

Is George Santayana an American Philosopher? *

George Santayana é um Filósofo Americano?

Martin Coleman

Indiana University – USA
martcole@iupui.edu

Abstract: Max Fisch in his characterization of Classic American Philosophy identified six leading figures including George Santayana. Others have found reasons for excluding Santayana from the tradition. Both sides of the issue seem not to have taken full account of Santayana's own views of his place among his contemporaries and predecessors. Santayana acknowledged his relations to his American contemporaries, but he resisted assimilation to their philosophical views. His materialism, his reverence for what he called human orthodoxy, his understanding of culture, and his philosophical theory led him to reject what he saw as the moralism, subjectivism, and mysticism in American philosophy. He found the American tradition neglectful of what he took to be the end of philosophic life, namely spiritual freedom. Santayana believed philosophic activity ultimately is unconcerned with (though materially dependent on) accidental conditions such as religion or nationality.

Keywords: George Santayana. Max Fisch. American philosophy. Pragmatism. Spiritual freedom.

Abstract: *Em sua caracterização da Filosofia Americana Clássica, Max Fisch identificou seis personagens ilustres, incluindo George Santayana. Outros acharam motivos para excluí-lo dessa tradição. Nessa questão, ambos os lados parecem não ter considerado plenamente a própria visão de Santayana de seu espaço entre seus contemporâneos e predecessores. Santayana reconbeceu seu relacionamento com os contemporâneos americanos, porém resistiu em assimilar suas visões filosóficas. Seu materialismo, sua reverência ao que denominava ortodoxia humana, sua compreensão da cultura e sua teoria filosófica o levaram a rejeitar o que via como o moralismo, subjetivismo e misticismo na filosofia americana. Ele considerava a tradição americana omissa naquilo que ele interpretava como o propósito da vida filosófica, a liberdade espiritual. Santayana acreditava que a atividade filosófica, em-*

* In his article "The Place of Santayana in Modern Philosophy," David Dilworth posed a question similar to the title of the present essay. Dilworth asked, "Was Santayana a 'classical American philosopher?'" (1997, 1). Dilworth answered negatively and characterized Santayana "as a southern European 'Continental' philosopher (the only one, in contrast to the waves of 'Continental philosophers' of today who, in Santayana's own estimation, are no longer true to the French tradition and have gone over to the German camp)" (7). But Dilworth's project differed from mine, because he was concerned with relating Santayana to the Modern Philosophical tradition and with assigning a national character to Santayana.

bora materialmente dependente de condições accidentais, tais como religião ou nacionalidade, é fundamentalmente indiferente a elas.

Palavras-chave: *George Santayana. Max Fisch. Filosofia americana. Pragmatismo. Liberdade espiritual.*

[M]y intellectual relations and labours still unite me closely to America; and it is as an American writer that I must be counted, if I am counted at all.
(PGS, 603)

I. Introduction

Max Fisch famously characterized the time between the end of the Civil War and beginning of World War II as a classic period of American philosophy. According to Fisch, a classic period is marked by three things: first, the expression, definition, and synthesis of philosophical tendencies of a culture; second, the production of canonical texts; and third, a lasting influence (1996, 1). Fisch identified six major figures as Classic American Philosophers: Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, and Whitehead. He then indicated continuity among them through personal relations, social and intellectual influences, and fourteen common philosophical tendencies or themes expressed in their work.

It is not uncommon to consider Santayana peculiar among the figures chosen by Fisch. He was a Spanish-born Catholic who never became an American citizen, arriving in the United States in 1872 when he was eight years old and leaving in 1912 to live in Europe until his death in 1952. A well-known history of philosophy characterized Santayana as “an alien figure — an outsider whose very presence is puzzling” and who “belongs to no American tradition” (FLOWER; MURPHEY 1977, 773).¹ Indeed, there are some fairly obvious ways in which Santayana appears to have diverged from Fisch’s Classic American Philosophers. Santayana remarked his irritation with “disingenuous Protestantism” in New England and his discomfort in the presence of William James (*LGS* 1:212; *PP* 401-02). He characterized the intellectual and scientific influences on the expression of his thought as accidental and maintained that no matter when or where he had been born he “should have had the same philosophy” (*SAF* x). His philosophy seems to elude Fisch’s fourteen themes or tendencies, and Fisch acknowledged only four of five themes to be found in Santayana’s work.

