**Some Thoughts on Santayana at Harvard[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Any informed reader of Herman Saatkamp’s crowning publication, *A Life of Scholarship with Santayana,* will recognize that no serious student of Santayana should be without it. Its author devoted decades towards restoring Santayana’s autobiography *Persons and Places* out of mutilated published versions, and one crucial manuscript was even missing altogether until he tracked it down himself (Saatkamp 2021, 144-45). Reading through the results of those efforts, it’s easy to see that without Herman Saatkamp’s remarkable dedication, we could not be talking about Santayana’s life nearly as knowledgeably as we now can.

Moreover, in Santayana we now are able to imagine clearly aphilosopher who actually tried to *live the life his own philosophy describes.* In particular, it becomes apparent that neither Santayana’s later accomplishments nor his days at Harvard can be fully appreciated apart from his *metanoia* -- an intensified self-awareness (around the year 1893) which marked for him the eventual direction that his attitude towards life and towards philosophy would be taking (PP 350-52, 418-29).

However, that eventual direction has troubled some of his readers. I confess to being among them. Here I shall address those concerns by suggesting two things. (1) Santayana’s self-characterization of his life, even if accurate, was most likely accurate only at intervals; and (2) the appeal of Santayana as a model for living may well be severely constrained by his views on charity/justice. These are two closely related points, and here I shall discuss each of them in turn.

(1)

Towards the end of Santayana’s life, Sidney Hook -- known to some (*perhaps* affectionately) as “Dewey’s bulldog” (Jessup 1974) -- bewailed what he called “the new note of Olympian despair in Santayana’s later work” (Hook 1940, 423-24). But the “despair” in that work (if that’s the best word for it) was not new. It must have begun early on in Santayana’s rather stultifying family life, germinated by “the reign of silent despair” that had overtaken his mother’s household even before his birth (PP 43, 46). Fortunately, in that setting the young George may well have managed to laugh as much as to weep (156). Yet in fundamental ways he remained “a stranger at heart” (PP 158), both as a youth and later as man, and the “wretched poverty-stricken real world in which [he felt] condemned to live” (PP 167) remained of little moment to him -- at least as compared with the realities of his own imagination.

But remarkably, as he matured this inward social isolation left him not so much with anxiety, as with detachment from the worldly *causes* of anxiety. Importantly, it also left him detached not just from the world’s affairs but increasingly detached from many of those around him, who were so taken up with those worldly affairs. This is well worth noticing. For Santayana, the real world was “only the world of other people: of all those, at least, and they were the vast majority, who had never understood” (PP 350). He does not say here just what they had never understood, but one suspects it must have been George Santayana.

This sense of detachment became the master theme for the mature Santayana. Tellingly, and of course quite intentionally, the last volume of *Persons and Places* opens very much out of sequence, in its portrayal of the “metanoia” he remembers from his student days at Harvard. This sets the scene further towards the chapter entitled “Old Age in Italy” and thereafter into the epilogue chapter of the entire book. But what may not be fully apparent to the casual reader is that what emerges here, from the vantage of a man in eighties, is a “chosen *persona*” – what “Santayana appears to himself in retrospect to have been” (Lyon 1986, xix). Detachment becomes his evolving life theme, but the account he gives of how that actually occurred must have been more spotty than his published story explicitly reveals.

Santayana’s detachment is what lies at the root of what bothers quite a few of his readers. Around the time Santayana was completing the autobiography, a number of those critics (Sidney Hook, certainly) had become irked by Santayana’s abandonment of reformist politics. This was the era of what Henry Samuel Levinson has called Harvard’s (and later Columbia’s) mission of “intellectual statesmanship” (Levinson 1992, 125-31), and it is quite obvious that Santayana’s heretical path gets primed by events of his days at Harvard. He puts it this way: “Not that I had then, or ever, any ideal hostility to sport or to polite society or even to politics or trade….But I can *truly live* only in *the reaction of the mind* …in religion, poetry, history, and *friendship*. If I take a practical part, it is only by putting on a domino for the carnival” (PP 158, emphasis added). Only in treating social relations as a game, in other words. This same tendency towards a lack of (let’s call it) “existential seriousness” always seems to be lurking in the background of his narrative. It points to what (to a number of us) seems so troublesome.

