**Continuity, Allegiance and Community in Santayana[[1]](#footnote-1)**

My topic here today concerns the well-known development of Santayana’s work around the time that *Scepticism and Animal Faith* appearedin print. That publication marked for its readers a brand new turn in his thinking.That’s one story, anyway.[[2]](#footnote-2) Others have wondered whether there really was such a “new turn.” By mid-career, even though Santayana was abandoning the so-called “humanist” tone of his earlier writing, he explicitly dismissed the idea that there was any “change in … deliberate doctrine” (SAF 183).

This does point to one very natural way of framing the so-called continuity problem in Santayana — as a matter of doctrinal deviation. But I’ll be framing the problem differently, and my observations will be directed towards reframing (at least part of) Santayana’s legacy, towards a way of life that might actually be possible for those of us who are not named George Santayana.

**\*1\* The source of the continuity debate**

First a little historical background. In his article “One Santayana or Two?” Justus Buchler took up this question of continuity soon after Santayana’s death, noting that a number of Santayana’s former admirers had come to believe that the *Life of Reason* (1905, 1906) was incompatible with the later Santayana (Buchler 1954, 53). In fact, according to Santayana himself (Schilpp 1940, 538), some of those critics had developed a “personal animus” towards him over that very issue.[[3]](#footnote-3)

“A personal animus.” This seems to me worth noting. Perhaps if we could penetrate the source of that personal animus, we might better diagnose the perception of discontinuity that accompanied it. So that is the first thing I hope to do here.

Now, not all commentators have discerned discontinuity. Buchler himself had not followed the crowd on this, and more recent commentators (including John McCormick and Herman Saatkamp)[[4]](#footnote-4) have focused on the *continuity* they see in Santayana’s doctrine.[[5]](#footnote-5)

But maybe this entire discussion is missing a larger and more fundamental point. Shouldn’t we be wondering just why this continuity issue ever seemed worth pondering in the first place? Today, if we concentrate simply on this issue of doctrinal integrity, it seems to me, we risk underrating the “personal animus” that Santayana detected.[[6]](#footnote-6) And in that regard, Santayana says this: “there has really been a change in my sentiment, though none in my theory or *in my allegiance* to the life of reason” (Schilpp, 1940, 560 [italics added]). Maybe this gives us our best hint — that the most nagging issue may really be about “allegiance.”

Allegiance tracks what a person in actual practice is going to do, and what that cadre of pragmatist philosophers aimed to do was to solve social problems. But (much to their dismay[[7]](#footnote-7)) the problems Santayana began working on, after 1912 or so, had indeed changed. He simply had become no longer so “taken up with rational ethics” as he was in the *Life of Reason.* His doctrine had not changed.He still thought that *if* someone is going to do ethics, then yes, the story he told in the *Life of Reason* was the way to go. But that someone was no longer George Santayana. He still pretty much accepted the essence of what he had presented decades earlier --butin theory, but not in his own practice.

I think this is absolutely key. In the eyes of the pragmatists in the 1930s and 40s, Santayana’s resistance to rational ethics appears to be more than just a doctrinal disagreement. Though the realms of being may have seemed to them ontologically vacuous, I think it must have been his allegiance that seemed so hollow, and this (I imagine) was what smarted so. This is what prompted the personal animus. The common enterprise of the philosophical community[[8]](#footnote-8) (at least in New York) was being disturbed by one who (they now realized) had never even aspired to join in the first place.

So back to the matter of continuity. If I’m right, the answer to the question “Continuity or not?” depends on one’s own allegiances.For the advocates of discontinuity, the attraction to Santayana seems to concern some aspect of the moral vision enunciated in *Life of Reason,* and Santayana’s later disenchantment with that earlier work feels like the interruption of an exciting tale that needs more chapters. *That* feels discontinuous. On the other hand, those who embrace instead his later spiritual disintoxication project may find it rather pointless to be trudging through the old dialectical ditches, after the master himself has shaken the dust from his feet and moved on.

So, to summarize so far: the issue here is not so much whether there has been a fundamental continuity between the early and later Santayana, but rather which doctrinal continuations or ruptures, based on one’s own allegiances, one might wish to highlight.

**\*2\* Living the life one's philosophy describes**

I’ve been remarking here on the cherished allegiances among the Harvard and Columbia faculties as they assessed Santayana’s later work — in particular, their allegiance to reformist politics. This might naturally provoke some similar level of reflection regarding our own allegiances. For after reading Santayana, those of us who have been impressed with the recent turn toward “philosophy as a way of life” might be inspired to reconsider and refine our own existential allegiances. And in this regard I think there is one key consideration especially which might profitably inform our sense of what might be at stake in doing so.

Now for at least some of us, I imagine, one issue that may *not* be so much at stake concerns what Henry Samuel Levinson has called the aspiration to “intellectual statesmanship.” Gilded Age America, at least for the gilded agents of high society Boston and New York, was a community of movers and shakers, and of the intellectuals who were preparing the up and coming generation for the destiny that at the time seemed so manifest. But even if we as philosophers might no longer aspire to solidarity with a community of revered philosophical hierarchs, this is not to say that issues of community are of no account.