Yet, none of this would have been news to Fisch,² who plainly allowed for “what is unique or emphatic in each philosopher” (1996, 1). It seems he intended to produce

¹ Santayana’s first biographer, George Howgate, described him as “a Latin, a poet, an aesthete” (1961, 52) and “as a spectator, an observer of long residence with us, not as an indigenous part of the society he surveys” (272). James Ballowe called him “an anomaly in Boston society.” He wrote, “Santayana was willing to participate in and observe American life. But [...] he could never enter into anything as if it were all that mattered. [...] Santayana preferred to be a sympathetic spectator, a sophisticate in the midst of the barbarians who were engaged in the struggle for success” (1969, 10-11).

² Those who, like Fisch, have regarded Santayana as part of the American tradition include: LARRABEE, Harold. “George Santayana American Philosopher?” *The Sewanee Review*, v. 39, p. 209-221, 1931; and BROWNELL, Baker. “Santayana, the Man and the Philosopher,” in SCHILPP, 1951, p. 31-62.

not a profile to which each thinker would conform exactly, but rather a collection of traits each being shared by some or most of the figures and a collection of figures each sharing some traits with some or most of the other figures. But, while Fisch's classification seems justified insofar as he considered biographical and sociological information, it seems that Santayana's work points to a distinction based on something else. He offered reasons not considered in the usual accounts of his alien character for counting himself an exception among his American predecessors and contemporaries. I want to state what it could mean, in Santayana's terms, to claim that he does not belong to an American tradition.

II. The Genteel Tradition and American Philosophy

In 1911, Santayana delivered his well-known address, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in which he described a philosophy as "a distinct vision of the universe and definite convictions about human destiny" (*WD* 187). A philosophy articulates the ideals and ends involved in a people's activities; it defines their troubles and directs their hopes. Santayana found no such expression in American intellectual life and instead observed what he christened the genteel tradition.

Santayana saw America as a vibrant nation of expansion, experiment, and technological innovation; but he observed that it took its stated philosophy from other times and places. The genteel tradition, consisting of second-hand philosophies rooted in Kant and Hegel, grew out of transcendental method made into doctrine and Calvinism understood as a philosophical principle. The resulting forms of idealism dominated official philosophy in America, preaching providential order and absolute spirit and declaring reason or duty to be the ruling principle of a fixed cosmos. In actuality, American life grew out of uncertainty and established new forms of human flourishing. America's actual ideals remained hidden and unexpressed even as its activities raised a new nation; the American intellect was out of step with the American will.

Thinkers who might have escaped the thrall of foreign tradition still had to contend with the temptation of anthropocentrism,³ which denied the material basis of human life and attributed physical influence to thought, leaving the actual ideals of material activities undisclosed. In Santayana's view, anthropocentric philosophies shared with idealistic philosophies a deceptive moralism. In other words, they both read human perspectives and preferences into the structure of the universe, whether those preferences were formal and logical or romantic and empirical. This moralism inhibited expression and understanding of American life.

If America had no genuine philosophy that expressed its distinct vision, then no one — neither Santayana nor anyone else — could be an American philosopher. Santayana's portraits of thinkers in America show how he thought each, with one exception, fell short of expressing an American philosophy. Emerson was a Puritan mystic born too late and "was in no sense a prophet for his age or country" (*IPR* 139). Royce was an exemplar of the genteel tradition whose Calvinism was reflected in the notion "that virtue consisted [...] in holding evil by the throat; so that the world was good because it was a good world to strangle, and if we only managed to do so, the

³ This double aspect of the genteel tradition is discussed in LYON, 1968, p. xi-xxii.

more it deserved strangling the better world it was” (*COUS* 67). And James, though perhaps free of the genteel tradition proper, seemed to represent not a cohesive system of values but rather a mood of romantic self-assertion. Santayana thought that the Americanism of James, like that of Emerson, was too idiosyncratic to reflect broader social currents (*OS* 217).

In contrast, John Dewey appeared to Santayana to represent the American tendency to subsume the individual in the social, and he equated Dewey’s pragmatism with an American drive to democratic control (*OS* 217). Santayana wrote:

It is only John Dewey who genuinely represents the mind of the vast mass of native, sanguine, enterprising Americans. He alone has formed a philosophical sect and become a dominant academic influence. He inherits the Puritan conscience, grown duly practical, democratic, and positivistic; and he accepts industrial society and scientific technique as the field where true philosophy may be cultivated and tested. (*BR* 130)

But christening Dewey the representative of the American mind did not prevent Santayana from making charges similar to those leveled against earlier thinkers.

