



## **Scepticism and Animal Faith**

*George Santayana*

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In this work, Santayana analyzes the nature of the knowing process and demonstrates by means of clear, powerful arguments how we know and what validates our knowledge. The central concept of his philosophy is found in a careful discrimination between the awareness of objects independent of our perception and the awareness of essences attributed to objects by our mind, or between what Santayana calls the realm of *existents* and the realm of *subsistents*. Since we can never be certain that these attributes actually inhere in a substratum of existents, skepticism is established as a form of belief, but animal faith is shown to be a necessary quality of the human mind. Without this faith there could be no rational approach to the necessary problem of understanding and surviving in this world.

Santayana derives this practical philosophy from a wide and fascinating variety of sources. He considers critically the positions of such philosophers as Descartes, Euclid, Hume, Kant, Parmenides, Plato, Pythagoras, Schopenhauer, and the Buddhist school as well as the assumptions made by the ordinary man in everyday situations. Such matters as the nature of belief, the rejection of classical idealism, the nature of intuition and memory, symbols and myth, mathematical reality, literary psychology, the discovery of essence, sublimation of animal faith, the implied being of truth, and many others are given detailed analyses in individual chapters.

## Scepticism and Animal Faith Details

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## Lynne King says

“All belief, Santayana writes, is “a form of some faith in animal, material existence.” What Santayana calls “animal faith,” is the instinctive (if you will) and unavoidable tendency for human actions to betray a deep belief in the existence of matter. On Santayana’s account, one cannot act without believing in matter. According to Santayana, the denial in speech or dialectical skepticism of the existence of matter is a solipsistic, momentary pose. So philosophers like Descartes and Berkeley are transcendental posers, inflexibly denying in theory what they unhesitatingly affirm in practice. Worse yet, however, these Moderns conflate functional orientations of the mind which Santayana respectively distinguishes as “intuition” and “intent.”

I wanted to read this book because I was intrigued by the title and especially the “Animal Faith” shown in it. But what a kaleidoscope of philosophical ideas were opened up to me; some were excellent but others I really had no idea what the author was attempting to discuss. I realize that philosophy is drawn from many different interpretations that have come into the literature over the years but really it is purely all down to a question of who is interpreting what. Santayana seemed to me, à priori, to be the person who could help me in this respect.

This author had everything going for him: he was involved in evolutionary theory and metaphysical naturalism, was a true man of letters and finally was an “early adherent of epiphenomenalism.” And what a splendid word that is. For those of you, including me, who have never heard of this word, it means:

“Epiphenomenalism is a position in the philosophy of mind according to which mental states or events are caused by physical states or events in the brain but do not themselves cause anything.”

And I am none the wiser for reading that I must confess.

Probably the most well-known sentences of Santayana’s is also one of the least accurately quoted: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (The Life of Reason: Reason in Common Sense. Scribner’s, 1905: 284). Even that sentence confused me. How can you possibly repeat something if you cannot remember it in the first place? Surely that’s highly illogical.

What can one say about this obviously multi-talented individual? Well I can certainly say something. He has “encouraged me to begin to think”. Yes, think. I’m a “reader.” I have been since the age of four but there’s reading and then there’s reading. I read for pleasure pre-Goodreads but now I search for enlightenment. A strange word in my vocabulary I must confess and thoroughly out of character with me. Nevertheless, we sometimes arrive at an unanticipated crossroad in our life on this incredible planet of ours when we don’t know which direction to take and now I have an inkling in which direction I would like to travel.

I’m currently becoming more and more fascinated with the idea of “illusion” but it is so abstract and unless one can get some form of scientific proof, which of course you cannot with philosophy, I will only ever find out its meaning, if I ever do, when I either pass into death, go into another dimension, etc. I’m open to anything really.

I may not agree with many of the things that Mr Santayana advocates such as self, essence and psyche, but what I do know is that he’s removed some of the scales from my eyes.

My disappointment, however, with this book is that parts of it were far too complicated for me. I would read a paragraph and not understand it, try a second time and then a third time and so the way I was going, I soon realized I would still be reading this book in a couple of years' time and so what was the solution? The only thing possible; I skim read the incomprehensible sections and stayed with lighter elements such as "self", "essence" and "psyche" as mentioned above but even those proved to be contradictory at times.

