

Review of *Santayana the Philosopher: Philosophy as a Form of Life*¹

Santayana the Philosopher: Philosophy as a Form of Life

Daniel Moreno, translated by Charles Padrón (Lewisburg, Penn: Bucknell University Press, 2015)

Daniel Moreno's *Santayana the Philosopher: Philosophy as a Form of Life* (a translation of his Spanish-language *Santayana filósofo: La filosofía como forma de vida* [Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2007]) pursues "the golden thread of [George Santayana's] thought" (42) in order to read his work "from the inside" (xxi) and give an account of his philosophy as a coherent system. The idea is that taking Santayana's interior perspective—engaging in *literary psychology*—is the best way to make sense of his philosophical system. Accordingly, Moreno is concerned with Santayana's philosophy as he lived it; but this book is not a biography, intellectual or otherwise. Moreno acknowledges that the life one lives influences the way one thinks, but he does not hold that the way to grasp the interior world of a thinker is to read the thinker's work in light of biographical detail. Rejecting the search for "the key to [Santayana's] thought in the vicissitudes of his life," Moreno chooses "to move from Santayana's oeuvre to his life, and not merely to the commonplace facts of his life, but rather to the interiority of that life" (xxii). In other words, the realm of matter undeniably influences spirit and the intuition of essences, but moments of spirit can be understood without reducing them to material factors, and Moreno chooses to consider them in terms of the essences intuited rather than the material flux.

Moreno picks up the golden thread at the point of Santayana's commitment to avoiding the idolatry of taking essences for existences, of taking the deliverances of the human mind as exhaustive of reality. Moreno writes,

Recognizing the natural necessity in humans driven to be natural born mythologists, Santayana suggests the possibility of not succumbing to illusion, and of arriving at moments of rapture in which projection is suspended. What interests him is not only the ascertaining of illusion but also the interesting consequences that follow from rejecting it. (44)

Santayana's project turned on a tension between the animal compulsion to believe myths and the spiritual ability to transcend that compulsion. His philosophical system, in distinguishing essence and existence, guards against deception by illusions while cultivating the capacity to appreciate them.

The golden thread leads Moreno to a striking realization about Santayana's perspective: Santayana's avoidance of the seduction of illusions is a pursuit of sanity, which reflects his "constant preoccupation: madness" (49). It is madness to mistake illusions for reality, and "the chief and most lasting illusion of the mind is the illusion of its own importance" (*DL*, 44; quoted in Moreno, 50). This is

¹ A Spanish translation of this review by Inmaculada Yruela appears in *Limbo: boletín de estudios sobre Santayana* (35), 2015.

the point of the story of Autologos in Santayana's dialogue "Normal Madness": Autologos loses his head when he abandons the garden in despair after learning that the names he has given to the plants based on his feelings and perceptions do not pick out anything existent in the garden; when stripped of his illusions about nature, Autologos' despair betrays his attachment to the illusion of his mind's importance.

Moreno points out that the strangeness of the disillusioned life was well known to Santayana, who characterized living without illusions as

walking dead among the living, not knowing what we seem to know, not loving what we seem to love, but already translated into an invisible paradise where . . . one only companion . . . stands beside us and shakes his head silently, bidding us say Nay, nay, to all our madness. (*DL*, 57)

In response, Moreno writes,

This is a terrifying text in which Santayana exhibits his personal demon, this companion, silent and smiling, who reminds him that everything is an illusion, who compels him constantly to say 'no,' 'no,' to the things that influence the majority of people. What comes to light is his less visible side, hidden beneath an august style. . . . (50)

In pointing out Santayana's preoccupation with madness, Moreno follows a path of interpretation similar to Richard Rorty's readings of Vladimir Nabokov and George Orwell in which he emphasized their concern with cruelty (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 146). Rorty read Nabokov and Orwell as pointing out temptations to and consequences of cruelty so that we might expand our awareness of the suffering of others; similarly Moreno reads Santayana as pointing out temptations to madness and consequences of illusion so that we might grow in self-knowledge and sanity and expand our awareness of ourselves.

The book traces Santayana's golden thread through his ontology, social and political philosophy, novel, and speculations on spirituality. Moreno's emphasis on Santayana's concern with madness aids in understanding what motivates the ontology: Clearing his mind of cant, cleaning the windows of his soul and eliminating superstition mean distinguishing categories that help one avoid the madness of confusing essence and existence and of overvaluing the importance of the human mind. In Chapter 2, "Knowledge and Reality," Moreno identifies "the vertebra of [Santayana's] philosophical system" as "the categorical separation between essence and existence, animal faith and intuition, and psyche and spirit" (53). He follows Santayana's descent into and reemergence from skepticism and the subsequent articulation of the Realm of Being. The chapter ends with a consideration of Santayana's anti-metaphysical approach to traditional philosophical topics including teleology, God, and self.