The key to Santayana’s criticism of Dewey is the notion of “*the dominance of the foreground*” (author’s italics) (*OS* 223). The universe has no foreground or background; these are distinctions introduced by a particular perspective. To privilege the foreground is to abandon naturalism for some favored perspective and to ignore what is not agreeable to the chosen perspective (*OS* 223). Such an outlook marks transcendentalism, empiricism, moralism, and the sort of religion that subordinates the universe to the interests of a sect or nation (*OS* 224). Pragmatism, claimed Santayana, synthesized all of these philosophical approaches in defining things in the narrowest terms of immediate use — concerns in the foreground were emphasized to the neglect of other realities that serve no immediate need.

The particular concerns in the foreground for Dewey were those of material activity — business, technology, and exploration. Santayana thought that the social emphasis on such activities in Dewey’s day bequeathed to him his naturalism. The developments in transportation, communication, and commerce and the expansion of the nation, of urban centers, and cultivated land were activities that inevitably involved naturalistic assumptions of physical substance and independent existences. Such activities exhibited the instinctive faith of living creatures in objects that they can act on and be affected by. But such naturalism is accidental, subject to prevailing perspectives on existence, and ignorant of that to which contemporary moral life is not sympathetic. Because he thought Dewey’s naturalism resulted from following dominant social interests, Santayana attacked Dewey’s naturalism as “half-hearted and short-winded” (*OS* 225). A whole-hearted naturalism would be rooted in honest acknowledgement of animal faith and the independent existence of a material realm indifferent to human thought and desire.

On Santayana’s reading, Dewey called the dominant foreground “experience,” understood impersonally or transcendently as “something romantically absolute” and substituted for an independent nature (*OS* 226). Santayana regarded immediate experience as “only the dream which accompanies our action” (*OS* 233-34), but he thought Dewey made immediate experience the only reality. And this eliminated the distinction between knowledge of objects and objects of knowledge, absorbed nature into thought, and entailed mysticism.

III. Santayana's Resistance

Santayana was not an American philosopher either in the sense of expressing the ideals of American culture or in the sense of subscribing to Dewey's articulation of them. Santayana's naturalism, or as he preferred to call it, his materialism, compelled him to reject the subjectivism and mysticism he found in American philosophy. But ultimately Santayana's concern was with spiritual freedom, and he believed that the moralism and deception in American philosophy threatened philosophical reflection that made spiritual freedom possible.

a. Materialism and Criticism

For Santayana materialism meant living and moving at the whim of a mindless and irrational process, "a great automatic engine moving out of the past into the future" (*PGS* 505). He characterized his view as "ordinary perception, sustained in its impulsive trust but criticized in its deliverance" (*PGS* 505), and he took it to be the presupposition of scientific inquiry and intentional action. It grows out of the faith of all active creatures in material nature, a faith that is redirected and modified in action and reflection.

In criticism, Santayana's materialism required him "to understand every part of nature from within. [...] and] to conceive life, knowledge, and spirit as absolutely natural growths, and not to grudge them their exuberance" (*PGS* 550). Hence, he acknowledged the legitimacy of Dewey's perspective. Similarly he acknowledged the right of a society or nation to regard the world as its domain and human consciousness as an instrument of the public good just as any spirit has a right "to regard existence as a strange dream" (*OS* 239). The materialist critic is then free to distinguish what part of a philosophy expresses material conditions and what part privileges human biases and desires. In Dewey's philosophy, Santayana observed that the expression of material conditions was accidental and the dominance of the foreground was a manifestation of subjectivism.

While pointing out the biased perspective of Dewey's philosophy, Santayana never meant to suggest that criticism could assume a godlike vantage point. He thought critical standards are internal to a judge and not themselves chosen critically. Any expression of such standards is more like a confession of natural affections than criticism (*PGS* 551). But he maintained an important distinction between the limited perspective acknowledged in his criticism and the anthropocentrism or subjectivism he found in American philosophy. Santayana claimed to recognize the limitation of his perspective, while the subjects of his critique seemed to him to presume the priority of their perspectives over nature.

b. Orthodoxy, Heresy, and Art

Santayana acknowledged that each philosophy is the work of an individual and bears the marks of human temperament and finitude. And to the extent that one forgets this, one departs from human orthodoxy. By orthodoxy Santayana understood, "not [...] those orthodoxies which prevail in particular schools or nations" (*SAF* v), but rather the background of all philosophical systems, that is "the current imagination and good sense of mankind — something traditional, conventional, incoherent, and largely erroneous,

like the assumptions of a man who has never reflected, yet something ingenuous, practically acceptable, fundamentally sound, and capable of correcting its own innocent errors” (OS 95). When a philosophical system emphasizes some favored part of this background and denies other parts, it departs from orthodoxy and becomes heresy.

