

THE PHILOSOPHY OF GEORGE SANTAYANA*

GEORGE SANTAYANA was not only a philosopher. He was also a poet. It is not surprising, therefore, that his philosophy reflects a poet's mind. He thought little of academic polemics. To him philosophy was an imaginative effort of the mind to grasp and to express in fitting language the prominent features of experience. He believed that the interest in reflection is essentially moral; its goal is to gain wisdom and to discover the good life. In aiming at these objectives Santayana wrote in the tradition of the great sages of mankind, and it is as such that he may count for posterity.

Born in Madrid in 1863 of Spanish parents, Santayana came to Boston at the age of nine, to be educated with the three children of his mother by previous marriage. Although reared in American schools, Santayana did not develop a sense of belonging to his environment. But, as he himself said, his detachment from America was balanced by an equal detachment from every other place. Although he occasionally went to Spain to visit his father, he found the society and the public life of that country most unattractive. His later residences in England and in Italy were more satisfying, but the feeling of being a stranger, wherever he was, never left Santayana. And this, as he confessed, was rather consonant with his philosophy and may have helped to form it.¹

Nevertheless, Santayana is an American philosopher. He obtained his philosophical training at Harvard under William James and Josiah Royce, and taught there for over 20 years. He wrote in English in a beautifully polished style, and regarded it as the only possible medium for him. On the

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eve of the First World War he received an inheritance from his mother's estate. This prompted him to give up his professorship at Harvard and to move to Europe. He lived and wrote for a number of years in England, and later established his headquarters in Rome. During the Second World War, his health failing, he gave himself over to the care of nuns in an Italian convent and died there in September of 1952, working and writing well into his 90th year.

Although a stranger everywhere, Santayana did not disavow his intellectual dependence on the American environment. To this his own statement testifies: "My intellectual relations and labors still unite me closely to America; and it is as an American writer that I must count, if I am counted at all."² He had no direct interest in and no acquaintance with the broader strata of American life, yet his writings reveal a sympathetic observer, often exhibiting a deep understanding of American character. The following excerpt from the *Character and Opinion in the United States*, written in England in 1921, may serve as a good example.

In his affection the American is seldom passionate, often deep, and always kindly. If it were given me to look into the depths of a man's heart, and I did not find goodwill at the bottom, I should say without any hesitation, You are not an American. But as the American is an individualist his goodwill is not officious. His instinct is to think well of everybody, and to wish everybody well, but in a spirit of rough comradeship, expecting every man to stand on his own legs and to be helpful in his turn. When he has given his neighbor a chance he thinks he has done enough for him; but he feels it is an absolute duty to do that. It will take some hammering to drive a coddling socialism into America.³

Later on in the same book we find another shrewd remark about the American man.

He is an idealist working on matter. Understanding as he does the material potentialities of things, he is successful

in invention, conservative in reform, and quick in emergencies. All his life he jumps into the train after it has started and jumps out before it has stopped; and he never once gets left behind, or breaks a leg.⁴

To the very last Santayana believed in the native goodness of the American. When in his latest work, *Dominations and Powers*, he proposed a new type of world government by experts he suggested that the leadership should be placed in the hands of Americans, since they are basically good and the most generous of all peoples. He also claimed that his American friends were "more numerous, more loyal, more sympathetic, and with two or three exceptions, more beloved," than his friends of other nationalities. The people with whom he felt most at ease were Americans, and he found American tastes and manners more natural to him than any others.⁵

Santayana's social and political detachment has its counterpart in his refusal to identify himself with any philosophical school or movement. He stood aloof both from the contemporary world of action and from the world of thought. He found both very uncongenial to his taste. This reaction is explained in one of his posthumous writings.

The liberal, empirical, psychological philosophy into which I was plunged was miserably artificial, like a modern town laid out in squares. There was nothing subterranean acknowledged in it, no ultimate catastrophe, no jungle, no desert, and no laughter of the Gods. Mankind lived lost in the fog of self-consciousness, persuaded that it was creating itself and the whole universe. They had forgotten their religion; and their philosophy, when they had one, was a glorification of their vanity, and of their furious impulse to make money, to make machines, to make war. What would come of it, except perhaps to make them all alike? In my solitude I watched their mechanical arts not without admiration: they were clever children making their own toys, and as busy at it as birds building their nests or worms burrowing their holes. Verily they have their reward, if they enjoy the process. But may they not be rather multiplying their troubles, and missing the natural pleasures and dignity of man? These pleasures

and dignity lie in seeing and thinking, in living with an understanding of the place and destiny of life.⁶

