

## EMERSON AND SANTAYANA ON IMAGINATION\*

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This paper examines Santayana on imagination, and related themes, chiefly as these are expressed in his early work, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). My hypothesis is that Santayana underestimates, in this book, the force and significance of the prevalent distinction between imagination and fancy, as this was originally put forward by Coleridge and later developed in Emerson's late essays. I will focus on some of those aspects of Santayana's book which appear to react to or to engage with Emerson's views and aim to bring Santayana's treatment of the theme of imagination into relation with Emerson. Understanding the differences in greater detail we stand a better chance of reasoned evaluation of alternative conceptions of imagination. I will argue that the Coleridge-Emersonian conception of the distinction between imagination and fancy is a crucial element of the background of Peircean abduction, and in this fashion, contributes to the continuity of Emerson's writings with the pragmatist tradition. Santayana, in some contrast, resists the pragmatic tendencies of Anglo-American thought; and his alternative treatment of imagination, in stricter contrast with the scientific and common-sense understanding, prefigures or reflects his more emphatic distinction of the ideal and the real, which made of Santayana a "philosophical materialist," as he purports.<sup>1</sup> Though we may certainly regard Santayana's conception of imagination as resisting the tendency to make the imagined better the enemy of the good, his approach invites, too, our contrary concern with melioration and pluralism.

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\* This paper was first presented at the II. International Santayana Conference, Opole University, Opole, Poland, June 2006, and late at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Columbia South Carolina, March 2007.

1. Cf. Norman V. Henfrey, "Santayana, George" in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (1999).

### 1. Santayana and the Ordinary Language of Imagination

The English word “imagination” comes to us through Middle English and Middle French ultimately from the Latin verb “*imaginari*.” My Latin dictionary gives a noun, “*imaginatio*,” translated to English as “imagination, fancy.” These Latin forms, in turn, were traditionally used to translate a Greek word, “*Phantasia*,” from “*phantazein*”—to present to the mind.

Webster’s American dictionary lists three chief meanings.<sup>2</sup> First of all, imagination is “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.” This first meaning emphasizes the connection between imagination and images, as we contrast images with discursive imaginings. Secondly, imagination is rendered by Webster’s as “creative ability” including the “ability to confront and deal with a problem.” A person of imagination is, then, in this second sense, not someone sitting by and contemplating mental images, but a person of resourcefulness: the thinking person or active mind. An imaginative person is thus one who engages our interest, for instance, by means of stories or accomplishments “that fire the imagination.” Imagination as creative ability points to new and engaging possibilities arising in the face of recognized problems. The third listing, however, builds from the formation and contemplation of images into a broader sense: imagination is a creation of the mind; especially an idealized or poetic creation but including, too, “fanciful or empty assumptions.” We say to the child, frightened by shadows in the night, “Don’t let your imagination run away with you;” or “You are only imagining things.” This final sense of imagination harkens back to the translation of the Latin “*imaginatio*” as both “imagination” and “fancy.”

There is a clear sense in which Santayana is a great advocate of imagination. Our initial problem is to try to understand what sense of imagination he is employing or advocating in particular contexts of discussion; and for that purpose, I have gone over the meaning of the English word in some detail. All the elements of common usage are present in Santayana’s early book, and the chief problem is to see how the configuration of these elements figures into his arguments.

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2. See *The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 1994.

In his Preface to *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, Santayana criticizes the liberal school of religion which we would expect to include the Unitarians: The liberal school “attempts to fortify religion by minimizing its expression, both theoretic and devotional,” he complains, and it “seems from this point of view to be merely impoverishing religious symbols and vulgarizing religious aims;” and in particular Santayana charged that the liberal school “subtracts from faith that imagination by which faith becomes an interpretation and idealization of human life, and retains only a stark and superfluous principle of superstition.”<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, Santayana in this early passage, would have us dispense with the superstition while avoiding the impoverishment of religious symbols and religious imagination. We are not to fortify or strengthen the plausibility of religion by minimizing its claims and expressions but instead add to faith that imagination by means of which faith enters into the interpretation and idealization of life. I think we can see here already that concrete differences between religious traditions enter into Santayana’s conception of what to count as appropriate imaginative expression and interpretation. In the background of these comments we might expect to find something of Santayana’s perception and reaction to the comparatively austere visual forms of New England Puritanism and Unitarianism, in contrast with the richly colored devotional and decorative practices of the Catholic tradition. As in much of Judaism and Islam, the dissenting or non-conformist Protestant founders of New England typically rejected the aim of artful visual presentation of their ideals, and they are emphatically a “people of the book.” In order to focus on the Word, it was felt necessary to remove all visual and imagistic distraction, minimize decoration and ceremony, and highlight the “good news,” the discursive message to be conveyed. Form follows function.