Heresies have two main forms: mysticism and sectarianism. Sectarianism takes a part as the whole; mysticism takes some illusion as fact, for example, takes religion literally. This second form, thought Santayana, was the flaw in Dewey’s pragmatism: Immediate experience, the dream that accompanies action, is taken to be reality.

There are two ways to avoid heresy. One way is to achieve a “comprehensive synthesis” by engaging in broad and even speculation without distortion. No one has succeeded in this endeavor or is likely to do so. Past attempts have merely recorded opinion rather than mastered and deepened it. Santayana explained that “[s]uch a philosophy would be to human orthodoxy what the Fathers of the Church were to the Apostles, or the Doctors to the Fathers” (OS 99). The other method is to first confess “that a system of philosophy is a personal work of art which gives a specious unity to some chance vista in the cosmic labyrinth,” and then “substitute the pursuit of sincerity for the pursuit of omniscience” (OS 100). The sincere philosopher would no longer proclaim some particular philosophy to be a system of the universe. The mysticism of Emerson, the moralism of Royce, the romanticism of James, and the dominance of the foreground in Dewey all distort reality without acknowledgement, ignore the material world, and substitute selected ideas for the entire universe. So in addition to being unable to honestly express their own ideals, having as they do a material basis, these views cut off the possibility of acknowledging other ideals not congenial to their favored perspectives.

But Santayana was not wholly negative in his assessment, and he did think an honest American philosophy was possible. Though it would take centuries, the way to bring about a sincere expression of American ideals was “simply to deepen practical life, to make it express all its possible affinities, all its latent demands” (LYON, 1968, p. 34). This meant recognizing the ground of ideals in material activities rather than taking them from dead tradition, and then being attentive to the direction of present activity. It is conceivable that in those future times Santayana’s objections to American philosophy might disappear. Then, an honest and sincere philosophy would recognize its own limitations, the arbitrariness of its particular values, and the variety of ideals and perfections. It would have eliminated the coercive tendencies aimed at those who differed in background and particular ideals, and it could exist harmoniously with other philosophies. But until then Santayana could not ignore that his own roots and spiritual resources lay elsewhere.

c. Cultural Roots

An honest philosophy requires acknowledgment of both the limits of a given perspective and the need for a definite perspective from which to observe and appreciate ideals. Santayana wrote that “[t]he full grown human soul should respect all traditions and understand all passions; at the same time it should possess and embody a particular culture, without any unmanly relaxation or mystical neutrality” (PP 464). Santayana observed in American intellectuals a presumption of the universal value of their ideals.

Santayana knew well that these were not his ideals and that it was only by accident that he ever came to be classed among American philosophers. He acknowledged that he could hardly be designated as anything but an American philosopher given his language and education, but he maintained that “in feeling and in legal allegiance I have always remained a Spaniard’ (*BR* 133-34).

Santayana expressed his sense of the difference in ideals when he described the “blind alley” in which he found himself with regard to religion in New England. In Spain he could have been a Catholic and retained his materialist philosophy with no direct social consequences. But in a Protestant nation, “the freethinking Catholic is in a socially impossible position” (*PP* 362). The trouble resulted from America having subordinated spiritual matters to public and political concerns, so that one’s religious beliefs always have social consequences. Ideals were thought to serve the material realm of social organization rather than liberate the spirit from the pressures of such concerns. Santayana gave a further example when he characterized the so-called intellectual freedom at Harvard as sharply delimited by duty. He wrote “[y]ou might think what you liked, but you must consecrate your belief or your unbelief to the common task of encouraging everybody and helping everything on.” At Harvard and in America the social and the moral dominated the spiritual; any opinion was fine only so long as it could be made to serve the people, to uplift and improve them. Contemplation of ideals was bound by duty.

