

Materialism in Limbo: Democritus, Santayana, and the ethics of Metaphysics

Materialismo no limbo: Demócrito, Santayana e a ética da Metafísica

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Abstract: In this essay, I argue that the mark of a viable metaphysics is as much practical and ethical as it is logical and systematic. To do this, I analyze George Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo*, where he affirms his support of the atomistic materialism of Democritus on pragmatic grounds. A metaphysics, he suggests, is a worldview that accommodates a person—viewed as a particular kind of psychological organism—wisely to the forces of nature and best enables that person to lead a flourishing life. At the same time, Santayana puts his own stamp on materialism by challenging the possibility that Democritus's geometric characterization of atoms can be a literal account of material substance. He reinterprets Democritean metaphysics as a poetic and mythological position that discounts subjective experience and instead turns our attention to the substrative origins of our being.

Keywords: Santayana. Dialogues in Limbo. Pragmatic metaphysics. Psychology. Self-knowledge.

Resumo: Neste artigo, argumento que a marca de uma metafísica viável é tanto prática e ética quanto é lógica e sistemática. Para tal, analiso os Diálogos no Limbo de George Santayana, no qual ele afirma seu apoio ao materialismo atomístico de Demócrito em bases pragmáticas. Uma metafísica, ele sugere, é uma visão de mundo que acomoda uma pessoa – vista como um determinado tipo de organismo psicológico – sabiamente às forças da natureza e da melhor forma possibilita essa pessoa a levar uma vida próspera. Ao mesmo tempo, Santayana coloca sua marca no materialismo ao questionar a possibilidade da caracterização geométrica dos átomos de Demócrito ser uma explicação literal da substância material. Ele interpreta a metafísica Democritiana como uma posição poética e mitológica que desconsidera a experiência subjetiva e, em vez de, volta nossa atenção para as origens substrativas do nosso ser.

Palavras-chave: Santayana. Diálogos no Limbo. Metafísica pragmática. Psicologia. Autoconhecimento.

"Your philosophy would have been perfect, if instead of
being a king you had been a cabbage."¹

Democritus to Dionysus the Younger, Tyrant of
Syracuse, in *Dialogues in Limbo*

When we hear the term *metaphysics*, many of us think of rationally-derived principles that identify and explain the ultimate structure governing existence. Certainly, this has been its traditional notion, going at least as far back as Aristotle and coming into its full glory (in this sense, anyway) with the rationalists of 17th and 18th century Europe. The modern, *a priori*, method of determining first principles helped lead, of course, to the very criticisms—Kant's First *Critique* and Twentieth Century verificationism, for example—that have caused it to fall out of favor in many quarters today. Despite this fact, many are concerned to preserve the relevance of speculative philosophy in the face of these claims that our ideas will either fall into inevitable contradictions or cannot be verified and are, therefore, utterly meaningless. One way to think about the ongoing value of metaphysical concepts is to view them as poetic or literary interpretations of the experienced world.² I want to align myself with this interpretation of metaphysics but also to stress, here, a pragmatic and ethical aspect that can become lost when thinking of speculative philosophy in solely logical or aesthetic terms.³ That is to say, our ways of making sense out of the world are not logical *or* aesthetic *or* practical *or* ethical but, when at their best, involve all of these elements of meaningful discourse.

In what follows I argue that the mark of a viable metaphysics is as much practical and ethical as it is logical, systematic, and aesthetic. To do so, I analyze George Santayana's *Dialogues in Limbo* (hereafter *Dialogues*), where he affirms his support of the atomistic materialism of Democritus on pragmatic grounds. This metaphysics, he suggests, is a worldview that wisely accommodates a person—viewed as a particular kind of psychological organism—to the forces of nature and best enables that person to lead a flourishing life. At the same time, Santayana puts his own stamp on materialism by challenging the possibility that Democritus's geometric characterization of atoms can be a literal account of material substance. That is to say, he reinterprets Democritean metaphysics as a poetic and mythological position that discounts subjective experience and instead turns our attention to the substantive origins of our being.

To develop my analysis of metaphysics as a psychological framework for wise living, I focus on two important themes in the *Dialogues*. First, I consider Santayana's argument against psychologism as a driving force. (By *psychologism* Santayana intends such theories as radical empiricism, panpsychism, transcendentalism, and idealism—anything that, to his mind, made a substance of subjective experience.)

1 SANTAYANA, 1948, p. 77. Hereafter, I will cite this source parenthetically as *Dialogues*.

2 I have in mind early Rorty or Vincent Colapietro's moving presidential address to the Metaphysical Society of America in 2003.

3 This is not to say that all systematic or aesthetic approaches to metaphysics ignore the practical and ethical. It is certainly the case that Colapietro's interpretation invokes the same kind of humane considerations that I am advocating. My aim is to stress the ethical aspects of metaphysics in addition to the logical or literary aspects.

In his *Dialogues*, Santayana appropriates Democritean atomism to make his own original claim that experience is “normal madness,” an adaptively successful illusion, and therefore—contrary to the various stripes of psychologism—not the proper object of knowledge. Second, I address Democritus’s argument in the *Dialogues* that our sense of reality is shaped by two gods, Punishment and Agreement. These deities represent natural and social forces that result from our interactions with our environment and one another and that dictate what we believe in if we are to survive and to flourish within our surrounding environments.

Before proceeding further, I would like to clarify my use of two terms essential to this discussion: *metaphysics* and *ethics*. In keeping with my own argument, I use *metaphysics* in the sense of a broad and encompassing worldview—a visionary ontology of sorts—rather than a set of logical first principles that determine the nature of existence. My use of *ethics* is in keeping with that of Aristotle, a study of flourishing individual and social life rather than a set of rules for action. Therefore, when I claim that a metaphysics can have ethical import, I do not mean that there are literal moral laws structuring reality. Instead, I assert that the way we understand ourselves in relation to our world and to one another can help or hinder our personal and collective well-being. It is in this sense that Santayana suggests the atomism of Democritus is superior to the psychologisms of his present day.

