

## George Santayana on Liberalism and the Spiritual Life

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ANYONE WHO CONSULTS THE ARCHIVES of the late philosopher Eric Voegelin can read the surprising, and to some minds frustrating, letter that Voegelin wrote to the historian George H. Nash. Nash, who had just completed work on *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America*, had written to Voegelin for a photograph to include in the book. The letter Nash received in reply could not have been anticipated: "Just because I am not stupid enough to be a liberal," Voegelin responded tersely, "does not mean that I am stupid enough to be a conservative." And so the attempt to label this great contemporary defender of ordered liberty a "conservative" was frustrated. Nash nevertheless included Voegelin in his book—appropriately, it seems to me—but the use of the label had to be dropped.

The situation is similar with another important figure in the history of conservatism: the philosopher and man of letters George Santayana (1863-1952), whom Russell Kirk includes in *The Conservative Mind*. While in later editions Kirk's work was subtitled "From Burke to Eliot," in its first edition the subtitle read, "From Burke

to Santayana." Santayana was in many ways a profoundly important American conservative, even though he was neither wholly American nor perfectly conservative. Indeed, this Spanish-born writer once described himself as "a Mephistopheles masquerading as a conservative." He defended the past because "once it had been victorious and had brought something beautiful to light;" but he was in no way wedded to the past.<sup>1</sup> Writing to Sidney Hook in the 1930s, Santayana claimed that

I am not a conservative in the sense of being afraid of revolutions, like Hobbes, or thinking order, *in the sense of peace*, the highest good; and I am not at all attached to things as they are, or as they were in my youth. But I love order in the sense of organized, harmonious, consecrated living; and for this reason I sympathize with the Soviets and Fascists and the Catholics, but not at all with the liberals. I should sympathize with the Nazis too, if their system were, even in theory, founded on reality; but it is Nietzschean, founded on Will: and therefore a sort of romanticism gone mad, rather than a serious organization of material forces—which would be the only way, I think, of securing moral coherence.... I hope that (the Soviets) may succeed in establishing a great new order of society, definite, traditional and self-justified.<sup>2</sup>

These are not the words of any usual

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sort of conservative; but they are, as Kirk understood, the words of a certain kind of conservative. Exactly what kind of conservative was Santayana?

## I

Santayana was born in Madrid to parents who separated only a few years after his birth. He spent most of his boyhood years in Spain, in the Castilian town of Ávila, but at the age of nine he moved to join his mother in Boston, where he attended the Boston Latin School and Harvard College. At Harvard he studied with William James and, after a two-year hiatus in Germany, wrote a dissertation on Rudolf Lotze under the direction of the great American idealist Josiah Royce. He was thus exposed to some of the finest philosophical minds of his age—empiricists, pragmatists, idealists—though he was not especially attached to any of them. In fact, Santayana was not especially attached to anyone or any place, perhaps because of his unusual position as an outsider—a Spaniard and a lapsed (or lapsing) Catholic in a predominantly Protestant environment. His philosophical and literary style was also decidedly his own.

He describes his philosophy in various writings as a variety of materialism, but this characterization can be misleading. Materialism did not mean for Santayana that nothing exists except sensations, or that nothing exists except matter. It meant, rather, that matter is at all times the root cause of occurrences in nature and the *sine qua non* of all human experience. There is, to be sure, an immaterial side to human experience for Santayana—feelings and dreams, moral purposes and spiritual essences. Indeed, it is the immaterial life, the “spiritual life” as he calls it, that makes human existence worthwhile. But for Santayana (contra Plato, for example) ideas are the product of material causes and not the other way around: neither the world nor anything in it is, properly speaking, *caused* by the realm of

Ideas.<sup>3</sup>

Santayana’s materialism is especially misleading if viewed in relation to the “dialectical materialism” of Marx, who famously writes in his *Theses on Feuerbach* that “philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways,” while “the point is to change it.” Santayana’s materialism was in fact precisely the sort of approach to philosophy that Marx was at pains to combat: an understanding of material existence as the precondition for *contemplative* existence. Santayana was uninterested in changing the world; the world as it stood was quite adequate for his purposes. “One has to live in some age, under some fashion,” he writes; “I found, in different times and places, the liberal, the Catholic, and the German air quite possible to breathe; nor, I am sure, would communism be without its advantages to a free mind, and its splendid emotions.”<sup>4</sup> Such placid detachment was not, for Santayana, the achievement of old age; it was a way of life that infused even his earliest writings.