Santayana's philosophy cannot be fitted into a specific major camp. He found most philosophical systems "anthropocentric and inspired by the conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil is the centre and pivot of the universe."⁷ He rejected idealism, pragmatism, and positivism—the three major camps of philosophical thinking in his lifetime—because he found them permeated with false pretensions and advocating false hopes. He believed them to be not only cognitively inadequate, but also morally wrong. In rejecting the special schools of philosophy, each of which, according to Santayana "squints and overlooks half the facts and half the difficulties in its eagerness to find in some detail the key to the whole,"⁸ he claimed to seek refuge in certain basic and persistent deliverances of common sense, which, he believed, when well expressed, could become a better witness to the kind of world in which man finds himself. Santayana was fond of calling himself a naturalist, a realist, and a materialist. These labels certainly have an application to his philosophy, but not without some important qualifications.

I

One of the dominant themes in Santayana's thinking is scepticism. He was puzzled by the confidence with which men tended to identify their picture or their idea of the world with the world itself. Of course the primary and indelible conviction of common sense tells man that he is immersed in something which he calls a world, full of things and events. But whence comes the claim that the world which confronts man is characterized properly by the qualities and distinctions which he happens to experience in it?

In his hasty judgment about the real nature of the world man tends to forget that the world as he knows it is a world seen only from *his* perspective. He forgets that his special animal equipment is the intervening variable which stands between him and what surrounds him. This variable is bound to distort the world by presenting it to him in his own image. In spite of our progress in science we are still plagued with anthropocentric delusions. We project our representation of the world on the world itself, we read our concern about our limited destiny into the operation of the cosmos which, for all we know, is indifferent to our fate.

Especially deluded is the claim of the idealists, culminating in the Hegelian philosophy, that the universe is directed by all-embracing rational laws, thus organizing and interlocking all there is into one interdependent system, progressively unfolding its sublime destiny. How can such a wild claim be justified? Does it have any basis in fact? None whatever, is Santayana's answer. We are not equipped with an instrument which could give us such knowledge. What we call reason is only a way in which the human animal adapts itself to its immediate environment. This adaptation does not exceed the narrow limits of natural needs and drives. If we are honest with ourselves we should confess to a vague but persistent awareness of a dark background which we cannot penetrate. The world is not what *we* find in it, and it is presumptuous to claim that we know its core. The ultimate reality is unknowable in the same sense that a drum is inaudible; you can hear the sound but not the drum. An idealist who claims to know what the ultimate reality is, walks through one world while mentally beholding another. But what he is beholding isn't there. There is *something*, but what it is the human being, as a biased creature, cannot know.

Our special human bias is involved in all knowledge. Take ordinary perception. The fundamental fact about perception is that it is a recognition of something absent. Seeing an object or a person is not merely seeing its immediate surface. When I look at a certain shape of a certain color and call it an apple, the meaning of the word "apple" is not encompassed by the qualities which I perceive when I look at it. What I do not see are other qualities and properties which at the moment I do not perceive but nevertheless ascribe to the apple—such properties as weight, taste, solidity, etc. But how do I know that they are really present in that which I see? By animal faith, answers Santayana. Even ordinary everyday perception is full of memory and expectation; it is a way of seeing what isn't there. But from this we can derive an important lesson: our contact with the world is primarily imaginative. The world becomes significant because we supplement in imagination what we see by what we do not see. What we see or are otherwise aware of are the immediate reports of the senses. What we add are the associated or expected features which are—and this is important—of some possible interest to us. This is the way our experience becomes *meaningful*, and a mere welter of sensations becomes for us a world.

Merely to stare at a datum is to discover nothing but the datum itself. If I look at a red patch on the table and repress all memory and expectation I do not perceive anything at all. But if I let my animal psyche pursue its accustomed course, the sight of the red round patch will cause an impulse to connect it with further possible experiences which I have undergone in the past and which are recorded in memory. Memory itself Santayana defines as "faith in the absent."⁹ The forward tension of this memory will cause an

expectation that similar experiences of formerly experienced properties await me in the future. This expectation is a strain of life in me, an animal faith, stretching my attention over what is not given but is of possible interest. Consequently, Santayana concludes that knowledge is only a more or less successful adjustment of an animal in its special way to its special environment. "Belief in the existence of anything, including myself, is radically incapable of proof, and resting, like all belief, on some irrational persuasion or prompting of life."¹⁰