In summary, did I enjoy this book? Yes and no as it was a hard course to travel over. Some of the hurdles were unsurmountable but there were some excellent facets to this work and in a strange kind of way I'm glad that I read it, purely to attempt to unravel the amazing mind of one highly gifted philosopher.

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## **Erin says**

This book is extremely hard to read. Most of the concepts I already believe so it was easy enough to follow along, but the author gets really far out there with some of his ideals.

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## **Roy Lotz says**

### **Who was Santayana?**

Santayana has long attracted my curiosity. He just has so many things going for him.

For one, his background is interesting: a Spanish citizen who grew up in Boston, and whose professional career was spent at Harvard during its golden age, alongside William James and Josiah Royce. Like Nabokov, he learned English as a second language; also like Nabokov, he was a fantastic writer of English prose. His philosophy is as unique as his background: a personal statement far removed from the technical problems of his discipline. And in addition to authoring several influential philosophical works, he was also a man of letters, penning a best-selling novel and autobiography. He belonged to no country and no philosophical school. He was an individual.

Seeking an entry point into the writings of this half-forgotten sage, I picked up this book: *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. This is meant to be a critical introduction to a longer work that Santayana later wrote on metaphysics, *The Realms of Being*. But nowadays this book is more often read than its hefty sequel. It is a rich text. Santayana manages to compress an epistemological argument into just over 300 pages.

The first thing the reader will notice is Santayana's writing style, which is elegant, humane, and often poetic:

*Here is one more system of philosophy. If the reader is tempted to smile, I can assure him that I smile with him... My endeavor is to think straight in such terms as are offered to me, to clear my mind of cant and free it from the cramp of artificial traditions; but I do not ask any one to think in my terms if he prefers others. Let him clean better, if he can, the windows of his soul, that the variety and beauty of the prospect may spread more brightly before him.*

He also has a knack for aphorisms. "Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer."

But lurking underneath this melodious stream of words is quite a sophisticated philosophical argument. Ironically, Santayana's eloquence actually makes him harder to understand than other, less literary, writers. He takes pains to clothe his thoughts in fine words, when more cumbersome and less artful language would actually make his point easier to grasp. By the time that I got halfway through this book, I felt uncertain that I was following his argument.

Seeking guidance, I picked up John Lachs's *On Santayana*, which is a marvelous little book that I recommend to anybody struggling. For what it's worth, I put my own attempted summary in this review.

### **Santayana in a Nutshell**

Santayana was a realist, a materialist, a naturalist, and an epiphenomenalist. By realist I mean that he believed that reality existed independently of it being perceived. He is a materialist in that he thinks that matter, not mind, is the fundamental stuff of nature. He is a naturalist in that he thinks scientific investigation is the only valid explanation for the universe; that natural laws, not supernatural principles, are what govern reality.

Epiphenomenalism is just a fancy word indicating the view that mind is distinct *from* matter, but fully and totally dependent *on* matter. Someone who holds this view believes that mental events cannot possibly influence or affect material events. For example, you see a bear; the sight of the bear triggers a flight-or-flight mechanism in your limbic system; you run away. Subjectively you have the experience of seeing, of feeling fear, and of deciding to run away. But your body performs this action because of things happening in your brain, which fully determine the things that happen in your mind; not the reverse.

Think of foam on the top of an ocean wave. The foam only appears if the wave is tall and fast enough. The presence of this foam has no effect on the height or speed of the wave; it is a byproduct of certain conditions. This is what an epiphenomenalist thinks of the body (the wave) and the mind (the foam).

These are his general conclusions; so how does he arrive at them?

### **Santayana's Epistemology**

Like Descartes, Santayana starts the book by doubting everything that can be doubted. But Santayana finds—to his and our astonishment—that he can doubt himself out of existence. He doesn't get himself down to just a transcendental ego, like Descartes or Husserl; instead, at the end of Santayana's doubting, all that remains is pure appearance.

Perhaps 'doubt' isn't quite the right word for this kind of radical skepticism, since the word is too active; a better term would be 'letting go.' Santayana's ultimate skeptic is completely and totally engrossed by pure appearance. Like a sage having a mystical vision, the experience absorbs him entirely—so entirely that the idea of him somehow being a distinct entity, or somehow possessing a quality called 'existence', couldn't even be thought.