Santayana saw things differently, and he refused, in his words, “to be annexed, to be abolished, or to be grafted onto any plant of a different species” (*PP* 363). Neither American deception nor American ideals suited him, and he strove to remain free of their influence. Santayana, as one commentator has noted, routinely rejected others’ interpretations and classifications of him, showing expertise in defense against categories and their cultural deployment (DAWIDOFF, 1992, p. 152). He resisted categorization that would have imposed a closed order on intellectual life, and it seemed classification as an American philosopher presented just such a danger. To subscribe to philosophies that distorted reality would close down intellectual life with insincere categories; inhibiting the expression of material conditions and understanding of the world and one’s self. Santayana resisted categorization to preserve the integrity and spiritual freedom that he valued most in philosophy.

The point of Santayana’s loyalty to his cultural roots certainly was not that Spain was superior to America. Santayana believed that “[n]ationality and religion are [...] too radically intertwined with our moral essence to be change honourably, and too accidental to the free mind to be worth changing” (*SE* 4). The implication of this belief is that nationality and religion cannot be denied by the honest mind; they are material conditions necessary for a human being. Yet no particular nationality or religion is superior from the perspective of the free mind. And none is more necessary than another for spiritual freedom, just as one might claim that no particular language is more suited than another for poetry — each has its own beauty.

d. Philosophical Theory

While Santayana’s materialism led him to reject what he characterized as subjectivism and mysticism in American thought, it did not entail a wholesale rejection of American

philosophical ideas. In fact, his theory of knowledge displayed the influence of his pragmatic contemporaries; but his distinctive use of pragmatic ideas also provides an example in the context of philosophical theory of how Santayana could take up the idiom of American philosophy for a purpose he thought neglected by his contemporaries — namely, spiritual freedom.

For Santayana, knowledge is an expression of the plastic habits of an organism that acts and modifies its habits according to its experience (*SAF* 172). Ideas arise through the interaction of an organism and its inorganic environment. Ideas symbolize aspects of the environment rather than literally reproduce it and must be employed in action if they are to help the organism survive. Ideas that are helpful in guiding the organism through its environment become the expressions that are knowledge.

In a recent essay, Angus Kerr-Lawson argues that Santayana limits the application of the pragmatic test of usefulness or survival value to those ideas, or essences in Santayana's terminology, that provide perspectival and symbolic guides to action in the material realm. But Santayana recognized further essences to which the pragmatist criteria cannot be fruitfully applied. That is, these further essences have nothing to do with the survival activities of the organism; and such essences are typically derided by pragmatists as “metaphysical” (KERR-LAWSON, 2007, p. 37).

In addition to ideas or essences used to guide action, there are, Santayana argued, essences embodied by material things and events. These are essences that make things what they are rather than something else. “Essence is just that character which any existence wears in so far as it remains identical with itself and so long as it does so” (*RB* 23). Without the “eternal distinctness” of essences the material flux “would collapse into a lump without order or quality” (*RB* 24). These essences are the objective natures of things and hence are not perspectival. An observer necessarily has a perspective and is unlikely to intuit the essence objectively embodied in the material thing. Hence, such essences surely are useless since they cannot be reliably or even wittingly intuited by anyone.

There are also the essences that are the concepts of Santayana's philosophical categories of essence, truth, and spirit. These are “kinds or categories of things which [Santayana found] conspicuously different and worth distinguishing” (*SAF* vi), and for which he made no claim of universal exhaustiveness. These essences are not perspectives on material existences and not subject to testing in action (there is nothing necessary about Santayana's philosophy). For example, Santayana understood truth as something absolute, unchanging, and independent of human experience — quite a departure from a pragmatic understanding of truth. Santayana similarly conceived of essence and spirit as eternal and independent of material flux, putting them along with truth outside the kin of pragmatically acceptable concepts.

Kerr-Lawson attributes pragmatists' rejection of such concepts to what he calls the “empiricist setting” in which pragmatic insights have typically been situated. In spite of the common pragmatist objections to traditional empiricism's conception of experience, pragmatism ends up repeating the empiricist mistake of assuming knowledge to be of ideas. This confusion of knowledge with its objects results from the rejection, common to empiricists and pragmatists, of a category of material substance that remains beyond the reach of intuition and that Santayana, of course, retained in his materialism.