These promptings of life may be more or less dependable and disciplined, but they will always make use of imagination. The work of imagination consists in ballasting our sense data with that which they are taken to signify. Thus, if seeing what is not there is madness, even ordinary perception is mad. But it may be normal madness, if imagination employed is successful enough, if it establishes a harmony between the flux in the organism and in its environment. The order of perceptions, checked against those of other people, may even establish a certain pattern of sanity, and this normalcy in the use of imagination will become a common sense picture of the world. But we should use it without being misled by it. An agreement of perceptions on a working basis is merely a projection of the world on the human scale, and we can understand it in terms of our purposes only. We have no knowledge of what the world is in itself, for all our knowledge is calling names on provocation. An animal equipped with a different visual apparatus will not see the forms of things as they present themselves to a human eye. We know, for example, that for most animals colors do not exist. Similarly, the distribution of heavenly bodies on a starry sky will look quite differently from another planet, not to speak of

more remote corners of the intrastellar space. The game of picking out the Big Dipper would be played differently on Mars or on Venus, or more likely, it would not be played at all. Our relative perspective, our means of perception, and our special interests color every assertion we may make about the world. There *is* a real world, but it is not the one we construct out of our sense data and by our animal imagination. The recognition of this truth should prevent us from lapsing into unwarranted dogmatic claims about the ultimate reality. All knowledge is recognition of something absent; it is, in Santayana's words, a salutation, not an embrace.

One of the persistent and urgent deliverances of common sense is the belief in being rooted in that primeval, mysterious, vital, prolific and irrational basis of all existence, which we call nature. This basic element out of which human life arises, which it confronts in itself and outside of itself, against which it has to fight and in which it finds its protection, Santayana calls matter or substance. "The realm of matter is the matrix and the source of everything; it is nature, the sphere of genesis, the universal mother."¹¹ Santayana even suggested that this source of all being may be called God, if we prefer to call it so.¹² Nevertheless, this source is nothing supernatural or otherworldly. It is definitely *this* world in all its infinite manifestations. "If in clinging to the immaterial we denied the material, it would not be merely ashes and dust that we should be despising, but all natural existence in its abysmal past and in its indefinite fertility; and it would be, not some philosopher's sorry notion that we should be denying, but the reality of our animal being, the fact that we are creatures of time, rooted in a moving universe in which our days are numbered."¹³

Santayana's main objection to so many traditional philoso-

phies is that they were trying to deny this natural rootedness of man in the realm of matter, and even denied its very existence. Human organism is but one form in which the infinitely plastic matter expresses itself. That it does so, is nothing to be explained or investigated, for all existence is irrational in its very core. Why the world exists, or why it is the kind of world it is and produces the beings it does, are unanswerable questions. Recognition of material facts as such is the beginning of wisdom. But there can be no explanation of any existence, Santayana tells us. "We may enjoy it, we may enact it, but we cannot conceive it; not because our intellect by accident is inadequate, but because existence, which substance makes continuous, is intrinsically a surd, a flux, a contradiction."¹⁴

Since our contacts with matter are various, our ideas of it will be various. Furthermore, they will be always in some ways inadequate and provisional, for matter is essentially dynamic and not pictorial. It is interesting to note in this connection that the view of modern physics that what we call matter can be best described in a formula defining certain dynamic relationships, is in line with Santayana's opinion. We should not forget, he tells us, that the common sense conventional ideas as well as more elaborate representations of science present us with a store of beliefs useful for our purposes, but that these beliefs by no means reflect the nature of the world itself. Without some beliefs we simply cannot do, and a rational attitude will consist in recognizing them as such "can't help." But we should be mistaken and probably sooner or later disillusioned if we should take them for the whole of truth and not relative to our organisms and interests only. A human organism finds itself equipped with definite impulses and needs, and all its perceptions and organization

revolves around serving them well. This is the function of intelligence. Our comprehension of the existing world is useful in the same way that a sewer system is; it's good to have in order to make our lives more comfortable, but it would be a mistake to treat it as the pivot of the universe. A wise man will believe in a common sense world but will not take it too seriously. To find happiness and satisfaction he will turn somewhere else.