The most notable exception to this irenic political detachment, however, concerns liberalism, the regime in which Santayana actually lived from his arrival in Boston in 1872 until his departure from the United States in 1912. Liberalism, it seemed to him, promised two things, material comfort and moral liberty; but it could deliver on neither of these promises, and tended rather to destroy what traditional order there was in a society. It was thus a dangerous and inhospitable regime, and it sparked his fiercest criticism.

With regard to liberalism’s promise of material comfort, the matter is somewhat paradoxical. For by the end of the nineteenth century, liberalism had “enabled mankind to grow far more numerous and more exacting in its standard of living,” and had “multiplied instruments for saving time and labor.” But by the same token, liberalism had “rendered life more

hurried than ever before and labor more monotonous and in itself less rewarding.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the promise of “moral liberty” had proved illusory. For the true path of liberalism runs toward social homogenization, while moral liberty—which by nature breeds diversity of opinions and manners—could never be tolerated. No one can really desire anything in a liberal regime except what he is *supposed* to desire, Santayana observed in his essay “The Irony of Liberalism”:

If you refuse to move in the prescribed direction, you are not simply different, you are arrested and perverse. The savage must not remain a savage, nor the nun a nun, and China must not keep its wall. If the animals remain animals it is somehow through a failure of the will in them, and very sad. Classic liberty, though only a name for stubborn independence, and obedience to one’s own nature, was too free, in one way, for the modern liberal.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, modern liberalism tends to a truncated and servile way of life, a boring monotony in pursuit of wealth and efficiency as ends in themselves, while its “progressive” morals, though not politically or juridically enforced, are ever more socially binding.

Unlike Marx, however, Santayana never for a moment believed he could topple the liberal state. He recorded his encounter with it in precise prose, criticized its abandonment of true liberty, of tradition and the liberal arts, and tried to preserve for himself an independent life of the mind amidst the wreckage. It is here, both in Santayana’s penetrating insights into the failings of liberalism and his stubborn refusal to abandon the permanent things, that Russell Kirk sees a conservative. What kind of conservative was he? He was a “critical conservative,” according to Kirk, like Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, whose role it was to restrain America from “destroying its own past [and] shattering its own constitution” while at the same time holding out hope for future genera-

tions.<sup>7</sup> “Santayana left America in 1912,” Kirk reports; “he abandoned London and Oxford too, after some years, withdrawing from this vertiginous world, a very old man, to that most conservative of all places: Rome.... He wrote on, nobly sane in a generation of frenzy; and surely the civilization which possessed a Santayana retains some chance for regeneration.”<sup>8</sup>

## II

There is, however, another kind of conservatism afoot in Santayana—one hinted at by Kirk, but not fully developed—and that is a *spiritual* conservatism. In describing Santayana’s conservatism in this way, I am being deliberately ironic. For Americans tend to associate the word “spiritual” almost exclusively with religion, and there was precious little in Santayana’s view of religion to call conservative. But the “spiritual life” for Santayana (the *geistiges Leben*) was not necessarily religious. It was a disposition or an intellectual way of viewing the world; and in this sense it was deeply conservative.

The world, Santayana thought, exists in a state of flux such that nothing is permanent, nothing secure. And while man cannot avoid approaching the world, on one level, through the eyes of an animal—which means approaching it as a series of opportunities, or a series of dangers, to be pursued, avoided, loved, feared, nurtured or neglected—he may also view it through the eyes of the spirit. “Spirit,” writes Santayana,

is a hypostatic unity which makes actual and emotional the merely formal unities or harmonies of bodily life; and since the living psyche is in flux, any actual existence which bridged its processes and relations would have to transcend time in its survey, and not be attached or confined to any of the moments which it overlooked and spanned. Therefore spirit is essentially dateless, and its immediate terms are all essences in themselves eternal...overarching a part of the existential flux.<sup>9</sup>

This sounds rather complicated, but what Santayana means is not complicated at all (though it may seem foreign to some readers). He means that to live spiritually is to view the objects of human experience not in their earthly manifestation, which is fleeting and accidental, but rather as they are grasped immediately by intuition, as essences.