Now, I certainly do not mean to treat Santayana as some kind of life-long misanthropic hermit — though he does admit to having turned into a hermit at the end (PP 422). As Saatkamp reminds us, Santayana acutely felt his own family ties and responsibilities, loyally and regularly visiting his ailing mother during the very time he was arranging his final exit from Harvard. And it is certainly true that Santayana writes of a rather normal childhood with chums and adventures. Nevertheless, as he matured, this *reaction of the mind* (rather than the *heart*)increasingly marks the major portion of his attraction to others, even to his own “true friends.”

Yet the more intimate, heart-felt human emotions must have been present as well, at least on some occasions. Take his account of one of his truest friends, Albert von Westenholz (which consumes five full pages of the autobiography). Westenholz, despite their mutual affinities, was not a well man. Santayana describes his “various forms of mental or half-mental derangement, sleeplessness, and obsessions,” which are striking as both comedy and tragedy. And it would be hard to imagine the younger Santayana having absolutely no heart-felt reaction in all this. And yet -- he does add that Westenholz himself “diagnosed [these afflictions] with perfect scientific intelligence.” And that seems to have been the key point: “with all these morbid preoccupations filling his days and nights Westenholz retained to the last his speculative freedom. Everything interested him, he could be *just* and even enthusiastic about impersonal things” (emphasis added). Both his sister and Westenholz himself were “all goodness.” But Albert “had intellect” (PP 263-64).[[2]](#footnote-2) Santayana wasn’t true friends with the sister. All this seems to fit seamlessly into his developing sensibility towards philosophy and his own way of living.

Still, it is important not to be too quick to draw conclusions. For example, in the final pages of *Persons and Places* the first necessary condition for living rationally is said to be self-knowledge -- an awareness of one’s own instinctive and deeply habitual interests (PP 542); and many pages earlier Santayana declares his own antipathy to anyone else’s precepts displacing his own moral freedom (PP 134). In this regard some of what Santayana says may sound like the creed of some libertarian from Silicon Valley. But this would fail to capture all that Santayana has in mind here. It underplays what he calls, rather unusually, “charity” — which he also characterizes in terms of both “hospitality of mind” and distributive “justice” (PP 177; LR3 130-31). This is exactly what drew him to Westenholz, the one who could be so “just” about impersonal things. “Justice” (for Santayana) involves the benign toleration due everyone else’s instinctive interests.

This “justice” is hardly a bad thing. However, this has a downside that points us to the real problem here. For Santayana one’s best “sympathetic intelligence” is displayed only in a “representative” awareness of “all the types of excellence toward which life may be directed.” As an illustration, Santayana tells us that this was exactly where Spinoza went wrong because Spinoza lacked a sensitivity to “other types of excellence,” and because he had “no idea of human greatness and no sympathy with human sorrow.” Now that may sound like an expression of empathy on Santayana’s part. But right then he goes on to explain this not in terms of possible excellences one might divine from encounters with individual people he knew, but in terms of Spinoza’s ignorance of Plutarch, Shakespeare, Racine, Dante and Virgil (PP 235). The “charity” Santayana has in mind seems to have less to do with actual persons than with a repertoire of essences available through imagination to Santayana himself.

Yes, these essences can be mutually grasped in friendship perhaps – but only insofar as the shared habits and instincts of two fortunate psyches allow for it. And isn’t this where the problem shows itself? Are there not a whole range of essences which the life experiences of others exhibit, but which Santayana may not have been eager to listen to and perhaps could not even have heard, except as elements of his own philosophically-embedded speculations? From the standpoint of literary psychology, these would also have to be comprised of essences that Santayana is projecting upon those others — “essence objectified,” we might even call them. This might remind us of what he famously said in *Sense of Beauty* (SB 35), except of course for the fact that art objects don’t have their own story, and they certainly can’t be asked what that story might be. Persons of course *do*, and they *can* be asked. And in many cases it seems doubtful that the ordinary folk who crossed paths with Santayana would feel seen or heard in the literary stories he might be intuiting about them.[[3]](#footnote-3) The difference is that in our own day they might feel little compunction about volunteering their felt sense of invisibility.