There is something of a divide regarding religious aesthetics in the offering here; and concerning Santayana’s claims against the subtraction of imagination from faith, my inclination is to see him implicitly emphasize-

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3. Santayana 1900, “Preface,” to *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*. (New York: Scribner’s), p. vii. Cf. the discussion of the religious imagination in Santayana 1896, *The Sense of Beauty* 47, “The Religious Imagination,” and especially the final pages, pp. 185-187, in the Modern Library edition.

ing the visual and imagistic in imagination as contrasted with the discursive imagination and a more practical orientation. Consider, for instance the empty Calvinist “cross of the resurrection,” in contrast with the crucifix, or a white New England, wood-frame meeting house in contrast with the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Rome. Certainly something has gone missing in these Protestant expressions, but it may be argued that it is not imagination itself which is missing, not imagination of the sort which can form and reform lives, it is instead a certain outward grandeur which has been replaced by the preacher’s and the congregation’s discursive elaboration of the good news. The empty cross of the resurrection, it is said, is a symbol of hope and new life. Similarly, the simplicity of Puritan-derived architecture suggests that the Word, written and spoken, is regarded as more important and central. Yet whatever forms are felt to be more appropriate for religious expression, I think we will all agree that only a particular narrowness of perspective would prevent a purely aesthetic appreciation of the contrasting forms.

In criticism of any positivistic account of society and religion in his Preface, Santayana certainly does make some room for the moral and more practical import of imagination. “The environing world can justify itself to the mind,” he writes, “only by the free life which it fosters there” (a profound comment, as I see it); and moreover, according to Santayana, “All observation is observation of brute fact, all discipline is mere repression, until these facts digested, and this discipline embodied in humane impulses, become the starting-point for a creative movement of the imagination,” which, according to Santayana, we are to understand as “the firm basis for ideal constructions in society, religion, and art.”<sup>4</sup> Mere facts tell us little of interest except when understood “as conditions of these human activities.” The facts of nature and history only become morally intelligible or have any practical import, when understood in relation to creative movements of the imagination which enter into our constructions of the ideals of society, religion and art. There is a suggestion of the moral function of the imagination, then, according to Santayana,<sup>5</sup> along side the poetic nature of religion, and when Santayana makes these kinds of points, we should take note that imagination seems

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.

5. *Ibid.*, p. x.

less imagistic and more discursive. The theme of the moral function of the imagination even suggests more practical concerns insofar as the readers take ideals to have practical import. However, in light of Santayana's comments, neither should we be greatly surprised if the imagination of New England has had its own specific, historical and developmental forms and direction.

Santayana draws upon all the elements of our common-sense or ordinary-language conceptions of the imagination, and if there is something distinctive in his approach, then this would seem to depend on the particular stress which he places on particular elements, say, imagination as related to images, in particular contexts or regarding particular themes. From what we have so far seen, one might suspect somewhat traditional or orthodox devotional practices as entering into his conception of the religious imagination. This seems to enter significantly into his opening criticism of "the liberal school." Yet Santayana recognized the power of Emerson's imaginative practice, and we cannot read his opening criticism of the liberal school into his criticism of Emerson. On the contrary, if anything, he exaggerates the Emersonian imagination, saying, of Emerson that "Imagination, indeed, is his single theme."<sup>6</sup> Santayana also says of Emerson that "Reality eluded him,"<sup>7</sup> and this is a claim we need to review in light of Emerson's anti-nominalism.

