substances and essences in cases of perception. Or, as Lachs correctly states: “If nothing given exists and if cognition is symbolic, knowledge of nature is impossible” (*ibid.*).

33 However, as has been outlined before, a distinction should be made between pure and intent-laden intuition of essences, with only the latter being relevant for perception. Essences presented by intent-laden intuition could then be considered as *indicative* of absent, not given, existing substantial things such as a flower. By projecting the intuited essence onto the dynamic field of fluctuating existing things, the required contact between symbol and symbolized thing could thus be established. *But why then positing essences at all?* This is the crucial critical question. For it can be plausibly argued that essences are, in fact, not necessary to describe the symbol relation adequately. Why not just start from concepts and apply them directly to what is given in perception? To proceed in this way would amount to Sellars's "conceptualistic nominalism." Yet, it could be replied that such a position would be flagrantly *intellectualistic* compared to that of Santayana's. Is it not a great advantage of Santayana's approach that it accounts for the role of the perceiving organism's *body* in perception? Animal faith – the "voice of hunger" – is supposed to connect us directly to the things out there. Both human and non-human animals are apparently driven by intentional bodily directedness toward particular things or substances. From this, Santayana arrives at the following diagnosis:

Belief in substance [...] is inevitable. The hungry dog *must* believe that the bone before him is a substance, not an essence; and when he is snapping it, that belief rises into conviction, and he would be a very dishonest dog if, at that moment, he denied it. For me, too, while I am alive, it would be dishonest to deny the belief in substance; and not merely dishonest, but foolish: because if I am observant, observation will bring me strong corroborative evidence for that belief. (Santayana 1923/1955: 233)

34 This passage shows very clearly that Santayana's account vacillates between a purely pragmatic, even physiological point of view and a truly epistemological perspective. Granted that the mind is embodied, we still must refer to mentalistic concepts such as "belief," "conviction," and "evidence" to evaluate claims about perceptual *knowledge*, just as Santayana does in the passage above. Therefore, there is no reason to ignore things *aka* substances in connection with the analysis of perception from the outset by considering them as not given. For the perceiving organism they are just as present and immediately accessible as their perceptual properties or what Santayana means by sensible, materialized, essences. In short, substances and sensible essences are *epistemologically on a par*.⁶

35 What is more, the body of the perceiving organism itself is, according to Santayana, also a substance and as such to be considered as not given. How can this be? Indeed, this assumption seems absurd, if not ridiculous. Or, to put in the gentler words of Lachs:

If nothing given exists, the body presented to consciousness is but a complex essence within our perceptual field. As such, it cannot be the body that is an existing substance in its own right within the field of action. The body whose "discoverable attitude" identifies the object of intent is, therefore, the phenomenal body: it is a unit in discourse which occupies a position in pictorial space and is devoid of dynamic properties. This body is the only one we can observe, and it is altogether unable to escape the charmed circle of our thoughts. (Lachs 1967: 295)

36 Thus, if the "real," existing, body is not given, then we must think of it as a bundle of essences immediately presented to us in the relevant perceptual situation. However, we then remain within the realm of ideal static entities, namely essences, and animal faith degenerates into a *fait accompli* with no plausible connection to the body's sensor-

motoric activity. Indeed, the body's sensor-motoric activity and its involvement as a substance in an environment of other, both organic and inorganic, substances must be taken into account from the very beginning. It forms part of a perceptual process in which immediately given particular things are deciphered by their apparent sensible qualities which in turn serve as guides or cues in this very context. Sellars, in his *Philosophy of Physical Realism*, emphasizes this point by asserting that "in perceiving we are characterizing denoted external things in terms of predicates founded on sense-data" (Sellars 1932: 112). Exactly this takes place in perception when regarded from the viewpoint of semantics: the interplay of reference (or denotation) and predication (or attribution) is applied to things and their sensible qualities. Why, then, bother with an outdated ontology of essences and substances?

- 37 Last but not least, Santayana's understanding of *representation* is obscured by his two-faced view of essences. How, one might ask, come purely intuited and materialized essences in a relation of correspondence to each other, so that the purely intuited essence does indeed apply to its materialized counterpart? Is it not much more clearer to state a relation of predicate terms and respective properties in this regard? Animal faith could then be viewed as the driving intentional force underlying the process of perceptual reference and predication. Consequently, the representational relation as such could be "dynamized" in favor of a non-intellectualistic, body-emphasized conception of consciousness and perception. Again, it was Sellars who sought to advance the critical realist program along these lines. In his own words:

The critical realist would not speak of a relation of representation between external fact and the idea mediating knowledge of it. Rather would he regard *the act* of knowing as a descriptive interpretation of an external state of affairs now made the object of a cognitive intent. In such a situation, representation is a *use* made of an idea which is presumably such that it corresponds to the object of the intent. (Sellars 1932: 128; emphases added)

- 38 In his 1937 paper "Critical Realism and the Independence of the Object," Sellars complemented this approach by adding: "We can, cognitively get no nearer to the things intended and interpreted than the disclosure mediated by our concepts" (Sellars 1937: 548). Thus, it is concepts and their meanings, rather than pure essences and their materialization, on which the focus must be placed. In its combination with an evolutionary perspective, Sellars approach still has much to recommend it (see, for details, Slurink 1996); whereas Santayana's point of view appears confusing, if not confused.