And this is the second point I am focusing on here — issues of community. It’s hardly an exaggeration to point out that Santayana, in his personal life, became increasingly anti-communitarian.

Communities, like ethical practices in general, are not realized in the abstract, and one way to interpret the notion of “communitarianism” might instead be in terms of the specific practices that one is willing to engage, within the concrete particularities of one’s own extended social circle. I’m speaking now about more than just social formalities. Certainly Santayana could show dedication to acting out conventional roles of courtesy, often out of the genuine enjoyment playing such a role gave him; nevertheless, enjoying the social role one plays is not the same as forming a personal relationship with one’s neighbors. And a network of personal relationships is the kind of community I have in mind. Increasingly (it seems to me), as time went on, Santayana was not so eager to enter into more personal emotional connections with almost anyone. Instead, he lived the life of the mind rather than the life of the “community.”

I’ve argued elsewhere[[9]](#footnote-9) that Santayana’s self-described metanoia was only a partially accurate reflection of his actual life after 1893. His autobiography, which provides us with the most detailed account of that, was composed at least forty years after the fact (Saatkamp, 2018, 4) and reflects how Santayana thought of himself after decades of hard-won self-discipline. But he does not often say much about the emotional difficulties that must have brought him, perhaps because gliding over the challenges he must have faced serves better his own literary purposes. Or else maybe his memory has simply lost track of those difficulties. In either case, all through the autobiography he is reiterating (to himself as much as anyone) the equanimity he has achieved in later life. Regarding his earlier life however, I think a sober reading of his account suggests that (knowingly or not) he is actually indulging in fictive literary narrative as he tries to reconstruct the younger man he once was. It seems to me obvious that he has smoothed away some of what he once was in favor of what he eventually intended to be.

I don’t want to be misunderstood here. What he became was immensely remarkable, especially given what he came from. The literary critic Joseph Epstein once wrote that Santayana did not have to cultivate detachment: he was born with it, “the way other people are born with, say, large feet” (Epstein, 1989, 321). This may not have been a serious remark, but if it was, I think it’s wildly off the mark. Santayana’s own family was painfully dysfunctional,[[10]](#footnote-10) and near the age of thirty, his sister’s ill-chosen marriage must have been the last straw -- almost as if their cherished relationship suddenly got revealed to have been a cruel hoax all along.[[11]](#footnote-11)

I mention this because this strongly suggests that there was simply little basis in his own experience for the aspect of personal, emotionally based relationships which now, over a century later, have become a natural expression of community life (at least for some of us). Of course Santayana had a number of “friends” and some he called “true friends” — especially Albert von Westenholz (PP 261). But (at least in his own recollection) these true friends seem to have been mostly those who were open to new and interesting ideas, through a “just” and “charitable” hospitality of mind (PP 177). However, I think[[12]](#footnote-12) his own account shows that such “justice” or “charity” is really more about responding to impersonal concepts than responding to individual persons, and the notion that individuals could be admirable for excellences of character unimaginable to the rather patrician Santayana could not have figured uppermost in his assessment of their characters.

This point speaks to his anti-communitarianism. For Santayana, as for the rest of us, emotional connection with others conceivably *could* be a prime source forone’s own personal growth and *could* lead to apprehending essences that he had never before imagined.But Santayana’s estimate of social relations was different. For Santayana, “modern life is not made for friendship: common interests are not strong enough, private interests too absorbing” (pp 352). Instead, as Lionel Trilling suspected, Santayana’s most all-absorbing private interest was his own self-definition: “he needed to define himself by withdrawal” (Trilling, 1956, 164). We might even be tempted to call this the narcissist’s trap. Fixation on one’s own self-definition provides little room for sympathetic understanding of anybody else, and I find it difficult to imagine that Santayana was very capable of sympathetic understanding.[[13]](#footnote-13) Quite to the point here, Richard Rubin has reminded us that “Santayana’s frame of reference can lead to cavalier indifference” (2014, 55).

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In closing I need to mention a little book by Milton Mayeroff, entitled “On Caring,” a book that helped inaugurate the ethics of care movement back in the 70’s. As we know, Santayana early on felt that he was not at home in the world (PP 167). Mayeroff remarks (interestingly) that in the sense in which individuals “can ever be said to be at home in the world,” they are “at home not through dominating, or explaining” — or merely contemplating! — “but through caring and being cared for” (Mayeroff, 1971, 2) To find a home in the world is to enter a circle of care, and Santayana rather soon in his life gave up looking for this — though his host the world did eventually provide accommodations suitable enough for him. We, on the other hand, might want to consult our own allegiances to see whether that sort of “host” would be suitable enough for us.

It is true that some contemporary readers have faced, straight on, the challenge of updating Santayana’s project, and have pursued quite impressively Santayana’s contemplative example (Brodrick, 2015). But others of us may still be left with some pressing questions as to which portions of Santayana’s work remain viable. Should we attempt to reinstate the model of intellectual statesmanship (Etzioni, 1996)? Or do we direct our energies closer to home, by building personal relationships within a local community of like-minded persons? Might that not be an alternative model for facing up to the worldly anxieties that Santayana’s own mature project was meant to address? It is interesting to imagine how much of the *Life of Reason* might still get reflected in such a project. But that remains to be seen.