## 2. Emerson, Imagination and Abduction

There is a significant philosophical conception of imagination in Anglo-American thought running through Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In comparison to the American dictionary definition of imagination, given above, the approach in Coleridge and Emerson appears to arise as a reaction against a stronger traditional association of imagination and fantasy. This traditional association is perhaps evident in the definition of "*immaginazione*," given in some contemporary dictionaries of Italian. "*Immaginazione*" is both *L'immaginare* and *fantasia: La facoltà di concepire nella fantasia e accostare liberamente*: "the faculty to conceive in fantasy and with a free approach." Though talk of imagina-

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6. Santayana 1900, "Emerson," in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, p. 220.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

tion invites the ideas of fantasy and fancy in English, as we see from the final element in the English definition given above, “fanciful or empty assumptions,” the differences in the definitions suggests something of a statistical difference between different languages in the corresponding usages of the specific elements involved in our notion of imagination. In spite of this, Coleridge himself, in sponsoring the distinction between imagination and fantasy, insisted that all languages contain some tendency toward expression of the distinction. Behind differences of emphasis on the particular elements of the ordinary notion of imagination, I expect we might find some difference in the relative influence of the ancient Epicureans and Stoics connected with contrasting emphases on the cognitive function of imagination. In German, the English word “imagination” translates most directly as a rather technical term, “*Vorstellungskraft*.” But since most of what we would ordinarily say in English using “imagination” would require something more colloquial, the burden of expression falls on the verb “*vorstellen*,” which literally means to place before, and is more evocative of mental imagings and material presentation or representation.

“Fancy” and “fantasy” contrasts with “imagination” in Emerson’s thought, following Coleridge on this topic. While imagination builds on or projects “necessity” from what has gone before, according to Emerson, mere fancy implies an arbitrary relation or capricious departure. The very character of this distinction suggests culturally and philosophically specific roots of the philosophical treatment of imagination. In Emerson’s 1836 Lecture “Modern Aspects of Letters,” he says of Coleridge:

He has made admirable definitions, and drawn indelible lines between things heretofore confounded. He thought and thought truly that all confusion of thought tended to confusion in action; and said that he had never observed an abuse of terms obtain currency without being followed by some practical error. He has enriched the English language and the English mind with an explanation of the object of philosophy; of the all important distinction between Reason and Understanding; the distinction

of an idea and a conception; between Genius and Talent; between Fancy and Imagination; of the nature and end of Poetry; of the Idea of a State.<sup>8</sup>

The passage testifies to the early influence of Coleridge on Emerson's thought, and I have found good reason to stress the passage in several contexts. It suggests, too, some resemblance in their methodologies. While later Coleridge is associated with the romantic revival of the Church of England, since America has no establishment of religion, and, in contrast with Great Britain, is predominantly non-conformist Protestant in history and culture (Catholics make up about 25% of the contemporary population and Jews and Moslems about 2-3% each), Emerson is a quite "non-conformist" Protestant figure—though by no means orthodox in terms of any of our approximately 800 distinct Protestant denominations, including that of his own Unitarian background. Still, like Coleridge, Emerson was always interested in the *reasoned* revival of religious sentiment, and like Coleridge he is a reformer or meliorist, working in significant degree within and against the given background of the existing society and culture.

There is certainly no lack of emphasis on imagination in Emerson's writings. Emerson contrasts imagination and fancy perhaps most vividly in his *Letters and Social Aims* (1875):

Imagination is central; fancy superficial. Fancy relates to surface, in which a great part of life lies. The lover is rightly said to fancy the hair, eyes, complexion of the maid. Fancy is a willful imagination, a spontaneous act; fancy, a play as with dolls and puppets which we chose to call men and women; imagination, a perception and affirming of a real relation between a thought and some material fact. Fancy amuses; imagination expands and exalts us. Imagination uses an organic classification. Fancy joins by accidental resemblance, surprises and amuses the idle, but is silent in the presence of great passion and action. Fancy aggregates; imagination animates. Fancy is related to color; imagination to form. Fancy paints; imagination sculptures.<sup>9</sup>

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8. R.W. Emerson 1836, "Modern Aspects of Letters," in Whicher, Stephen E. and Robert E. Spiller eds. 1966, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. I., 1833-1836. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 371-385.