Let us follow Santayana's invitation to visit further realms of being. But before we do so, it may be helpful to recapitulate briefly the basis from which he proceeds. He wants to arm us with scepticism radical enough to rebuke all dogmatic philosophers and scientists who claim to show us the world as it really is. He appeals to the irresistible conviction of common sense that there exists an external order of things in which we are rooted and which we call nature, substance or matter. He reminds us that, although in dealing with our natural environment we organize our perceptions and cognitions to form beliefs about the world, those beliefs are not more than a basic orthodoxy of mankind. They are useful because they enable us to take care of our natural needs, but they do not bring us in contact with ultimate reality. Since a certain harmony and health of the organism is prerequisite to attaining a possible human good, we should value our biased knowledge for what harmony it can bring about.

II

The natural adjustment and harmony characteristic of lower forms of life are attained without consciousness and intelligence. But a human organism, by virtue of its complex vital organs is capable of attaining satisfactions not open to the lower levels. It is in consciousness, in the mental life of

the human animal, that we discover a new realm. This realm Santayana calls the realm of essence.

Santayana's concept of essence has been very troublesome to his readers. It has been widely discussed and criticized, often producing much heat and little conviction. Nevertheless, this concept has had many versions in recent philosophy, which indicates that it may be one of the more significant ideas of our time. It has been given different names—"phenomenon" by Husserl, "eternal object" by Whitehead—but on the whole it is used to define the same unique aspect of experience. Let us examine Santayana's version of this concept. For him it is one of the most important philosophical insights, even though he himself once suggested a possibility that his doctrine of essence may be "merely a monk's dream."¹⁵

We have already noted that any *existence* is for Santayana an object of faith. Knowledge of things is knowledge of something not directly given but postulated by animal faith. The existence of the apple which we considered a while ago is a belief mediated by a symbol of which we are directly aware: a red round patch. Suppose we refrain from positing the existence of any further qualities that this red patch usually signalizes. This we can do by suspending our referential attitude, which, Santayana told us, is the pressure of the animal psyche in us, storing up certain memories and stretching certain expectations into the future. In suspending this belief and arresting our present experience, what are we aware of? Nothing but the round red patch. Now extend this suspension of belief to all objects signalized by sense-data, and confine yourselves to that which is immediately given. In looking around the room suppress all the memories and expectations connected with what you see, that is, exclude everything you do *not* see, such as the other side of the

walls, the insides of solid objects, the histories of the faces you are looking at. This is not easy to do because our awareness of present experiences is so automatically permeated by those brought in from the past or possible future that we hardly ever or never pay attention to what is really given to us immediately. But if you succeeded in removing the ballast of all memory and expectation, what would remain? Essences, suggests Santayana.

Essence is appearance taken *as* appearance, with no referential object tied to it. Essences are nothing but surfaces as surfaces. Whenever we add that they are surfaces of something, we are already transcending what we actually are aware of. When you suspend all belief in objects behind appearance you discover a new infinite realm of essences. This realm is inexhaustible, claims Santayana, and it is because of our particular animal constitution that we come in contact only with some of them. Moreover, only a limited portion of possible essences finds existential embodiment. Here Santayana reaffirms the protean, arbitrary power of matter to determine on its own which essences to embody. For all we know there may be other universes where quite different essences may be given existence in objects. And there may be essences in our immediate surrounding which never have been intuited. One might say that the impressionistic school in painting, the modern non-representational art, and atonal music are examples of a search for new essences. Perhaps James Joyce's and Gertrude Stein's linguistic exercises were attempts to capture directly intimate surfaces of experience which are not conveyed in conventional language. When the *Camel* or *Chesterfield* advertisers describe the absolutely unique flavors of their products, they show that the interest in essences is indeed a common feature of daily ex-

perience. Gourmets and wine connoisseurs, not to speak of opium and marijuana smokers, are all in their ways believers in Santayana's doctrine of essence.

It is important to stress the absolute abundance of essences. They are not limited to the sense-data. The surface aspect of *any* experience is an essence, and this includes all complex relations. Although pink elephants and green rats, as we say, do not exist, their essences can be distinguished. Even such characters as mathematical and scientific formulas have their essences, although they can be intuited only by those who understand them. But of course, the most abundant field of essences is art. It is there that the awareness of essences is intensified and brought to a sharp focus.