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1. Presented at the World Philosophy Congress (Rome), August 2, 2024. Thanks go to Phillip Beard and Matthew Caleb Flamm for their helpful advance comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. And indeed, by the late 1930’s critics like Irwin Edman were certainly pouncing on “certain glaring inconsistencies” between the early and the later work (Edman, 1939, 592). Twenty years later, one review of a reissued volume of Santayana succinctly characterized this: “Formerly Santayana had extolled intelligence as the art of giving form and discipline to natural impulse. Here [in his later work] all human pursuits are dismissed from the realm of spirituality as limited and transitory” (Knox,1958, 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There can be little doubt of this in the case of Eliseo Vivas, who wrote in *The Nation* that “the task of analyzing ‘The Realms of Being’ would be as unrewarding as it would be unpleasant. And yet it would be important to know in precisely what way the rhetorical effusions and the hyperborean posturings of the later period are prefigured in the earlier” (Vivas 1940, 37). However, notice the much kindlier tone toward the beginning of his essay in the Schilpp volume (Schlipp 1940, 316). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Biographer John McCormick promotes such an assessment, that “*Scepticism and Animal Faith* is packed with good things. It completes and fulfills *The Life of Reason* and advances from it” and also “summarizes the philosophical work to come” (1987, 262). To this same end Herman Saatkamp cites Santayana’s own words from *Persons and Places* (Saatkamp, 2021, 66). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this autobiography Santayana himself insisted that “my philosophy has never changed” (PP 167). So is this declaration sufficient? Perhaps. There he did give a story that traces continuity. Still, we might well wonder how accurate his autobiography really is. In the late 50s Herbert Schneider remarked that “his memory was certainly going” by the time he wrote *Persons and Places*. John Herman Randall and Horace Kallen agreed. All had visited Santayana during his later years in Rome (Lamont, 1959, 62). But more to the point perhaps is Santayana’s intent in compiling and polishing (and publishing!) his journal notes: was this not one more exercise in self-definition? I address this issue below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These were the ones who “feel that I have deserted the truth for the very errors that I denounced when I was a good humanist” (Schilpp,1940, 560]. Among those, Santayana refers specifically to Irwin Edman and Milton Munitz, whose critical essays appear earlier in the same volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rational ethics remained the major concern of a great many of his pragmatist colleagues, and the loudest reminder of this was probably Sidney Hook. In his review or *The Realm of Spirit,* Hook wrote that “the most effective answer to the Santayana of the ‘Realms of Being’ is the Santayana of the ‘Life of Reason,’ with its sane moral economy in which security is not a blessing which descends upon us as we rise to eternity but something to be achieved by intelligent social action and rational personal discipline” (Hook,1940, 423). Hook had studied under Dewey at Columbia in the 1920s, and his dogged devotion to his teacher’s social program earned him the title of “Dewey’s Bulldog” (Jessup (1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. At least one early reviewer of the *Life of Reason* had remarked on the common endeavor envisioned by the rising stars of philosophy: “Most fortunately philosophy, like natural science, has become largely a matter of methods, inviting cooperation, instead of a collection of more or less mutually exclusive system” (Albee, 1905, 603). See also the anonymous reviewer of Scepticism and Animal Faith (1923, 572). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Seiple, “Some Thoughts on Santayana at Harvard” (this Bulletin). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. His mother left him together with his sister Susana to “pick our way through the world by our native wits, without adequate means or preparation, and without any sympathy on her side” (PP 33). His father, largely absent except for summer visits from George, became “a hypochondriac, always watching his symptoms, and fearing that death was at hand” (PP 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “In respect to both my parents, whom I am proud of as persons of marked character and philosophic conformity with fate, I feel a certain strange distance, as if my bond with them had not been close and physical, but somehow accidental and merely social or economic, as with a schoolmaster or a school matron….A real father in my case was lacking, and the real mother was my sister Susana” (PP 248). And when Susana decided to marry (the “third event” of his awakened metanoia), this “struck perhaps even deeper into my conscience” than the death of either his father or Warwick Potter. This he saw as “an act of desperation on her part, a redoubled proof of her weakness” and showed that “she, who had given the first impulse to my speculative life, had never had any speculative or mystical insight. …This was a sad disillusion for me in regard to the person to whom I was most attached” (PP 424-25). The world had fooled him for the very last time. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Seiple, “Some Thoughts on Santayana at Harvard” (this Bulletin). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Even in an intellectual setting — at least according to Ernest Nagel — he seemed “not very effective in the sort of give-and-take discussion where the two people pretty much are equal and trying to understand an issue or to clarify a point.” Horace Kallen remarked that Santayana did not like being subjected to “sermons.” But it seems that he rather liked delivering them, expostulating on his own finely discerned insights. Kallen described this as “a kind of soliloquy out loud” (Lamont, 1959, 49, 65-66, 67). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)