There's no logical or philosophical way to return from this kind of skepticism. There is no argument that can be made; no kind of being that can be posited. The ultimate skeptic exists in a timeless, egoless ecstasy of images.

The thrust of this argument is that the Cartesian method of arguing outward from a condition of doubt can't work; it's an insoluble puzzle.

But clearly most people—including most philosophers—don't doubt themselves senseless. They eat, drink, go to the bathroom, and fall in love. Idealists (who think all is mental) still enjoy eating spaghetti; anti-realists (who don't think anything exists independently of perception) still run out of the way of oncoming traffic. Underneath all of the varied customs in history and around the world, in spite of all the different philosophies concerning the nature of reality, certain fundamental assumptions are constant to human behavior. And these assumptions, taken together, Santayana calls *animal faith*.

For example, one influential idea in the history of philosophy is phenomenism. This is the view of knowledge which holds that, since we can never experience something that isn't a perception, it is illogical to posit something that is 'behind' or 'responsible for' the perception, which in itself cannot be perceived. No such unperceivable object is necessary, they argue; the perception is self-sufficient. Imagine an apple. Now remove the color; now remove the texture; now remove the shape; now remove the taste; now remove the smell. What's left? Nothing. Therefore (argue phenomenologists) an apple is merely a collection of sensations; nothing more.

Santayana responds by saying, of course we can never perceive something that isn't perceivable; that much is obvious. And of course we can't have evidence for something we didn't observe; that would be a contradiction. But nobody acts on the phenomenalist assumption; nobody acts as though sensations constitute all reality; we all assume that *substance* exists. Now, Santayana uses the word 'substance' to indicate the thing that exists independently of it being perceived. He doesn't mean that substance is metaphysical, distinct from physical objects; to the contrary, Santayana thinks that substance is a name for the fundamental constituents of matter—whatever they might be.

It is a tenet of animal faith that things are more than mere sensations. Nobody thinks that, if they were standing in front of an oncoming trolley, closing their eyes and plugging their ears would make it disappear. And we all consider children to be the same individuals as the adults they eventually become—a gratuitous assumption, in the phenomenalist view, since the sensations associated with the person have changed entirely. If you left your house to go to work, and returned to find that a large tree had fallen and crushed it, I bet you wouldn't conclude that the house was a certain set of sensations when you left, and is now a different set of sensations. Rather, we all assume that the tree which fell in the forest did make a sound (or at least made vibrations travel through the air) and did destroy your house—even though you weren't around to hear and see it.

Santayana's point is that we believe in substance not for logical reasons, nor for experiential reasons; in fact, as far as logic and experience go, the phenomenalist argument is quite compelling. But we *can't help* believing in substance. It is an assumption that is inescapable. All attempts to doubt substance presuppose it. And any philosophical criticisms of substance are bound to be hypocritical, since the philosopher who offers the criticism also operates via animal faith.

So the task of epistemology, Santayana argues, is merely to describe these fundamental beliefs that make up animal faith. We all already assume and act as if knowledge is possible; that experience can be trusted; that reality is more than sensation or ideas. So all epistemological inquiries into the possibility of knowledge are bloodless, academic exercises—the wild play of the imagination when sophistry is embraced. These arguments are as far removed from reality as the wildest myths.

Santayana's realization that he must believe certain things in order to function, regardless of their logical

cogency, leads him to his materialism, his naturalism, and his realism.

This more or less sums up Santayana's epistemological argument. What is his metaphysical argument? I confess that I found this aspect of his thinking both harder to understand and to accept. But I'll do my best to explain it.

### Santayana's Metaphysics

Santayana thinks that there is not one simple type of being, but four distinct types of being: matter, essence, truth, and spirit. His conceptualizations of truth, matter, and spirit are hardly touched upon in this volume. Santayana spends most of his time explaining his notion of essence. His definition of essence, however, I find puzzling.