Santayana's criticisms of empiricism and pragmatism amount to the charge of

confusing the symbol with its object, which as Santayana claimed in his critique of Dewey leads to mysticism. This philosophical heresy makes each idea pay its way by serving animal needs; those that cannot earn their keep are rejected as nonsensical or metaphysical. Santayana avoided this heresy by holding to the orthodox faith in material objects. This means that knowledge is not merely intuition of ideas; rather intuition mediates knowledge of material things. Knowledge is faith in its material object along with intuition of an essence that is a helpful symbol of the object.

This is significant for spiritual freedom because it liberates ideas from what Santayana understood to be a totalizing pragmatic criterion of knowledge; that is, it frees essences from the pressing concerns of the animal organism. Recall the particular essences that Santayana wished to exempt from pragmatic scrutiny: The first, the objective essences embodied by material objects, helps establish Santayana's skepticism since these cannot be intuited with any certainty. His skepticism in turn helps separate intuited essences from the objects they symbolize. The other essences are the intuitions of a free mind, the concepts of a philosophy that envisions a spirit free to contemplate essences.

By resetting this key pragmatic insight in his own theoretical framework, namely his *Realms of Being*, Santayana articulated a philosophy that made a place for spiritual freedom without resorting to superstition or fantasy. He could acknowledge science and materialism as a realm of action in which a pragmatic theory of knowledge made good sense, and he could also recognize realms of essence, truth, and spirit, which a free consciousness could contemplate. He did not offer this dichotomy as a system of the universe with a claim to absolute truth; rather it was a modest and sincere attempt to articulate a vision of human life base on the dumb sense of thing he perceived in human action.

e. Rational Art and Spiritual Freedom

The spiritual freedom that comes with sincere philosophy can be understood as the culmination of philosophy as rational art. Rational art, explained Santayana, has two forms: "Art may come to buttress a particular form of life, or it may come to express it" (*TPP* 189). The arts that buttress a form of life included business, science, and morality. They prepare us for life by establishing the field of activity and teaching us the shape of the terrain. Such arts may provide a clear view of the world and secure and perpetuate that world. The expressive arts, such as philosophy, articulate the ideals that represent the ends of our activities. Such expressions go beyond awareness of activities and involve appreciation of consciousness itself, of the ideals, images, and concepts available to consciousness that Santayana called essences. Expressive arts celebrate these arbitrary qualities of activity, these "tender reverberations" of the soul and "overtones of life" (*TPP* 190). The qualities are arbitrary with respect to the material interactions and open a realm of freedom for spirit or a "margin of play," which Santayana wrote, "might grow broader, if the sustaining nucleus were more firmly established in the world. To the art of working well a civilized race would add the art of playing well" (*TPP* 190).

The distinction between forms of rational art assumes discrimination of waking intuitions from dreams, natural science from disciplines of the spirit, and powers from ideals. Without such discrimination, reality is miscomprehended, science is bogged down in magic, and ideals are subordinated to social agendas limiting contemplation. But when

powers are discriminated from ideals then the first kind of art can be secured and the second pursued for its own sake. Science may become secure and morality rational, while consciousness or spirit may become free to play and appreciate ideals apart from material compulsions.

In Santayana's view, America lacked clear awareness of its environment and had not distinguished powers and ideals. Its traditions did not allow for spiritual freedom and play; and one consequence was the denial of unhappiness (*WD* 200). Since the subjectivism, romanticism, and moralism Santayana observed in America could offer only denial or optimistic uplift in the face of despair; the spirit was left ill prepared for the travails of life. Santayana thought that philosophy as honest expression allowed the spirit to acknowledge ideals, and this opened a realm beyond the material and for which spirit was better suited.

Henry Samuel Levinson has described philosophy for Santayana as an interruption of social and political engagement, a holiday from social concerns, and a "disintoxication" of the spirit from the values arising from interactions in a particular social or political situation (1992, p. 5). The point is not to deny or escape the claims of material life, but rather to recognize the human spiritual capacities that give significance to the losses experienced in material life, to recognize the ideals that give meaning to our animal struggles. Recognition of ideals or essences, which are impotent in the material world, offers not the deception of blind optimism but rather unassailable freedom to the human spirit. To be able to look beyond the demands of business and politics is the practice of philosophy as a spiritual activity.