What is an essence? Again, the answer can be as complicated as one likes; but one of the best, and simplest, descriptions comes from the pen of Santayana's personal secretary and long-time philosophical companion, Daniel Cory. Cory had been walking down a mountain road when he observed a beautiful crimson sunset blossoming forth in the direction of Geneva. In time the sunset gave way to a sky of dreadful gray as the night wind blew up from the Rhone. "What a pity," Cory thought, that the "fine crimson has changed into all this depressing gray!" But then it suddenly occurred to him that he was *fundamentally* mistaken. "How could the intrinsic nature—the wonderful peculiarity of that crimson shade—literally *change* into anything other than its own inalienable loveliness?" he wondered. "Crimson is crimson and gray is gray. It is not the essences of things that grow, alter, or are subject to decay, but the pulses and congeries of existence that borrow these qualities, and give them a local vicarious notoriety in some mind—or secretly exemplify them in nature." At that moment, Cory reports, "Mr. Santayana's distinction between essence and matter seemed the most simple and inevitable point for a philosopher to make." An essence is not the thing that we long for, the passing of which we lament; "an essence simply *is*."<sup>10</sup>

With this description in mind, it becomes easier to see how the spiritual life first arises. In everyday human existence, scattered and accidental manifestations of being appear to the senses, to the memory or the imagination. These are the

"things" among which one attempts to secure a material life. Along with our perception of such things *qua* things, however, comes a more immediate and pure "intuition" of them as essences. Intuition must, indeed, supply the terms for experience of the world, or we could not know where one thing begins and another leaves off. Yet intuition of essences is not in itself an encounter with things (though it is dependent upon such encounters). It is rather an encounter with "eternal forms of Being." Thus, from everyday experience there arises "a revelation of essence to spirit."<sup>11</sup>

What, then, is the spiritual life which Santayana holds out as a human ideal? "In poets and children," Santayana writes, "it is but play; they revert from it at once to what the world thinks serious interests and sound knowledge of facts." But in philosophers it is a cultivated habit. In one sense (a minimal sense) it is the *undoing* of worldly engagement: suspending the urgency of the animal will and delighting contemplatively in what *is*. Here the spiritual life appears as a recovery of innocence: "spirit is happy to live in the moment, taking no thought for the morrow." In a fuller, more advanced sense, however, it is the ascent towards infinite being: spirit "comes to life at the foot of a ladder; it lives by contemplation, by knowing the thing above it." It "sees the visible in its true setting in the invisible; it is fixed instinctively on the countless moments that are not this moment, on the joys that are not this sorrow and the sorrows that are not this joy, on the thousand opinions that are not this opinion and beauties that are not this beauty."<sup>12</sup> Here the spiritual life appears as the discovery of truth, of pure Being in its infinity.

Because the spiritual life entails these two senses of immediate delight, on the one hand, and flight to the infinite, on the other, its relationship to the world is complex. Spirit is born of the world and loves the world "far more truly and tenderly

than it loves itself." But it does not love in the same *way* as the world loves. For the "thing eternally possessed by the spirit is not the thing as the world knows and prizes it."

[It] is not the person, or nation, or religion as it asserts and flaunts itself, in a mortal anxiety to be dominant; it is only that thing in its eternal essence, out of which the stress and the doubt of existence have wholly passed. It is that thing dead.... And therefore the world...is chilled and rebuked by that look of divine love, which, if it were heeded, would transmute its whole life and change it from what it so passionately and cruelly is, in time, into that which the spirit sees it to be in eternity.<sup>13</sup>

The spiritual life is born in the world, takes delight in the world, and depends upon the world for its own precarious existence; but the spirit is not itself *of* this world. Spirit is "homeless," as Santayana says in one place, or it "lives in the eternal," as he says in another.