9. R.W. Emerson 1875, "Poetry and Imagination," in *Letters and Social Aims*. (Boston: Osgood). To understand something of Emerson's development from Coleridge, compare Coleridge 1817, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 4.

In effect, flights of fancy are here contrasted with the constructive, cognitively oriented imagination. “Imagination is central,” says Emerson, while “fancy is a willful imagination” and sometimes “a play as with dolls and puppets which we chose to call men and women.” Imagination, in contrast, always relates thought to “some material fact,” it is “a perception,” according to Emerson, a matter of at least taking something to be true, since we do not affirm the perception that so and so, and at the same time call it an illusion, too. “Imagination uses an organic classification,” says Emerson, while fancy “joins by accidental resemblances” and “is silent in the presence of action.” From a philosophical perspective, as contrasted with that of literature as purely aesthetic interest, Emerson’s fully developed conception of imagination is a refinement of the common-sense notion which eliminates or sharply separates the element of willful fantasy, and it is a significant precursor of C.S. Peirce on abduction. The point is closely connected with what I have called Emerson’s anti-nominalism.

For example, in his 1860 essay “Fate,” fate is understood as a matter of unalterable law. Law, whether scientific law of nature or moral law has always at least some tendency to execute itself. The self-execution of the moral law, is implied in Emerson’s theme of “compensation.” Implicitly, Emerson follows traditional definition: Fate is a power superior to the human will and operating in accord with arcane laws knowable only to the initiate.<sup>10</sup> Though Emerson stresses the point that thought, as cognitive accomplishment, makes us free, still, he equally emphasizes normative observation of laws of thought. “For if we give it the high sense in which the poets use it,” Emerson says, “even thought itself is not above Fate: that too must act according to eternal laws, and all that is willful and fantastic in it is in opposition to its fundamental essence.”<sup>11</sup> From this one

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10. Compare the Italian: “Destino”: *Potenza superiore all’umana volontà che opera secondo leggi arcane e inalterabili; provvidenza; destinazione; fato* (Finson 2005, *Enciclopedia Multimediale*); “Destino”: *Potere superiore che talora sembra guidare l’uomo indipendentemente dalla sua e dall’altrui volontà; fato* (M.G. Bacci 1993, *Dizionario Della Lingua Italiana*. Milano: Edizioni Polaris); “Destino”: fate; (futuro) destiny; “Era destino che accadesse” = It was fated to happen (*The Collins Italian Concise Dictionary*. London: Collins).

11. R.W. Emerson 1860, “Fate” in Callaway ed. *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Conduct of Life*, A Philosophical Reading. (Lanham, MD, University Press of America), p. 11.



may safely infer, I think, that the “organic classification” which imagination is to employ corresponds to those concepts required for and identified in ascertained law of nature, including, in Emerson, natural moral laws. Crucial in understanding Emerson’s perspective is to recognize that on his view, so long as we are subject to unalterable circumstance, and have some need to expand our freedom and power, there is always a prospective “higher law,” which we have yet to observe, recognize, or institute. It is this kind of point which made of Emerson an abolitionist.

However we may be inclined to deal with the topic of Peircean abduction, what is central is the idea that we need some deeper understanding of the origin of reasonable hypotheses in contrast with wild guessing, and equally we have some need for comparative evaluation of hypotheses at a point short of their verification or refutation by empirical testing. Peirce proposed to investigate the logic of abduction, though I suspect there is at best a quasi-logic of the comparative evaluation of untested hypotheses. Peirce also claimed, in a very suggestive formulation that “The question of pragmatism is the question of abduction,”<sup>12</sup> The point is of special interest for our studies of American philosophy, if we are concerned to resist the tendency of the current revival of pragmatism to reduce to a disreputable anti-intellectualism and “vulgar pragmatism,” which to use a phrase of Santayana’s, we might expect to be perpetually captured in the foreground of experience. The crucial point is to understand how accepted laws or generalizations and concepts of a given field of inquiry may structure and constrain the formation and initial plausibility of new hypotheses in answer to outstanding problems of the field.

