

Santayana, Pragmatism, and Knowledge

by Ángel M. Faerna

English Abstract

This paper contradicts the view that Santayana merged a pragmatist epistemology with a philosophic perspective having metaphysical, anthropological, and ethical connotations that diverge from Pragmatism in the most radical way. In the first place, we comment on a general difference between Santayana and Pragmatism concerning “the ideal”. Then we proceed to distinguish two elements in their epistemological analyses: the first one is the naturalistic approach to the operations and interests of knowledge; the second concerns the relation between belief and justification. It will be contended that only the first element links Santayana to Pragmatism, whilst the second led them to radically different conclusions: Santayana’s “naturalistic fictionalism” as opposed to the fallibilistic empiricism which is characteristic of Pragmatism.

Resumen en español

Este trabajo cuestiona la opinión de que en Santayana se aúnan una epistemología pragmatista y una perspectiva filosófica que, en sus implicaciones metafísicas, antropológicas y morales, se distancia del pragmatismo hasta representar su polo opuesto. Empezaremos por comentar una diferencia general entre Santayana y el pragmatismo en lo que se refiere al concepto de “lo ideal”. A continuación distinguiremos dos elementos en sus análisis epistemológicos: el primero es el enfoque naturalista en relación con las operaciones e intereses del conocimiento; el segundo se refiere a la relación entre creencia y justificación. Sostendremos que sólo el primero vincula a Santayana con el pragmatismo, pero el segundo los opone y los encamina hacia conclusiones divergentes: el “ficcionalismo naturalista” de Santayana frente al empirismo falibilista del pragmatismo clásico.

Resumo em português

Este artigo contradiz a opinião segundo a qual Santayana fundiu uma epistemologia pragmatista com uma perspectiva filosófica que, em suas implicações metafísicas, antropológicas e morais se distancia do pragmatismo de maneira totalmente oposta. Primeiramente, começaremos com um comentário sobre a diferença geral entre Santayana e o pragmatismo, no tocante ao conceito de “o ideal”. Em seguida, distinguiremos dois elementos em suas análises epistemológicas: o primeiro é o enfoque naturalista relativamente às operações e aos interesses do conhecimento; o segundo refere-se à relação entre crença e justificação. Sustentaremos que somente o primeiro elemento liga Santayana ao pragmatismo, ao passo que o segundo os leva a conclusões radicalmente diferentes: o “ficcionalismo naturalista” de Santayana frente ao empirismo falibilista do pragmatismo clássico.

There seems to be some grounds for including George Santayana in a list of authors within a conference on “Pragmatism and the Hispanic/Latino World.” On the one hand, Jorge Agustín Nicolás Ruiz de Santayana y Borrás —his real, and really Hispanic, name— was born in Madrid and raised in Ávila within a Spanish family environment (language, costumes, religion) until he was nine years old, when he moved to Boston. He did not speak a word of English upon arriving in America, not a single drop of Anglo-Saxon blood ran through his veins, and he never became a U.S. citizen, but remained a lifelong Spaniard. His entire academic career, on the other hand, took place at Harvard University, where he studied under William James, Josiah Royce, and George Herbert Palmer, eventually becoming one of the most prominent and renowned figures of the golden age of the Harvard Philosophy Department.

This unique combination of Hispanic roots and American education placed Santayana in a privileged position to enact the perfect synthesis of both worlds; it portended a philosophical outlook that could put to the test, if not reconcile, the stresses and strains of such opposite backgrounds. But, surprisingly enough, many of these premonitions were to be disappointed. In the first place, Santayana never felt attuned to the American mind. He resigned his Harvard position in 1912 and left America, never to return. He had been planning his escape for years and accomplished it as soon as he could afford it, at the age of forty-nine. Despite his success as an American philosopher and man of letters, and even though his kindness and friendly character had rewarded him with a number of fond students, sympathetic colleagues, and close friends, his American links proved to be rather weak. But this detachment from his host country did not seem to stem from faithfulness to his native soil either. He was content to be considered an American writer—in fact, he never published a line in his mother tongue; he did not settle in Spain upon returning to Europe, nor did he show a special interest in cultivating Spanish acquaintances (he rather avoided them), and his concern for Spanish affairs and cultural milieu remained superficial. Of course, it would be silly to contend that the Anglo-Latin blend that formed Santayana’s personality did not shape his vital attitude or contribute to his philosophical stance in significant or even decisive ways; but this point may serve as a useful interpretative key in disclosing the underlying currents in Santayana’s soul rather than as the point of departure for his philosophical endeavor or as the source of a conscious intent to adopt a “mixed-blood” perspective.