In saying this, we have put our hands on the central lever of Santayana's philosophy. He found the characteristic capacity of the human animal in its ability to enjoy essences as separated from their embodiment in existence. The existence and the real nature of things is to us a closed book. We should reconcile ourselves to our limited grasp of the nature of the material flux in which we are embedded as natural beings, since this flux at bottom is arbitrary and irrational. This being our true situation, how shall we face it? Control matter as much as you can, says Santayana, adjust your physical well-being to the rest of nature, but don't get too excited about the material aspect of existence. This is the main fault of unqualified materialists and positivists. A wise man will try to live in health and physical comfort, but he will lay up his treasures somewhere else.

III

By way of essences we can now enter what Santayana calls the realm of spirit. On the face of it, it seems extremely

puzzling for a materialist to admit that there is such a realm. However, an examination of the nature of this realm may show what meaning Santayana assigns to the idea of spirit and how this idea fits into his system.

To understand what spirit means it is necessary to make a distinction between essence and *intuition* of essence. In any direct apprehension of essence, *what* we are aware of is different from the *act* of apprehending it. Now the acts of apprehending essences is the life of spirit. In a word, life of spirit is consciousness. It is the total inner difference between being awake and being asleep, alive or dead. Spirit is consciousness of experience as consciously enjoyed; it is attention, feeling, thought. The realm of spirit is the realm of all value. But we must guard ourselves from the delusion of regarding spirit as something independent and in some way exercising its own power and authority. It is explicitly a surface function of a natural organism which has reached a certain high level of complexity and organization. It has no independence of matter, but on the contrary, constitutes one of its dimensions, supervening on the natural basis. It is "a natural faculty in a natural soul,"¹⁶ for "spirit would have nothing to live with and nothing to live for, if it had begun and ended being a spirit."¹⁷

Spirit for Santayana is the moral fruition of physical life. It is epiphenomenal, volatile and evanescent, crowning some natural impulse as it attains its fulfilment. It is an inner light which, although powerless, renders events in experience mentally present. The function of spirit, which is essentially imaginative and poetical, can itself be best expressed through metaphor. Santayana calls it "the witness of the cosmic dance,"¹⁸ a "product of combustion," a "leaping flame,"¹⁹ which is "blown and extinguished by any wind: but no ex-

tion here can prevent it from blazing up there, and its resurrection is as perpetual as its death."²⁰

At the same time, spirit is a "fountain and seat of judgment,"²¹ it is "an ideal possession of things materially absent."²² This function, which we call "mind," liberates man from his blind immersion in material processes by observing, conceiving, enjoying, asserting, desiring, at the same time being capable of renouncing and outlasting any particular interest or commitment.²³ This cumulative response to experience gives substance and richness to the life of spirit; it endows humanity with culture. But it has no other destiny than to be privately enjoyed. Spirit is ever on the wing, has nothing to do with death or another life; it may come at any moment and it totally vanishes as it lives. It is immaterial, neither a drain nor an influence, and merely a concomitant to natural life.²⁴ On one occasion Santayana was quoted as saying that consciousness is "a sort of nodding towards or throwing kisses at reality or off into vacancy."²⁵ Out of the welter of intermittent and conflicting impressions the human psyche tries to construct as much order and beauty as it can, and hold them together in intuition and understanding. It craves to rescue its world from confusion "so that it may be better seen and understood."²⁶ This is the value of reflective and imaginative life of which man is capable: to form a single drama out of conflicting impressions and impulses. "The better we know the world the more inescapable will be our perception of its tragic and comic character, that is to say, of its vanity as an experience and of its richness as truth. We see that the only profit in experience is its profit for the spirit."²⁷

According to Santayana man is half-animal and half-poet. To experience happiness, to be aware of goodness he must

use the latter function. Nature in its innumerable pre-human forms may achieve equilibrium, habitual forms of behavior, smooth adjustment of functions, but prior to attaining the light of consciousness it knows no goodness and no happiness. Actual happenings in themselves are blind; to be enjoyed they must be illumined by spirit. "Intuition though it always has a natural ground never can have a natural object, but only an ideal one. Nature has learned to know itself at this price, that its knowledge should be indirect and symbolic. It can describe itself only in words, and had to invent them in order to think."²⁸ But when the light of spirit is kindled in the natural man, the valves towards value are open. Healthy and smooth discharge of organic functions will reflect itself in a sense of welcome and joy. "All ideals are but projections of vital tendencies in animal organisms,"²⁹ and spirit is only a silent observation of these tendencies as they engage in constant play. The awareness of the passing scene through intuitions of essences will intermittently kindle delight, suffering, joy, pain and pleasure. The fullest and most innocent absorption in intuition of essences is found in the play of children. As he lives and gains experience, man will learn how to discriminate between things which are good for their own sake and those which are mere instrumentalities. Furthermore, he will reject and condemn the intuitions which bring distraction to spirit. Such distraction is seen pure in pain. "As an intuition, if such it may be called, pain is empty, yet as a sensation it is intense, arresting, imperative; so that it exemplifies the very essence of evil for the spirit to exist in vain, to care intensely in the dark, to be prodded into madness about nothing."³⁰ But those essences which a man will find attractive, beautiful and good in themselves, are the crown and fruition of living.