### 3. Santayana, Imagination, and liberty

Turning back more directly to Santayana, I would like to skip forward to writings of 20 years later, “Materialism and Idealism in American Life,” and “English Liberty in America,” which were published in *Character and Opinion in the United States*. First a passage concerning American

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12. C. S. Peirce 1903, *Lectures on Pragmatism*; [CP 1.196]: “If you carefully consider the question of pragmatism you will see that it is nothing else than the question of the logic of abduction;” and further “no effect of pragmatism which is consequent upon its effect on abduction can go to show that pragmatism is anything more than a doctrine concerning the logic of abduction.”

Imagination: “The American is imaginative,” say Santayana, “for where life is intense, imagination is intense also;” Addressing the future-oriented character of American life, Santayana has it that if the American “were not imaginative, he would not live so much in the future.”<sup>13</sup> What is the general character of this American Imaginativeness? Santayana answers in general strokes:

But this imagination is practical, and the future it forecasts is immediate; it works with the clearest and least ambiguous terms known to his experience, in terms of number, measure, contrivance, economy, and speed. 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.<sup>14</sup>

The imagination here attributed is not the imagination prone to forming mental images or contemplating abstractions, and it certainly will seek to exclude vain and fanciful ideas and ideals. What Santayana attributes is the imagination of practical resourcefulness, which, like Emerson’s account must, at its best, sharply distinguish between imagination and mere fantasy; just as Peirce, if we consider him as looking at abduction as a model of the scientific imagination, helping to distinguish genuine hypothesis from wild guessing, seeks to limit and focus us away from merely fanciful wanderings.

It is not, then, a contemplative imagination which is to hold us engaged in the American world, but instead a more conservative and practical orientation to action, which finds expression in American pragmatism as in every-day life. In the end, then, we are faced with an important traditional question of American thought and civilization, “Can philosophy be practical?”—which we may now approach in something of the spirit of Santayana’s work. What are the appropriate philosophical principles of the philosophy of this life of the practical imagination?

We do not expect any totalizing or apodictic answer in the style of *a priori* rationalism, of course. Yet at the same time, a philosophy there must be, a general way of thought, suited to stand substantially against the practical man’s tendency of intolerance and impatience with our

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13. Santayana 1920, “Materialism and Idealism in American Life,” in *Character and Opinion in the United States*. (New York: Scribner’s), p. 174-175.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

philosophizing. Can we be both practical and principled? The practical imagination is responsible for engagement with life and the environment. Yet, on the other hand, it has its own general moral and social conditions. What philosophy will sustain the practical imagination and yet sustain itself and thus the general social and institutional conditions within which the practical imagination is free to operate?

The practical imagination projects potentialities and opportunities, such as belong to the American style in the integration of immigrants, for instance. This cannot be a matter of mere images of opportunities and potentialities, a social bait and switch, or it will cease to be genuinely practical. What we imagine in any given case is free and cooperative activity. “The will is a mass of passions,” says Santayana in “English Liberty in America,” and “when it sets up absolute claims it is both tragic and ridiculous.”<sup>15</sup> The philosophy suited to sustain the realm and reign of free cooperation is thus anti-absolutist and as a matter of positive policy it is fallibilistic. Those for whom a conservative and principled fallibilism is not sufficient as a principled policy simply demand too much. Though this may seem a harsh rule on occasion, as is the intolerance of intolerance, it is a necessary rule of the freedom of inquiry.

More generally, both science and human enterprise present to us ever new facts which we dare not ignore, and the process of moral and intellectual adjustment to them, and evaluation of them, dare be no less persistent. From this perspective any purportedly infallible dogma, however dressed, is an impediment: the mere static image of final perfection which cannot effectively enter into our world of cooperative action except as a stumbling block. But that is far from saying that we cannot justly be more conservative about principles basic to our civilization. In order to be more conservative regarding principle, we must look to living traditions of law, society and to established results of the diverse fields of inquiry. In Santayana’s account of “English Liberty in America,” there is both freedom and cooperation—and this significant combination demands much of the practical imagination and of principled action. It deserves a secure place in our philosophical practice as it does

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15. Santayana 1920, “English Liberty in America,” in *Character and Opinion in the United States*, p. 227.

in the wider world of human affairs. Being conservative on the principles of freedom is of the essence of political liberality.