As for Santayana’s involvement in Pragmatism, which is the issue I comment on in this brief address, the situation is no less ambivalent. Incidental circumstances such as Santayana forming part of the Harvard Philosophy Department during Pragmatism’s gestation, or his close relationship with James and Royce would suggest affinity for the Pragmatic movement. In fact, Santayana’s first major philosophical work, *The Life of Reason* (1905-1906), was generally received as a typically Pragmatic approach to the

evolution of human knowledge and culture. But this initial affinity, if it ever existed, did not survive the subsequent developments in his ideas; more likely it proved to be only a misleading appearance as Santayana found an increasingly pure and self-sufficient expression of his thoughts. This, by the way, allows me to bypass at this point the rather intricate question about continuity within Santayana's philosophy: whether or not *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923)—and the subsequent ontology of “realms of being”—represent a turning point in Santayana's views, it is clear that the echoes of Pragmatism in his work progressively faded over time. It is also noteworthy that every time Santayana made an explicit statement on James's or Dewey's Pragmatism it was intended to criticize or to dismiss their philosophical standpoint.

Finally, Santayana's professed aversion to schools as well as his strong feeling of intellectual independence should be kept in mind in this regard. “My system,” he wrote in the preface to *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, “is no phase of any current movement.”[1] When he left Harvard he was not only escaping from an American institution; his interests could not have been more distant from academic life and professional philosophy in general. This was the reason why he did not attempt to resume his career when he returned to Europe (he refused offers from several universities, including Oxford). It is therefore difficult to tell whether Santayana's willingness to keep his distance from Pragmatism was due to a specific disagreement or if it rather derived from a more general bias against intellectual fashions and a particular taste for aloofness.

Notwithstanding these preliminary reservations, I still believe it is legitimate to broach the question on whether Santayana can be termed a Pragmatist in any acceptable sense, irrespective of his personal idiosyncrasy and beyond the explicit aims of his philosophy. A ready-made answer to this question exists, which many scholars are prone to endorse. They contend that Santayana's account of empirical knowledge is akin to the one provided by Pragmatists, but then concede that he departed from Pragmatism in almost every other respect. I have no objections to the latter view. Indeed, I would dare to summarize the essence of such departure as a radical discrepancy from Pragmatists regarding the function of “the ideal” in human life or in human experience. Allow me to sketch this point a bit further.

Pragmatism is decidedly committed to a depiction of the world in terms of unpredictability and contingency. It was not by chance that opposition to determinism was a common trait in the philosophies of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, this notion being a distinct and fundamental feature of their metaphysical outlook. The flux of events in the world is not a manifestation of an overarching order possessing definite meaning. Hence our actions and values are submitted to a high degree of uncertainty and to forms of justification that are always precarious and provisional. It is on this essential openness and lack of self-direction of the world that Pragmatism, notably Dewey's, built its characteristic conception of human action as an interactive process of reconstruction and control of empirically delimited situations by

projecting innovative and revisable ends on them. Facts and values, means and ends are thus interwoven within our experience of the world. Human contribution brings purpose in the world and renders our experience of it intelligible and meaningful. In this sense ideals are not just agreeable dreams or a convenient refuge for the spiritual mind, but effective agencies within the world itself—a world, of course, in which the old dualism of matter and spirit no longer applies and where “the trail of the human serpent is over everything,” to quote James’s famous phrase.