Spirit, the most derivative aspect of natural life, by opening through intuition and imagination the avenues to consummatory experiences, constitutes the most valuable aspect. The world must be enjoyed for what it is and for what it offers to the life of spirit. Santayana's message to every human being is therefore: be a poet in some way. A social and gregarious animal like man will naturally find much goodness in the communal aspect of his existence. Our awareness of each other, mutual involvement and dependence, furnish a propitious medium for the activity of spirit. "Social life lifts the spirit to a more comprehensive intelligence; there is more constant transcendence of the self in imagination and a richer, more varied, more dramatic world to imagine and to overcome."³¹ Our daily work, if enlightened, can be another source of spiritual freedom and enjoyment. To love one's work is to attain this possible perfection. For, as Santayana tells us, "Free labor and art is simply nature unravelling its potentialities, both in the world and in the mind, unravelling them together, in so far as they are harmonious in the two spheres."³² Interest in art engages consciousness in the contemplation of possible beauty, for "art in general is a rehearsal of rational living, and recasts in idea a world which we have no present means of recasting in reality."³³ Any society in which people are compelled to do what they do not wish to do, or are forced to put up with what does not content them, is defeating and frustrating the life of spirit.

Spirit has other enemies besides human ignorance. Too often brute matter, the indifferent and arbitrary course of nature, defeats spirit and denies it its possible happiness. Being powerless, spirit cannot command its terms to the world. The dangers of existence cannot be eliminated, but

the struggle to survive is not without value to the life of spirit. Although mortal dangers are always with us, there is a way to deal with them: "in raising them into conscious suffering and love, spirit turns the ignominy of blind existence into nobleness, setting before us some object to suffer for and to pursue. In the very act of becoming painful, life has become worth living in its own eyes."³⁴ A wise man will not bash his head against the wall. To be disillusioned is a consequence of living in a world whose ultimate core remains uncompassed and dark. Man always was and will be surrounded and ambushed by the impenetrable powers of matter. But when he sees illusion as an illusion, it ceases to be illusory. It is possible for man to be disillusioned without becoming sour, disenchanted without being embittered. Toward whom shall we bear malice, and to whom shall we express our disappointment? Nature bears us no malice, and in lending its premises to the activity of spirit, cannot be accused of enmity to it. Only we must not expect too much. The last step in wisdom is to renounce the striving to possess and to change the world; the dominion of spirit is ideal, it is intellectual worship, pure vision, and pure love, it is the capacity to identify oneself with "the truth and beauty that rise unbidden from the world into the realm of spirit."³⁵ "There can be no final victory in existence, except in the comment that spirit may make on it."³⁶

IV

Santayana's philosophy is too rich in content to be discussed in a few pages. Moreover, it cannot be summarily criticized for being true or false, right or wrong. Santayana does not argue his views. He presents them as a possible way of looking at things, believing that his readers may find in

their own experience much of what he sought to express in his writings. No doubt a sympathetic reader will find this to be the case.

There is a definite merit in Santayana's urgent reminders that we are too eager to identify our representations of things with the nature of reality itself. Philosophers always have been tempted to identify what is most important for man with what is most real in the universe. In this respect Santayana's sceptical voice is a refreshing wind. He asked us to give due recognition to our special animal bias in our theoretical and practical comprehension of the ways of the universe. In agreement with common sense convictions, he pointed to the primacy of the immediate immersion of man in the totality of things which overwhelms him in its vastness and impenetrability. He believed that this feeling of immersion in nature is basically sound and reflects the true nature of our situation. To a healthy human animal theorizing is always artificial, suspect and secondary, while instinct and feeling are congenial, primordial and primary. In the recognition of the natural basis of existence Santayana's voice was not alone. The primacy of fact over idea is characteristic of our century. The naturalistic trend has a powerful ally in the contemporary reliance on experimental, pragmatic, positivistic methods and procedures in science. In the study of man himself, behavioristic psychology and descriptive social sciences are emphasizing the factual conditions of man's existence. At the same time psychiatry and depth psychology probe the deeper strata of human nature. The quest for naturalistic ethics has been quite lively of late, and Santayana's version is only one among many, although, of course, distinguished by its advocacy of esthetic illumination in natural enjoyments.