The language to which Santayana has recourse in his description of the spiritual life is that of the Christian mystics. But it is worth noting, before moving on, where Santayana's affinity with the mystics ends. Most Christian mystics will speak not only of an ascent, but also of a mystical union or attainment. They reach a state of *deificatio* in which they experience, or say they experience, identification with God. Here, Santayana is skeptical. In the first place, there is the problem of communicating such an experience (though most mystics are quite sensitive to this): "If spiritual attainment could ever be complete," Santayana writes, "the disproportion would be overwhelming between the number and variety of things to report and the human means of reporting them. Silence is therefore imperative." But Santayana's skepticism runs deeper still. In truth, Santayana thought, "the chasm has never really been bridged" and spiritual attainment of this kind can *never* occur, because man cannot escape his

bodily existence: "Mortal spirits, the spirit in animals, cannot possibly survey pure Being in its infinity; but in so far as they free themselves from false respect for the objects of animal faith and animal passion, they may behold some finite being in its purity."<sup>14</sup>

Jude P. Dougherty has stressed in an essay in *Modern Age* that Santayana was a "non-believer."<sup>15</sup> This is true. But he was a *spiritual* non-believer. That is to say, he was a materialist who recognized the possibility within material existence of a spiritual life, a life of contemplating or delighting in essences. Essences are not God, nor are they "heavenly" in any orthodox Christian sense. They are formal categories and relations arising from our experience of matter. They are, however, transcendent in the sense of transcending time and place; and the experience of essence is eternal and complete in itself, not to be used or employed for ulterior purposes, but enjoyed.

### III

But why then call Santayana a spiritual *conservative*? The answer comes by way of a certain understanding of conservatism which, it must be admitted, is not widely held—though it has often found able defenders. That is the view that conservatism is at root neither a doctrine nor a creed, but a disposition: a disposition to use and enjoy what one has, rather than wishing for (and working for) something better. To be conservative, in this sense, is to accept the world as it stands, to find delight and satisfaction in things as they *are*, and thus to oppose philosophies of progress and reform, melioration and revolution.

This is the understanding of conservatism that Michael Oakeshott takes up in his essay "On Being Conservative." Conservatives, writes Oakeshott, are "warm and positive in respect of enjoyment, and correspondingly cool and critical in respect of change and innovation." They

may feel grateful for what is present, and thus acknowledge a gift or inheritance from the past; “but there is no mere idolizing of what is past and gone. What is esteemed is the present; and it is esteemed not on account of its connections with a remote antiquity, nor because it is recognized to be more admirable than any possible alternative, but on account of its familiarity.” Such conservatism, when it becomes political, has “nothing to do with a natural law or a providential order, nothing to do with morals and religion”; it is rather “the observation of our current manner of living” combined with a belief that the purpose of government is not to impose “plans” for our substantive activities, but to enable people “to pursue the activities of their own choice with the minimum frustration.”<sup>16</sup>

Conservatism as here described is not identical to the “spiritual life” as Santayana conceives it. For to esteem something on account of its “familiarity” is not yet to delight in it on account of its spiritual essence. In fact, the spiritual life entails much more than a mere conservative disposition. But the two have a great deal in common. In the first place, the spiritual life begins from, and depends upon, a conservative appreciation for the present. It does not worship the past or prepare for the future, but simply seeks the essence of *what is*. In the second place, the spiritual life and the conservative disposition take a similar view of political change, which is to say a dim view. For political change is but a distraction from all the resources, spiritual and familiar, which offer themselves up for our enjoyment. Santayana has been criticized for a kind of impotent quietism, a refusal to resist evil or even to work for the preservation of a world in which the spiritual life might continue to flourish. But Santayana’s basic insight here is cogent:

The friends of spirit, in their political capacity, will of course defend those forms of

society in which, given their particular race and traditions, spirit may best exist: they will protect it in whatever organs and instruments it may already have appeared.... [But] political zeal even in the true friends of spirit is not spiritual.... The spirit itself is not afraid of being stamped out here, or anxious to be kindled there; its concern is not about its instances or manifestations; it is not essentially learned or social; its kingdom is not of this world.<sup>17</sup>

Activity that protects or secures a place for the spiritual life in a hostile world is valuable activity indeed; but it is not *itself* spiritual activity. It is rather practical and political activity. By the same token, activities that defend or promote those precious goods in which the conservative takes delight are not in themselves conservative activities, not essentially at least. They are political activities, be they ever so conducive to the conservative life. Activism, therefore, even “conservative activism,” is not essentially conservative, just as religious activism is not essentially spiritual.