Moreno challenges the perception that Santayana's disillusion and philosophical detachment entailed political indifference, and, in Chapter 3, "The Social Warp," Moreno argues that Santayana's philosophy includes a definite and considered political aspect. It is "a political philosophy thought out through the *spirit*" (97) and is expressed neither as activism nor policy recommendations. Santayana did not object to other thinkers being politically active, but it betrays a misunderstanding of Santayana's work to demand of him solutions to problems he never took up. As

an illustration of Santayana's political outlook, Moreno compares the responses of James and Santayana to the 1898 Spanish-American war:

James truly believed, innocently and romantically, in the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and this belief (once tainted) helped draw out his fit of bitter, profound tears over the first proofs of the imperialism in his own country. Santayana nevertheless, presented himself as listening attentively to this inner voice that said *no*; *no*. (119)

Here Santayana's political philosophy can be seen to follow from his concern with how best to regard ideals and avoid deceptive illusions.

Moreno shows, in Chapter 4, "Philosophy and Novel in *The Last Puritan*," how this literary work places "before the reader, under a different format, Santayana's own philosophical system" (130). The novel is presented as a memoir, written by a fictionalized Santayana, of Oliver Alden, who exemplifies transcendentalism taken to its extreme. The story is, writes Moreno, "the literary and philosophical progression of the boy Autologos" (132). Its tragedy lies in Oliver's inability to accept the irrationality of matter and the spiritual consolation of essence; and his insistence on the absolute value of his own perspective. Oliver's intelligence, strength, wealth, and noble intentions cannot save him from spiritual consequences of confusing essence and existence. While recounting Oliver's spiritual disease, the novel's structure expresses Santayana's perspectives on spirit. The novel—by including Santayana as a character—blurs the line between fact and fiction. According to Moreno, "this particular relation between reality and fiction connects directly with the point of view of the *spirit*" (127), for which essences of history, truth, fiction, and illusion have equal status. In this way, the novel is a play of essences expressive of spirit's activity, and this blending of essences is apparent in the characters as well: "each one represents a unity that corresponds not to an actual person but rather to an elaborate composite made up of fragments from distinct spheres" (128). This prevents assigning Santayana's perspective to any particular character; and, in fact, Santayana's ideas are expressed by many different characters. This allows for suggestive self-criticism, as in the Epilogue when one character tells Santayana that the memoir contains better philosophy than his other works. Moreno thinks this "claim reflects a way of understanding philosophy that does not impose on others its perspectives, nor becomes indignant when confronted with contrary views, but rather limits itself to describing from a spiritual point of view distinct possibilities, in order that it be the *psyche*, if anything, that chooses in the final say" (130).

Moreno follows the golden thread to the idea of "the spiritual as an essential element in Santayana," and finds the message that spirit makes life worth living when saved from distraction and madness (145). In Chapter 5, "Spiritual Testament," Moreno considers Santayana's speculations on the spiritual life, finding the novelty of Santayana's approach to lie with his thoroughly materialist starting point. He considers the difference in mood between *The Life of Reason* and later work on the spiritual life but does not think the forms of life incompatible. He examines religion, charity, metanoia and self-transcendence, and concludes that this last notion is unique for its assertion of a thing's capacity to transform into something else from within—an idea Moreno uses to tie together the realms of being and to consider the idea of union with God. Moreno claims that Santayana's understanding

of union showed that “embracing the divine point of view does not damage the psychological self, or lead to suicide, or even constitute a mental illness, at most, it does imply the regeneration of the psyche” (166). Moreno’s interpretation suggests that Santayana’s preoccupation with madness led him to articulate a program of spiritual hygiene, a way to avoid deception without cutting oneself off from the best things of human life. As Moreno writes in the final section of his book, “the mission of philosophy has to be to lessen the authority of the world without suggesting an escape from it” (169), which is what Santayana did by subduing illusion without being tempted to master the world.

Moreno’s book is an inspired and careful reading of Santayana’s work. It presents Santayana’s philosophical activity in its own terms and does not force it into mainstream categories. Though the text does contain editorial flaws that can be highly distracting (typographical errors and other mistakes including ones that most definitely are *not* the fault of the author or translator—for example, a consistently misnamed character from *The Last Puritan*), this is an extremely well informed and insightful work that should be taken seriously by anyone who cares about Santayana’s philosophy.

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