What is more uniquely Santayana's contribution, is his contagious invitation to seek value in the realm of art and symbolic imagination. In inviting us to live in the presence of an ideal, to increase our awareness of the multiplicity of beautiful forms which a well-lived life can offer, to sharpen our intellectual comprehension of the world to the degree in which such comprehension is possible, Santayana was performing a great service. He asked of man not to be pre-occupied with the instrumentalities of living and not so excited about the material aspect of existence. A wise man will concentrate his attention and give his allegiance to those things to which everything else is but a means. It is not the number of cars and electrical appliances that makes our lives better, but the amount of beauty and goodness which they may help inject into our experience.

The object of Santayana's philosophy was the enlightenment of men in the sphere of values. Like the Greeks, of whom he was very fond, Santayana urged us to ask ourselves whether what we pursue is really for our good. There are passages in his writings which reveal a genuine and profound appreciation of the intrinsic goodness of life. It is difficult to resist the temptation to quote some of the finer flights of Santayana's spirit. They seem to contradict his contention that this spirit was really vanishing as it lived.

Spirit has its lyric triumphs in childhood and in the simple life: wedding days and moonlight nights and victories in war and soft music and pious trust. It breaks out momentarily in the shabbiest surroundings, in laughter, understanding, and small surrenders of folly to reason. Such moments are far from permanently lifting the soul they visit into a high spiritual sphere; often they come to ne'er-do-wells, poets, actors, or rakes. The spark dies in the burnt paper; yet it had the quality of a flame or a star. All the saint or the sage can add is constancy to that light, so that it colours all their thoughts and actions, turning the material circumstances into

almost indifferent occasions. Yet the least disciplined or integrated of us sometimes feel something within us rising above ourselves, a culmination, a release, a transport beyond distraction. It was but a summer lightning, and the sultriness continues unabated; yet the flash has given us a taste of liberty.³⁷

No doubt the spirit or energy of the world is what is acting in us, as the sea is what rises in every little wave; but it passes through us, and cry out as we may, it will move on. Our privilege is to have perceived it as it moves. Our dignity is not in what we do, but in what we understand. The whole world is doing things. We are turning in that vortex; yet within us is silent observation, which bridges the distances and compares the combatants.³⁸

In the earlier stage of his philosophical development Santayana's thought was more cheerful and even sang praises to the immortality of human reason. Of course, the eternity of which he speaks cannot exist except in a vision of time, for otherwise "eternity would have no meaning for men in the world, while the world, men and time would have no status in eternity."³⁹ The real substance of all existence is material and perishable, and the eternal aspect is derivative from it. "If time bred nothing, eternity would have nothing to embalm."⁴⁰ However, the vision of the intellect is imperishable, "because it is ideal and resident merely in import and intent."⁴¹

Experience is essentially temporal and life foredoomed to be mortal, since its basis is a process and an opposition; it floats in the stream of time, never to return, never to be recovered and repossessed. But ever since substance became at some sensitive point intelligent and reflective, ever since time made room and pause for memory, for history, for the consciousness of time, a god, as it were, became incarnate in mortality and some vision of truth, some self-forgetful satisfaction, became a heritage that moment could transmit to moment and man to man. . .

As Archimedes, measuring the hypotenuse, was lost to events, so art and science interrupt the sense for change by

engrossing attention in its issues and its laws. . . Unconsciousness of temporal conditions and of the very flight of time make the thinker sink for a moment into identity with timeless objects. And so immortality, in a second ideal sense, touches the mind.⁴²

Nevertheless, for all its poetic beauty, there is a deeply disturbing note in what Santayana conceives to be the life of spirit. This disturbing note rings in the outright assertion of the evanescence and essential futility of human destiny. It is hard to accept Santayana's analysis of life as a series of little victories on the road to ultimate defeat. Moreover, this analysis carries with it a cognitive claim which our experiences do not seem to bear out. Santayana's central doctrine—the separation of essence from existence and the consequent characterization of spiritual life as esthetic communion with non-existing, non-*efficacious*, powerless essences—is a groundless doctrine and rests on distorted evidence. He describes the enjoyment of essences as the pursuit of ideals. But this, as he himself at times admits, is a pursuit of futility. To believe in ideals that are plainly irrelevant to the actual course of our life and, apart from esthetic titillation, make no difference to it, is not only futile, but also often irresponsible. Essence is what an ideal becomes when it loses all vitality.