Levinson has further explained that spiritual disciplines allow for a practical irresponsibility that makes possible appreciation of what is alien to one's cherished values (1992, p. 259). Judgment is suspended for the sake of appreciating things or people as they understand themselves, and this freedom Santayana found absent in America and in contemporary philosophy. He observed no philosophy of genuine freedom but rather universal systems and philosophies pledged to the public good. In contrast he offered a philosophy that he characterized as "essentially a literary labour, a form of art; and I do not attempt to drive other people to think as I do. Let them be their own poets" (*BR* 134). In a letter he wrote, "[m]y philosophy is not urgent or 'militant': you can manage perfectly without it, but you will find a quiet solidity in it at the end" (*LGS* 8:127). He presented a philosophy that he thought could be important without being necessary, without coercing one to adopt it. He did not find this conception of philosophy prevalent in America.

IV. Conclusion

Consider again Santayana's place among Fisch's Classic American Philosophers. Santayana freely admitted that, though he was an accidental American, he is to be counted as an American if he is to be counted at all.⁴ I do not think this is a repudiation of the distinction he drew between his own philosophy and those of his American forbears and

⁴ This seems consistent with a comment by Santayana's student Horace Kallen that "anybody's place in the in history of philosophy is a matter of accident" (LAMONT, 1959, p. 89).

contemporaries. Santayana realized that America's influence would affect the world for a long time. He wrote, "the equipment, the machinery, something of the manners developed in America will have to be adopted wherever a lively participation in the movement of affairs is desired" (*IW* 36). But he added that this need not entail the capitulation of other traditions; American ways might be used to defend "the ancient spirit" as in the installation of the radio-telegraph in Vatican City, with poles "almost as high as the cross of St. Peter's" (*IW* 36). Likewise Santayana might be regarded as having taken up the idiom of America, if accidentally and unintentionally, in order to say un-American things.⁵

So, if Santayana is taken seriously as a philosopher, it may be by virtue of his relationship to America and Americans. But he thought that such a classification, and indeed any classification would misrepresent his philosophy. He expressed regret for those readers who "think they must read and classify" his work "to gain a fair view of [his] philosophy. They will feel obliged to distinguish periods, and tendencies and inconsistent positions. But that is all insignificant, extraneous, accidental" (1947, p. 1) The essential part of his thought, "the living thread, still squirming and ignited," is not found in "the cold old academic printed stuff" or some complete set of expressions. Rather, as Levinson has argued, for Santayana philosophy is a set of practices allowing imaginative departure from social and political conditions (1992, p. 287); its essence lies in the activity of spirit, in contemplation of ideals, and the freedom from animal pressures that comes with arresting the immediate in consciousness.

None of this is meant to dismiss Fisch and his categories. But it suggests that overemphasis on the role and benefit of Fisch's classification can distort understanding Santayana's philosophy, of the philosophical practice he engaged in. His resistance to being classed as an American philosopher suggests reading Santayana as a philosopher apart from accidental connections. This does not entail denial or neglect of biographical and sociological information, but rather openness to the spiritual possibilities offered to imagination. It invites a reading of Santayana not subordinated to agendas and categories foreign to his affections and an appreciation of his ideas not subject to values accidental to the essences presented to consciousness. This is not a rejection of categories or the calculating understanding, as one might understand Emerson to advocate; rather it is recognition of the human capacity for spiritual freedom that Santayana thought was obscured in America.

⁵ Compare this with his reflection on his writing: "in renouncing everything else for the sake of English letters I might be said to have been guilty, quite unintentionally, of a little stratagem, as if I had set out to say plausibly in English as many un-English things as possible" (*PGS* 7).

Abbreviations

BR	<i>The Birth of Reason and Other Essays</i>
COUS	<i>Character and Opinion in the United States</i>
IPR	<i>Interpretations of Poetry and Religion</i>
IW	<i>The Idler and His Works</i>
LGS	<i>The Letter of George Santayana</i> (citations include book number and page number separated by a colon. For example, LGS 6:174 refers to page 174 in Book Six of <i>The Letters</i> .)
LR4	<i>Reason in Art</i>
OS	<i>Obiter Scripta</i>
PGS	<i>The Philosophy of George Santayana</i>
PP	<i>Persons and Places</i>
RB	<i>Realms of Being</i>
SAF	<i>Scepticism and Animal Faith</i>
SE	<i>Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies</i>
TPP	<i>Three Philosophical Poets</i>
WD	<i>Winds of Doctrine</i>

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Address/Endereço

Martin Coleman
IUPUI Indiana University
Department of Philosophy
425 University Blvd
Cavanaugh Hall 441
Indianapolis, IN 46202

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