It is precisely this equation of the world with the experienced world, or with the world as it is experienced, that Santayana rejected in the metaphysics of James and Dewey. In his mind this was blatant egotism, a symptom of the philosophical disease that he called “the dominance of the foreground.”[2] Santayana was content to agree that contingency governs the world. As a matter of fact, he made this point even more sharply than did the Pragmatists themselves. However, because of his straightforward materialism he was not willing to accept that the “realm of spirit” could interfere in any way whatsoever with the “realm of matter.” Spirit is a by-product of matter, though a totally ineffective one because, being immaterial, it does not exist but belongs to another realm of being altogether. Its intuitions are kindled by the animal body wherein it dwells, “lost in its mists and passions, and thinking itself to give and to receive the blows,”[3] and there it beholds the illusions created by the external relations of the bodily organs.

The mere idea that human endeavors can give direction to the course of events, imposing purposes to its independent flux, is simply excluded from such a metaphysical setting. Of course, for the engaged animal—that is, for us while we are living rather than thinking—this metaphysical persuasion is nothing but idle talk. Thus, in such moods, it is perfectly wise to cling to the habits and values that enable us to cope in practical terms with the vicissitudes of animal life. But these habits and values should not be taken with ultimate seriousness. Our achievements are simply a gracious concession of the indifferent world when we happen to bow to its unfathomable ways. They do not prove in the least that we can trace out its course. In other words, thought is, at most, apt to accept the world as it is, but it falls far short of improving it. The life of spirit can transcend this impotence only at the price of departing from the world and enjoying its own chimerical fruits. This was a price that Santayana did not find exorbitant inasmuch as he believed that the world was worthy for “the intuitions it can suggest, rather than for the wilderness of facts that compose it.”[4]

Thus the ideal both transcends and reaffirms our helpless condition. It placates the pains of living not by suggesting intelligent reconstruction but by inviting sceptical contemplation. But Santayana’s strong sense of realism tinges with irony this appeal to live in the ideal while accepting the ugliness of things. As Michael Hodges and John Lachs have remarked, “the acceptance and the transcendence cancel out each other’s claims to absoluteness, leaving a tragic sense of life or at least a pervasive sadness at the fleeting beauty that surrounds us.”[5] I am not sure whether the authors had the

Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno in mind when they used the expression “the tragic sense of life” but in finding some Spanish echoes for Santayana’s attitude toward the ideal I would rather turn to Cervantes’s deep understanding of the comic element that pervades our human aspiration to achieving the best. “Life,” Santayana said, “is a succession of second bests.”[6] When he declared that “the joke of things is one at our expense. It is very funny, but it is exceedingly unpleasant,”[7] one cannot help but recall the battered bones of Don Quixote. The topic of acceptance, in turn, finds inspiration in Spinoza (a Sephardic Jew of Hispanic origin) and Lucretius (a Latin), who Santayana listed as his favorite philosophers. If these are traces of Hispanic-Latino sediments in Santayana’s sensibility, then it must be admitted that they are utterly at odds with Pragmatism’s belief in the prerogatives of thought. According to Santayana, the ineffectiveness of thought is so patent that materialists have always been tempted to ignore thought, but “it remained for American optimists to turn their scorn of useless thought into a glad denial of its existence.”[8] What Santayana wants to stress is that useless thought not only exists, but is actually the only kind of thought there is.

I am not arguing that metaphysics caused Santayana and Pragmatism to part ways. If I emphasize metaphysical disagreements, it is only because contrasts appear there in their crudest form. Things were actually the other way around: in Santayana, as well as in James and Dewey, the search for a metaphysical framework was but a late effort to bring together a rich and varied body of preceding philosophical views into a single overarching picture. Such views were so different in perspective and accent that they led to incompatible metaphysical landscapes. In fact, divergences between Santayana and the Pragmatists reach back to the very meaning of philosophy itself. Pragmatism took a critical stance against the “pure philosophical theorist”; it urged philosophy to get rid of vain speculation and turn to the practical problems of life. In contrast, Santayana was at ease with the traditional theoretical approach to philosophical questions and did not believe in the socially transformative function of philosophy. For all his controversies with Bertrand Russell, Santayana was much closer to him than he was to John Dewey in this regard. Indeed, both Santayana and Russell criticized Dewey on a similar basis of underlying perplexity and incomprehension at the tasks that Pragmatism had claimed were properly philosophical.