It is certainly true that Santayana’s appreciation for certain select persons — the Jew Charles Loeser, for example, who was ostracized as a matter of course by others -- was very much an expression of “charity.” But even so, look at the description Santayana gives of Loeser! Not only were “pictures and books” the “keynote to our companionship.” Loeser’s exclusion as a Jew is described as “a privilege” (PP 215) — even though “he seemed to have no friends,” at least among the expats when he lived in Florence, or even at Harvard (PP 217). Surely one has to wonder how well Santayana could have really known Charles Loeser. And then there is the anti-Semitic generalization we see right at this point in the text. Clearly Santayana must not have been well acquainted with many (any?) Jews of the more ordinary variety. Rather, “most of them squirm and fawn and wish to pass for ordinary Christians or ordinary atheists.”

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In short, we should surely recognize that constraints of class and race might limit the scope of the “excellences” Santayana could even imagine, especially in Gilded Age Boston. This seems baked right into his theory of essences. Of course it is hard to fault him for not having broken down the social, economic and racial barriers of his own day. The point is that Santayana’s own emotionally based philosophical sensibilities made recognition of those invisible excellences inaccessible to him. This raises the question as to how his own philosophy of life, practiced as Santayana himself seems to have practiced it, could fare in our own day. How much would get retained once it gets reappropriated “under a different sky” (SAF x)?

So let’s imagine Santayana existing under the “sky” of multiculturalism in our own day. Here I’m reminded of an anti-racism training I sat in on a while back. There was a fair amount in those sessions which I didn’t agree with, but what I learned was appreciation for a kind of excellence I hadn’t been able to clearly imagine before (except in a bad light and at a great distance). For maybe the first time, I listened to what it was like -- experientially, from African-Americans themselves -- to deal with a host of racially based slights and insults, for a mother to have a conversation warning her teenage son of how to behave towards law enforcement, and then to watch him go out the door, day after day, not being sure if she’d ever see him again. And I could begin to imagine the kind of excellence of character it would take, to work through that anxiety on a daily basis and still forge a life of joy and meaning. To really imagine these life experiences would surely require many of us to work through our own anxieties — and not detaching ourselves from them! Is this something Santayana would even attempt?

I suppose one might ask, why should he? Should we hold him morally accountable for not doing so? I doubt it. But that’s not my point here. The pressing question is less about him than about us. In our own day, to what extent should we wish to aspire to a life that Santayana’s philosophy describes?

The complication this presents, both for Santayana and for us, is captured by an observation by Timothy Sprigge, as he comments on the features that make up “the distinctiveness of American philosophy.” These features include not only feeling as the basis of ethical assessment, but also the idea that “one cannot truly grasp the fact that something is a value for someone else [e.g., one cannot be *just*] without its becoming something of a value for oneself” (Sprigge 1980, 213). That is to say, not only can we not really understand Santayana without his philosophy becoming a value for us: we cannot even imagine the excellence of those who struggle in an entirely different arena of life, without being able to take in what their story really is — anxieties and all. Otherwise, we’re not being as charitable as possible to “other types of excellence.” Justice is a matter of the heart and not only of the intellect.

Realizing this might count as an advantageous upgrade of Santayana’s way of living. But if we do aspire to this, it seems to me, we need to abandon one way of thinking about “Santayana’s way of life, and ours” (Rubin, 2014). We are not just “travelers” through life. And neither I think was Santayana.Even though he describes his life as that of a traveler rather than a pilgrim (Saatkamp 2021, 54-55), was he always the traveler he describes in his Hermes essay? Wasn’t this Santayana in retrospect (so to speak), reflecting not just on how his life had actually evolved, but also on the meaning those early stages held for the person he had already turned into? Even as he became more at home in his travels, we know that he suffered during extended periods — especially during the early months of the Great War, when “the confused rumble of civilization” was anything but “pleasant to [Hermes’] ears” (HI, 261). He writes on August 3, 1914, that “the strain and excitement of these events is terrible. I don’t know what to expect nor even what to hope for”[[4]](#footnote-4); and then after that: “…this terrible situation in Europe made me quite sick and speechless, as if I had lost some dear friend”[[5]](#footnote-5); and even after: “I am now very restless, hardly knowing which way to turn, what to wish or to hope for or what to expect. My plans are upset and my sympathies lacerated”[[6]](#footnote-6); and then still (two months later) that “the war is the only thing in my thoughts — painfully persistent, like a night-mare.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Finally in December he writes that “the War has destroyed my moral [sic]…more than I thought anything could…”[[8]](#footnote-8)And even years later, he reports being “attacked” by “nervousness and distress” when he could not decide to whether to leave Rome for Avila in the period around 1928.[[9]](#footnote-9) He had not succeeded in detaching himself from anxieties -- yet. He was still a work in process. He was not just “traveling though” all this. He was struggling.