Before I muddle things up, here are some of the ways Santayana defines essence:

*The realm of essence is not peopled by choice forms or magic powers. It is simply the unwritten catalogue, prosaic and infinite, of all the characters possessed by such things as happen to exist, together with the characters which all different things would possess if they existed. It is the sum of mentionable objects, of terms about which, or in which, something might be said.*

Later, he says "*distinction, infinitely minute and indelible distinction from everything else, is what essence means.*" I don't know about you, but I'm still confused. Is an essence a potential object of experience? Is essence an adjective that isn't necessarily attached to a noun? A disembodied quality? But Santayana thinks that essences exist independently of both mind and matter; they are eternal and infinite. But how could a quality exist independently of a perceiving mind to take note of it?

This quote made it more clear to me: "*Substance is the speaker and substance is the theme; intuition is only the act of speaking or hearing, and the given essence is the audible word.*" Let us recall Santayana's view of the mind. Santayana thinks consciousness is an inner myth; that our experiences are quite literally fiction. But it is fiction that allows us to operate in the world.

When we see the color red, for example, we see a completely arbitrary mental representation of a certain wavelength of electromagnetic radiation. This representation is neither true nor false; it is a sort of visual symbol that indicates to you that something is in your environment. It is confirmed in experience when you point to a stop sign and say "that's red," and your friends agree with you. Similarly, the smell of spaghetti and meatball is an arbitrary mental representation of the atoms and molecules that are buzzing through the air and hitting your nostrils. Whether this is the 'true' smell of the spaghetti is besides the point; what matters is that this smell reliably indicates the presence of delicious food that makes your belly feel full and doesn't poison your body. In summary, sensations are signposts that tell you what to do and where to go; they aren't the things themselves.

Words are also arbitrary signs. The word 'red' is normally not printed in red ink; and the words 'spaghetti and meatballs' don't smell like spaghetti and meatballs.

Now imagine there's somebody near you speaking a foreign language. At least you *think* it's a foreign language. For all you know, it could be meaningless gibberish. The only thing you know for sure is that it's speech. You listen to the speech; but instead of listening as you usually do—interpreting the audible sounds into various meanings—you listen to the pure sound of it. In other words, instead of paying attention to the

significance of the sign, you pay attention to the qualities of the sign itself.

The pure qualities of sensations are, I think, what Santayana is getting at with his term 'essence'. The pure experience of red; the pure smell of spaghetti and meatballs. By 'pure' I mean the qualities of the sensation as a sensation—not purporting to signify something beyond the sensation. They are the qualities that differentiate one sensation from another. The visual qualities that make the letter *A* what it is are its essence. Every shade of red has its own essence. Every possible object of experience has its own essence—often multiple.

### **Parting Thought**

In case you haven't already guessed from this laborious summary, I found this book extremely engrossing. I must wait until I read his *Realms of Being* to pronounce on his metaphysics. But as an epistemological notion, I find "animal faith" extremely useful—and worth revisiting.

One of the things I most like about Santayana is his constant concern with the lived ramifications of philosophy:

My criticism is not a learned pursuit, though habit may sometimes make my language scholastic; it is not a choice between artificial theories; it is the discipline of my daily thoughts and the account I actually give to myself from moment to moment of my own being and of the world around me.

But to this humane and classical conception of philosophy, Santayana adds a considerable amount of dialectical sophistication. Thus in the same breath his system is convincing and vital.

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### **Veronica Mueller says**

This is an excellent introduction to George Santayana's philosophy. His epiphenomenalistic approach to the world reinforces his non-reductive naturalism as well as sets the stage for the further development of his system of philosophy 'The Realms of Being.'

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### **Maurizio Mancò says**

"Lo spettacolo della follia altrui risveglia continuamente in me il sospetto che io pure sono certamente pazzo; e il carattere delle credenze che mi si impongono – la natura fantastica dello spazio e del tempo, il guazzabuglio grottesco della natura, la beffa crudele chiamata religione e le passioni assurde dell'umanità – tutto m'invita a disfarmene e a dire a quello che chiamo mondo: «E ora fatti avanti; come puoi aspettarti che io creda in *te*?»." (p. 33)

"L'io è una sorgente di gioia, di follia e di tristezza, una creatura che cresce e decresce, stupita e sognante in mezzo a un vasto mondo naturale, di cui coglie solo poche fuggevoli ed eccentriche prospettive." (p. 131)