I believe these remarks invite one to reconsider the widespread opinion that Santayana and Pragmatism were committed, in spite of so many and such deep differences, to virtually the same analysis of human knowledge. If this were the case, should it not mean that such analysis was incapable of making a difference somewhere else? If Santayana had managed to incorporate a Pragmatic epistemology into his profoundly anti-Pragmatic overview, would it not prove that the Pragmatic account of knowledge was meaningless precisely because it did not pass the “pragmatic test of meaning”? To avoid drawing this awkward conclusion we need to undermine, or at least to qualify, the opinion in question.

To that effect, I think it is useful to separate two different elements in the

Pragmatic account of empirical knowledge. The first could be called the naturalistic element. By “naturalism” I simply mean the general view that cognitive functions are of the very same nature as any other organic capacity in the human animal. These functions have been shaped within the same process of biological evolution, they contribute to the same material needs, and they serve the same general purpose of adjusting organic behavior as a response to environmental conditions. According to this naturalistic standpoint there are no “interests of knowledge” that could be ultimately distinguished from the general interest that every organism has in making its way through the world and more or less thriving in the midst of things. Santayana was converted early to this Darwinian faith, as all Pragmatist philosophers were and, of course, many non-Pragmatists as well. He insisted on the inseparability of knowledge and action no less than Pragmatists did, and opposed similar arguments against traditional appeals to a purely theoretical impulse emerging from an abstract entity called “reason.” It goes without saying that such a naturalistic approach is what one would expect from Santayana’s undisguised materialism.

The second element I would like to differentiate within the Pragmatic perspective on knowledge is properly logical. It relates to the epistemic status of belief; in other words, to notions like truth and justification and how they hang together conceptually. In this regard Pragmatism maintained that there was an immanent relationship between belief and truth, that is, that our conception of truth is just the conception of a belief that satisfies a certain set of (perhaps only ideally) ascertainable conditions. Peirce, James, and Dewey put forward different descriptions of the conditions that would render a belief true, and they accordingly diverged on important, albeit partial, aspects of the definition of truth, but they undoubtedly shared the fundamental thesis that truth transcendent to belief is meaningless.

In contrast, the rejection of this very thesis is the most prominent characteristic of Santayana’s conception of truth. For example:

Truth is not an opinion, even an ideally true one; because besides the limitation in scope which human opinions, at least, can never escape, even the most complete and accurate opinion would give precedence to some terms, and have a direction of survey; and this direction might be changed or reversed without lapsing into error; so that the truth is the field which various true opinions traverse in various directions, and no opinion itself. An even more impressive difference between truth and any true discourse is that discourse is an event; it has a date not that of its subject-matter, even if the subject-matter be existential and roughly contemporary; ... whereas truth is dateless and absolutely identical whether the opinions which seek to reproduce it arise before or after the event which the truth describes.[9]

It was on this basis that Santayana reproached Pragmatists for having confused truth with correctness, the former being an eternal and absolute property of some essences (i.e., propositions) and the latter a temporal and relative character of opinions (i.e.,

events). While the correctness of an opinion may well be translated into a Pragmatic function, the truth of an essence is wholly independent of the fact that somebody may assent to it in actual or possible discourse, and therefore of whatever practical consequences such essence might have if it were believed and acted on. That there is actually any confusion at all here depends on whether one can make sense of “truth” as something totally disconnected from definite standards of justification and, more generally, from human evaluations of any sort. Santayana’s answer to this question was categorical: “Truth ... is indifferent to being praised or possessed by anybody”; “in fact the truth has a superhuman status; so that an absence of true opinions or criteria would not in the least abolish it.”[10] The Pragmatists’ response, in turn, was equally firm but went in the opposite direction: “Truth *ante rem* means only verifiability ... or else it is a case of the stock rationalist trick of treating the *name* of a concrete phenomenal reality as an independent prior entity, and placing it behind the reality as its explanation.”[11]