Now this last incident from 1928 may have been a calculated exaggeration on Santayana’s part, having to do with some family complications.[[10]](#footnote-10)  Of course nothing is certain in such matters of interpretation and especially when a commentator is seeking to understand a figure they admire and when (for the best Spriggean reasons) they seek to make that author’s values their own. The line between historiography and hagiography is not always easy to discern because textual interpretation is a beckoning well — one any of us might peer into, only to discover our own faces staring back at us. (This is a familiar image from historical Jesus research.[[11]](#footnote-11)) In other words, unless we are to believe that the historical Santayana himself was a gnostic avatar of some kind, there seems to me to be quite plausible evidence for a rather obvious point. Even for George Santayana, detachment was not equally possible at all moments of his life. He says it himself — that “my *eventual* metanoia … may be seen *in the slow change* that appeared in my way of living” (PP 422, emphasis added).

So I’m suggesting here that, overall, Santayana’s deepest internal struggles did not get much reflected in his own recounting, and the reason is that Santayana’s whole life project was to distance himself from those struggles. His own writing was his training platform. As Horace Kallen remarked: “The man had no companions, he talked to himself. He talked to himself with a pen” (quoted in Lamont 1959, 89). Yet he does eventually seem to manage it – even in the difficult war years in Rome (Rubin 2014, 53). And this fact alone certainly offers evidence. But this is not evidence that he had been magnificently untroubled all along, as his own self-narrative (for the most part) likes to insinuate. It is evidence for a much more remarkable conclusion. It was an immense *accomplishment* over the years to have gotten anywhere near that depicted equanimity. Though he may not have set specific “ultimate or final goals” (Saatkamp 2021, 48), he had to have been aware of what was at stake, and he had to have stayed excruciatingly attentive to what was working for him and what was not. He was constantly vigilant, like a watchman, as he wrote to himself and let others gaze through that window.

So what does this mean for Santayana’s personal ethics? I think that throughout his life, Santayana nurtured his detachment from the worldly causes of anxiety, including those around him who were so concerned with those worldly affairs. And this had to have included an assiduous detachment from the inner lives of the more unfortunate, who had no choice but to concern themselves with the wretched poverty-stricken world -- lives that must have been quintessentially anxiety-ridden. Otherwise, George Santayana risked losing his own equanimity.

But then, again, when it comes to the viability of that ethic, the question becomes: What about us? As we attempt to live the life our own philosophy describes, are we to be as “charitable” as possible, or not?

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1. Presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (Boston, March 30 2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The full quotation is: ”Mathilde really was all goodness, as Albert was too, only that he had intellect and madness to complicate the goodness” (PP 264). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Santayana suggests that mutual understanding among persons is closely tied to shared cultural affinities – which as a general statement can hardly be disputed. But Santayana draws these boundaries more narrowly than many would today. He insists that “friends have the same social status, so that they may live at ease together and have congenial tastes” and that “contagion is the only source of valid mind-reading: you must imitate to understand, and where the plasticity of two minds is not similar their mutual interpretations are necessarily false” (LW2 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Letter to Susan Sturgis de Sastre, 3 August 1914, Cambridge, England (LGS 2:187). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Letter to Charles Augustus Strong, 5 August 1914, Windsor, England (LGS 2:190). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Letter to Mary Williams Winslow, 16 August 1914, Oxford, England (LGS 2:192). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Letter to Charles Augustus Strong, 29 October 1914, Cambridge, England (LGS 2:199). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Letter to Mary Williams Winslow, 11 December 1914, Cambridge, England (LGS 2:206). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Letter to George Sturgis, 21 February 1928, Rome, Italy (LGS 4:16). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Suggested to me in conversation with Herman Saatkamp. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The image comes from George Tyrrell (1910, 44), in language that Santayana would have found agreeable: “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.” The context of Tyrrell’s discussion however hints that its origin was Alfred Loisy, whom Santayana was reading in his later years (PP 261). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)