

Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency. Michael Hodges and John Lachs. The Vanderbilt Library of American Philosophy. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr., ed. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 129. \$29.95 h.c. 0-8265-1341-7.

Anyone acquainted with Wittgenstein's and Santayana's work should be aware of a number of obvious differences between the two philosophers. While both were praised for their literary style, Wittgenstein's compact aphorisms and Santayana's flowing prose were radically different, and while Santayana seemed to unapologetically engage in systematic metaphysics, Wittgenstein's philosophy seems both anti-systematic and antimetaphysical. Nevertheless, Hodges and Lachs attempt to argue that while Santayana's and Wittgenstein's "resources, tools, and strategies are different, the philosophical goals they wish to achieve by means of them are remarkably similar" (93).

The opening chapter presents both as responding to the perceived collapse of the "comfortable certainties of Western civilization" (xii) that followed the First World War. The authors contrast Wittgenstein's and Santayana's "conservative" and "ironically accepting" reactions to "the twentieth century's painful discovery of contingency" (3) with "Cartesian," "Neitzschean," "Pragmatist," and "Postmodernist" responses to the problem. The second chapter argues that both Santayana and Wittgenstein think that "persistent and unallayable doubt shows that something has gone wrong in the intellectual enterprise," and that while skepticism cannot be defeated on its own terms, those terms are irrelevant to the actual processes of inquiry. Consequently, "both reject absolute certainty as the standard of cognition and want to return the criteria of knowledge to the looser practices of ordinary life" (32). The authors then take on the formidable task of showing that Santayana's and Wittgenstein's meta-ethical views "are virtually indistinguishable" (47). The negative aspect of Santayana and Wittgenstein's agreement resides in their "rejection of universal claims about the good," while their positive accord shows up in their "belief that moral life and moral values reside in particular social practices" (52). The authors discuss the possibility that such ethical views might lead to a type of complacent conservatism about ethical matters, and argue that

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2001.
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the two still make room for critique, and only deny that it can be “based on neutral or universal principles” (53). The next chapter argues that, when properly understood, Wittgenstein’s conception of a “form of life” bears a number of remarkable similarities to Santayana’s notion of “animal faith” in that both philosophers agree that the facts of animal life “constitute the final and definitive context of all our practices” (65). Hodges and Lachs then attempts to establish that, though not religious themselves, Santayana and Wittgenstein were among the few who “could understand the power and affirm the self-justifying independence of the religious life” (71), and that each thought that “the role of religious discourse is not to convey factual information but to articulate life-transforming ideals” (81). The book’s conclusion focuses primarily on reconciling Santayana’s apparent interest in ontology with Wittgenstein’s avoidance of the topic. The authors argue that one of the central purposes of Santayana’s “ironic ontology” is to “let the air out of the grand metaphysical systems of the past,” and that both philosophers believe “ontology is impossible simply because we cannot attain the perspective necessary to take an objective inventory of all there is” (91). In response to this shared belief, Wittgenstein “altogether refuses to take up ontology,” while Santayana “displaces it by means of an ‘ontology’ that undercuts its own objectivity” (91). As with the discussion of skepticism in chapter 2, the authors thus hope to show that Santayana’s and Wittgenstein’s “differences in strategy guise an identity in ultimate belief” (92).

The book presents a clear and persuasive exposition of both Santayana and Wittgenstein, and even if one is not especially interested in the connection between them, it serves as a good introduction to the views of either of these philosophers. However, the brevity of the text (108 pages) promotes a tendency to paint in comparatively broad strokes. Some potentially serious differences are thus played down with little argument, while the significance of some comparatively superficial areas of agreement is overstated. As a result, the authors’ claims about the relation between Santayana and Wittgenstein are often more suggestive than persuasive.

For instance, the authors claim that while Wittgenstein “rejects the starting point of wholesale doubt” and Santayana “pushes the program to self-destruction,” both thinkers agree that skepticism “fails in the end only because it is incompatible with action or the practices that constitute our lives” (27). This is true enough, but agreement at this level could be attributed to many philosophers, including, say, the Russell of *The Problems of Philosophy*. The claim that skepticism is senseless seems considerably different from the more common claim that it is intellectually dishonest or useless, and the authors could do more to show that Santayana shares with Wittgenstein the comparatively less common initial position. Furthermore, the authors suggest that Santayana’s discussion of “essences” amounts to a defense of a sort of pluralism, and that “Santayana’s commitment to a multitude of forms is the equivalent of Wittgenstein’s views of the multiplicity of language games” (95). However, this claim that these two sorts of pluralism are *equivalent* is given little support. As described, the “mul-

titude of forms” could all be parts of various *descriptive* language games, while the plurality of games need not be limited to the descriptive. Consequently, more needs to be said about how these types of pluralism are related. Finally, the authors claim that Santayana and Wittgenstein share “the important insight” that “truth is not a matter of subjective whim and that individuals are surrounded by social and natural entities they did not create and may not be able to change” (102). This may be the case, but I would be hard pressed to think of any philosopher that didn’t, ultimately, share this insight. As a result, much more needs to be said to establish that their views on truth are interestingly similar, and the authors do little to support that claim.

Still, these criticisms are minimal remarks about what could be added to what is already an excellent book. Such omissions no doubt could have been remedied had the authors chosen to produce a longer book. Furthermore, the brevity that leaves these questions unanswered also makes the book eminently readable, and encourages the philosophical community to begin thinking about the connections between these two important thinkers.

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Moral Progress: A Process Critique of MacIntyre. Lisa Bellantoni. SUNY Series in Philosophy, George R. Lucas, Jr., editor. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 126. \$47.50 h.c., 0-7914-4443-0, \$15.95 pbk. 0-7914-4444-9.

Alasdair MacIntyre is one of only a few contemporary philosophers who is oft cited in the popular press, his name usually being invoked as a great defender of morality and virtue. I must confess that I find this puzzling, as MacIntyre’s work has always struck me as being rather seriously misguided. In *Moral Progress: A Process Critique of MacIntyre*, Lisa Bellantoni articulates some of the more serious flaws in MacIntyre’s thinking. Utilizing the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, she undertakes a sustained critique of MacIntyre’s view of practical enquiry, and, despite a few rough spots along the way, she ultimately demonstrates the general incoherence and inadequacy of that view. Bellantoni’s project is important both for its critique of MacIntyre and for its development of a Whiteheadian model of practical enquiry.¹ While the book is occasionally uneven and, from my perspective a little overly teleological (more on that later), it does represent a significant contribution to the development of Whitehead’s thought in the area of moral enquiry.

The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2001.
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