Thus in order to answer our question (were Santayana and Pragmatism really committed to virtually the same analysis of human knowledge?) we only need to ask what follows when these opposing logical standpoints, Pragmatism’s conception of truth as immanent to belief on one hand, and Santayana’s defense of absolute truth on the other, are combined with the naturalistic element mentioned above. Naturalism repudiates “Cartesian” epistemologies in both their foundationalist and representationalist commitments. When knowledge is framed as an element coordinated within the whole system of organic (sensitive, affective-motor, evaluative, and so on) mechanisms that facilitate increasingly successful adjustments between the individual and the pressing world, it is, to put it in Richard Rorty’s words, “hard to imagine that at a certain point in the evolutionary process, somewhere between the squids and the apes, these patterns [of complex behavior] began to be determined by inner representations, having previously been determined by mere neurological configurations.”[12]

Indeed, the interpretation of true beliefs as habits of action or patterns of complex behavior that have proven to be useful in coping with the world rather than as accurate representations of it lay at the bottom of both Santayana’s repudiation of “literal truth” as well as James’s and Dewey’s criticism of the “copy-theory of truth” and encouraged similar analyses of empirical knowledge along nonrepresentationalist, instrumentalist lines. But Santayana’s commitment to the idea of absolute truth led him further to redescribe true beliefs themselves as illusions of a harmless type. In this redescription our concepts become a sort of mythology, a vocabulary of anthropomorphic metaphors projected onto a world that remains recondite and unintelligible because of its essential heterogeneity with human discourse. Measured by the standard of absolute truth, then, every description of the world is equally false, or at least is equally poetic, a poetic commentary on the life of nature flowing on its own and absolutely unconcerned. This fictionalism is utterly consistent with that metaphysical split between the ideal and the factual that Santayana so emphatically asserted; indeed, it constitutes its

epistemological corollary. But it is also, in my view, far from fitting in with a Pragmatic interpretation of knowledge. At the very least, it is at odds with the robust empiricism of classical Pragmatists like John Dewey and William James, though, ironically enough, it may be closer to more recent versions of Pragmatism wherein empiricism has dissolved in discourse and discourse itself is no longer granted to have a firm grasp on the world. Santayana once suggested that gnats would believe in the flux of Heraclitus while barnacles would adhere to Parmenides' unshakable foundations of being,[13] only to mock our foolish pretension of arriving at a true image of the world by surveying the ways that we experience it. I suspect that he would have welcomed Rortyan squids as a new species of metaphysicians who cleverly admit that all images are drawn with the ink of their own discourse.

In "The Will to Believe" William James put forward a fairly simple taxonomy of epistemological parties.[14] "Dogmatists" believe that some truth is attainable; "sceptics" do not. Dogmatists, in turn, are subdivided into two groups: "absolutists" who claim that some beliefs bear the unmistakable mark of their own truth, and "empiricists" who dismiss such infallible recognition of true belief. For Santayana, even an ideally true belief is bound to be mere illusion, as are all products of the human mind. Human truth will thus always remain a second best. I find this ultimate skepticism in Santayana's epistemology quite incompatible with the empiricist/fallibilist attitude of classical Pragmatism.

Notes

[1] George Santayana, *Skepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy* [SAF] (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), viii.

[2] George Santayana, "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics" [DNM], *Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1925): 673-88, 678.

[3] Santayana, SAF, 286.

[4] Santayana, SAF, 171.

[5] Michael P. Hodges and John Lachs, *Thinking in the Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 11.

[6] Letter to George Sturgis, July 9, 1934, *The Letters of George Santayana*, Book Five (1933-1936), ed. W. G. Holzberger, 125, in *The Works of George Santayana, Volume V*, eds. W. G. Holzberger and H. J. Saatkamp Jr. (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003).

[7] Letter to Henry Ward Abbott, January 16, 1887, *The Letters of George Santayana*, Book One ([1868]-1909), ed. W. G. Holzberger, 44, in Holzberger and Saatkamp, eds., *The Works of George Santayana, Volume V*.

[8] Santayana, DNM, 676.

[9] Santayana, SAF, 268.

[10] George Santayana, *Realms of Being* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 543 and 529.

[11] William James, *Pragmatism: The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 105 (*Pragmatism*, Lecture VI: "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth").

[12] Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 20.

[13] Santayana, *SAF*, 29.

[14] William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), § V.