7. Santayana's Legacy

- 39 To be clear, what has been said in the previous section is not meant to "destroy" the philosophy of Santayana in its entirety. That is, I do not deny that "Santayana is an important philosopher whose work is of continuing significance" (Sprigge 1995: 218). I merely dispute that his contribution to *the critical realist movement* was significant. Viewed against this backdrop, it is Sellars who clearly deserves more attention. As for Santayana, I fully agree with the following, more recent, assessment by Lachs:

A philosophy of animal faith, one honest in the sense that its tenets do not belie our actions, does not begin with essences; its point of departure is human agency situated in a space-time world. A philosophy that has its foundation in essences, on the other hand, is not a system of animal faith because eternal forms are at most

distant and derivative objects in the causal continuum. That Santayana does not recognize this suggests failure to see the two distinct strains in his thought and the way in which they undermine his efforts to present a consistent and unified philosophical system. (Lachs 2009: 485-6)

- 40 As a matter of fact, it was Santayana's weird ontology of essences that prevented him from developing a convincing account of perception. It simply did not fit with the thing-related and action-based conception of animal faith. Ultimately, it remained unclear how essences and animal faith *interact* in the context of perception.
- 41 Furthermore, it must be noted that Santayana was ignorant, not to say reactionary, to the developing *analytic philosophy* and its undeniable conceptual and logical strengths. Thus, Bertrand Russell retrospectively mocked as follows:
- He [Santayana] could admit into the realms of his admirations the ancient Greeks and the modern Italians, even Mussolini. But he could feel no sincere respect for anyone who came from north of the Alps. [...] Towards me, as towards other northern philosophers, his attitude was one of gentle pity for having attempted too high for us. (Russell 1956: 87)
- 42 Russell further states: "For my part, I was never able to take Santayana very seriously as a technical philosopher [...]. The American dress in which his writing appeared somewhat concealed the extremely reactionary character of his thinking" (*ibid.*: 88). And Russell continues: "much of what he says, particularly as regards essence, ignores much work which most modern philosophers would consider relevant. He completely ignored modern logic" (*ibid.*: 89).
- 43 All in all, then, Santayana proved to be a retarding element of the critical realist movement rather than its driving force. His quite interesting considerations in the fields of ethics, religion and aesthetics remain unaffected by this assessment, as I have already indicated.

8. Concluding Remark

- 44 In the present paper, I have argued that George Santayana's essentialist approach toward perception does not work. I have located the reason for this failure in his refusal to take note of the results of modern logic and especially semantics. If one were to focus on semantic issues such as reference, predication, and the perceptual use of terms and concepts in general, one would certainly arrive at a more convincing account. Roy Wood Sellars was the one among the critical realists who offered the most promising insights in this regard. Santayana's role within the critical realism movement, on the other hand, has been largely overestimated to this day.

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NOTES

1. In Føllesdal and Friedman's survey essay "American Philosophy in the Twentieth Century" (2006) critical realism is not even mentioned.
2. Regarding Montague's "The Story of American Realism," Sellars accordingly confesses: "I never quite forgave Montague for his very one-sided story of realism" (1969: 37).
3. There is disagreement in the relevant research literature about the exact relationship between essence and matter in Santayana's overall ontological account. While Lachs 1966, for example, claims that matter and essence do not overlap at any point but form completely different ontological categories, Kerr-Lawson 1979 opines that matter is formed entirely by essences from the very outset. For further details of this dispute, see Moreno 2009.
4. For an extended discussion of the two forms of American critical realism, see Neuber 2020.
5. As one of Santayana's contemporary critics notes, "[s]uch a realistic conception might very well be accepted by the idealists" (Ten Hoor 1923: 200).
6. Santayana seems to concede, or rather overemphasize, this point when he writes: "Experience brings belief in substance (as alertness) *before* it brings intuition of essences [...]. Experience, at its very inception, is a revelation of *things*; and these things, before they are otherwise distinguished, are distinguishable into a here and a there, a now and a then, nature and myself in the midst of nature" (Santayana 1923/1955: 188-9). The alleged epistemic priority of essences is clearly undermined by this statement.

ABSTRACTS

American critical realism was defended in two versions, an “essentialist” and an “empirical.” The main proponent of the essentialist version was George Santayana, who in his *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) outlined a critical realist account of epistemology based substantially on an articulate doctrine of essences. In the present paper, an attempt is made to critically examine the resulting approach, particularly in relation to perception. It will be argued that Santayana failed to develop a sufficiently convincing essentialist view of perception, and that his actual significance in terms of the impact of the critical realist movement was, contrary to what is often claimed, quite limited.

INDEX

Keywords: American Critical Realism, George Santayana, Essences, Perception

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