The radical disillusionment of Santayana is really the result of his analysis of human ideals. If thought is indeed a surface function, then of course, futility is the only answer and we should exclaim with Ecclesiastes: All is vanity! This is where the unwarranted separation of essence from existence, of contemplative and esthetic enjoyment from practical involvement in the affairs of living, does its real damage. If pressed to ultimate conclusion, it should lead not only to renunciation and to ivory tower living, but also to utter indifference, irresponsibility, and at best to an egoistic pur-

suit of Epicurean contentment. Santayana often speaks like his favorite poet Lucretius. "If you have seen the world, if you have played the game and won it, what more would you ask for? If you have tasted the sweets of existence, you should be satisfied; if the experience has been bitter, you should be glad it comes to an end."⁴³

It is true enough that ideas by themselves have no physical efficacy. But it is equally true that human beings equipped with ideas do have such efficacy. At least their lives become different when they entertain their ideas seriously and guide their activity in accordance with them. In a sense, Santayana's disenchanted and wintry wisdom reflects our modern disillusionment in man's rational capacity and in his ability to shape the world for his own good. Undoubtedly, recent political and social upheavals furnish enough material for scepticism about man's use of his powers. Global wars and the threat of atomic annihilation show us how precarious our individual existence is and how little we can do to alter our personal fate. But this does not mean that all efforts to avert disaster on the part of thinking men are doomed to failure. Paradoxically enough, it is the ideas in some people's minds that really expose us to the atomic threats. Those ideas are a threat because they are accompanied by an effective grasp and control of nature's powers and resources. To a significant extent our fortunes depend on what kind of ideas and ideals we and our fellowmen shall embrace as our guides. Not only does our mutual survival or mutual destruction depend on the ideas we shall embody in our living, but also the very meaning of life will receive its import from the ideals we shall choose to follow. Our choices will have practical effects in our natural life. And it is because of its possible real effects that an idea is or is not worth embracing and following. For-

tunately, much of Santayana's moral wisdom stands firmly in spite of his gloomy estimate of human aspirations. The ideal of brotherhood and love, expressed by him in the essay on "Ultimate Religion," could hardly find a more effective statement.

To love things spiritually, that is to say, intelligently and disinterestedly, means to love the love in them, to worship the good which they pursue, and to see them all prophetically in their possible beauty. To love things as they are would be a mockery of things: a true lover must love them as they would wish to be. For nothing is quite happy as it is, and the first act of true sympathy must be to move with the object of love toward its happiness.⁴⁴

KONSTANTIN KOLENDA

NOTES

1. *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, Schilpp, ed., p. 602.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 603.
3. *Character and Opinion in the United States*, p. 171.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
5. Schilpp, pp. 601-2.
6. "The Idler and His Works," *Saturday Review*, May 15, 1954, p. 6.
7. *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 214.
8. *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, Preface, p. v.
9. *Realms of Being* (subsequently abbreviated: *RoB*), p. 204.
10. *Scepticism and A.F.*, p. 35.
11. *RoB*, p. 189.
12. "The Idler and His Works," p. 48.
13. *RoB*, p. 190.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 218-9.
15. Irwin Edman in *Saturday Review*, October 18, 1952.
16. *RoB*, p. 554.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 762.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 562.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 550.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 567.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 550.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 618.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 552.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 632.
25. R. B. Perry, *Thought and Character of William James*, II, p. 404.
26. *RoB*, p. 567.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 703.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 649.
29. "The Idler and His Works," p. 49.
30. *RoB*, p. 679.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 702-3.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 704-5.
33. *The Life of Reason*, 1954 ed., p. 365.
34. *RoB*, p. 620.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 643.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 724.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 756.

38. *Winds of Doctrine*, p. 199.

39. *Life of Reason*, p. 294.

40. *Dialogues in Limbo*, p. 174.

41. *Life of Reason*, p. 292.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 292-6.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 295.

44. *Classic American Philosophers*, M. Fisch, ed., pp. 323-4.