The key difference to be noted between the spiritual life and the conservative disposition has to do with transcendence. The spiritual pilgrim, like the conservative, takes delight in the particular things that surround him; their familiarity is a cause for affection. But the pilgrim does not love the things of this world in the same *way* as the conservative loves them. The pilgrim loves them spiritually, which is to say he loves them not for their particularity but for their universality. He loves the essence that is revealed by the particular object, the essence that transcends space and time. He loves the eternal, not the particular, though the eternal and the particular are necessarily intertwined. This is indeed distinct from the conservative, who loves *this* object, *this* people, and *this* set of laws, exactly as they are; his is a worldly affection for a worldly set of objects. But while this difference is important to bear in mind, it is

the similarity between conservatism and the spiritual life that is so worth stressing. For in a world in which, increasingly, everything is evaluated in terms of its utility, where the never-ending pursuit for efficiency leads to the careless scrapping of one set of objects or one group of people for another, a love for the familiar is a rare and admirable thing.

Thus, there are two sides to the conservatism of George Santayana. There is the "critical conservatism" noted by Kirk, which assails liberalism for its meaningless commotion and flat-souled understanding of liberty; but then there is the "spiritual conservatism," which takes little notice of politics at all, as it finds delight in things as they are.

These two conservative impulses exist in tension, one with the other, so that Santayana was not, and could never have been, perfectly conservative in either sense by itself. To engage in a critique of liberalism is, just at that very moment, to abandon the spiritual conservatism

which says, "[I] had to be born in one odd world or another; why should [I] quarrel with my earthly cradle?"<sup>18</sup> To engage in a critique of liberalism is indeed to break from spiritual detachment. Yet such breaks are at times unavoidable. As Oakeshott has pointed out, there are times so tumultuous and unhinged that one cannot possibly find comfort amidst the chaos. And in times such as these, spiritual conservatism is simply not possible. One may, then, work for the recovery of what has been lost, or one may retreat to greener pastures where the spiritual life might be taken up again in solitude. George Santayana, it seems, did a little of both: he railed against the regime that made spiritual life impossible, reminding it of what it had thrown away. And then he left for a regime which, by our lights, was much worse than liberal democratic America: fascist Italy. Yet there, the spiritual life was again possible, and Santayana could turn to meditation or critique as his heart desired.

1. George Santayana, *Persons and Places: Fragments of an Autobiography* (Cambridge, 1986), 387. 2. Quoted in Anthony Woodward, *Living in the Eternal: A Study of George Santayana* (Nashville, 1988), 74. 3. See George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society and Government* (New Brunswick, 1995), 18-19, and 9-10. Does this undercut the basic conservative notion made famous by Richard Weaver that "ideas have consequences"? Not necessarily. See the important qualification Santayana makes (19) to the effect that "material agencies may be at the same time animated by ideal motives and moral purposes." 4. George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York, 1922), 188. 5. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, 319. 6. Santayana, *Soliloquies in England*, 181. 7. Russell

Kirk, *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Eliot*, 7th ed. (Washington, D.C., 1985), 418. 8. *Ibid.*, 452. 9. George Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life* (New York, 1927), 57. 10. Daniel M. Cory, "Some Observations on the Philosophy of George Santayana," in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of George Santayana* (La Salle, 1991), 102-103. 11. Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, 77, 85-86. 12. *Ibid.* 13. *Ibid.*, 53-54. 14. *Ibid.*, 78, 76, 83. 15. Jude P. Dougherty, "Santayana on the Role of Religion in Society," *Modern Age* 37 (1995): 116-123. 16. Michael Oakeshott, "On Being Conservative," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, 1991), 412, 408, 423-424. 17. Santayana, *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, 38-39. 18. *Ibid.*, 32.