My use of *metaphysics* to signify a literary ontology like Santayana’s should give pause to those familiar with his work, for Santayana disavowed the term *metaphysics* as an appropriate designation of his naturalistic philosophy, preferring *ontology* instead. In his alignment of his system, as he called it, with the Greeks rather than the modern philosophers (with whom he was temporally nearer but temperamentally more distant), Santayana took pains to separate himself from the absolutist aspirations of rationalists, generally, and German idealism and its offshoots, in particular. Any philosophy that claimed it could discern reality’s fundamental structure or grammar or knew how to cut nature at the joints was deluded regarding the meaning of knowledge and the best role for philosophy. As he puts it in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*:

Metaphysics, in the proper sense of the word, is dialectical physics, or an attempt to determine matters of fact by means of logical or moral or rhetorical constructions [...]. It is neither physical speculation nor pure logic nor honest literature, but (as in the treatise of Aristotle first called by that name) a hybrid of the three, materializing ideal entities, turning harmonies into forces, and dissolving natural things into terms of discourse.⁴

I mentioned earlier that Santayana composed his visit to Limbo because he preferred the Greeks to his recent predecessors and contemporaries. So, it is worth noting that Santayana does include Aristotle’s metaphysics as an object of his criticism. However, it is arguable how much his dislike for more recent speculative systems was coloring this characterization of the ancient empiricist. (It is important to keep in mind that Santayana draws on many aspects of Aristotelian metaphysics—such

4 SANTAYANA, 1955, p.vii.

as the concept of psyche—in his own philosophy in very friendly ways and seems to suggest that they are worthwhile tools for making sense of nature.). The point I want to stress for my purposes regarding Santayana's criticism of metaphysics, then, is twofold: 1) Santayana disavowed the idea that his ontology of four realms of being should be taken as foundational principles of existence, a point that will become relevant to his own criticism of Democritean atomism, and 2) Santayana was critical of metaphysics for conflating different methods of coming to terms with the objects of our experience. In a manner reminiscent of Hume, Santayana asserts that matters of fact should not be discerned by logical relations among ideas, nor should we allow our psychological preferences (whether moral or aesthetic) of how we would like reality to be to determine how it, in fact, is. Santayana's dislike for metaphysics did not, however, cause him to lean towards modern forms of empiricism. He rejected the approach of the British empiricists and of his pragmatic contemporaries such as William James who, in denying the possibility of knowledge beyond that which we experience, confined philosophy to experience itself, or—as Santayana labels it in *Dialogues*—to illusion. Santayana was a decided and avowed materialist, and in appreciation of the Greeks, he composed his own naturalist ontology. Eschewing narrow specializations on technical problems, he offered readers his own broad interpretation of reality. It is a focus of Santayana's own theoretical position generally and a dominant argumentative strain in *Dialogues* that we should distinguish scientific from literary methods and at the same time affirm each as valid and meaningful in its own right and for its particular purposes. As such, his distinction between metaphysics as a flawed application of logical principles and ontology as a literary account of reality should not be taken lightly. At the same time, given that others before me have reinterpreted metaphysics along more aesthetic lines, both terms can now be said to connote the background conditions of a given worldview, a sort of context from which to philosophize about particulars. Therefore, when I refer to an ethics of metaphysics in this essay, I have in mind speculative worldviews more generally—something more like Santayana's sense of ontology—and am treating the absolutist system-builders, often against their own intentions, as composers of literary accounts of reality and their philosophies as psychological productions.

Dialogues in Limbo is George Santayana's imaginary conversation with ancient Greek philosophers and other figures with whom he felt a greater kinship than he did his own contemporaries. Taking on the role of a visiting stranger in Dante's first circle of Hell, Santayana converses in the first five of the dialogues with Democritus, who represents the materialist position, and Alcibiades, Aristippus, and Dionysius the Younger, all of whom affirm the pleasures of subjective experience to the happy neglect of matter. While he states that he ultimately sides with Democritus, Santayana includes the others as representations of his own poetic temptations and as foils for the view that all that counts in our interactions with the world is our practical knowledge of it. The arguing shades, as we will see, together present Santayana's own philosophical position that knowledge, or animal faith, concerns

itself with material substance while periods of aesthetic detachment may temporarily free the spirit (or conscious existence) from dogmatic beliefs and practical concerns. *Dialogues* takes the position that such a philosophy is both sane and healthy for an organism inevitably dependent on material forces but at the same time intimately invested in the illusory objects that form the data of its experience.

In the preface to the enlarged edition of *Dialogues*, Santayana states that the purpose of the text is to “confirm the scientific psychology that [he has] put into the mouth of Democritus at the beginning” (*Dialogues*, ii). By scientific psychology, Santayana means the position that the origins of subjective life are material and thus the causes of our experience are to be found within the organism rather than among experiential data, which are immaterial and, in an important sense, illusory. In affirming his take on Democritean psychology, Santayana acknowledges two important and related points: 1) The dramatis personae in this dialogue are his own imaginative inventions, inspired by the ancient thinkers but not intended to be historically oriented representations; and 2) Santayana is focusing on Democritus’s philosophy as a *psychological* orientation, a position Santayana then develops in the ensuing chapters of the book.⁵ Santayana’s interpretation of Democritus as reflective of a scientific psychology and the other characters in the dialogues as lovers of illusion amounts to his analysis of the relative psychological value of each of their various viewpoints for the possibility of a sane and flourishing life.

In the first dialogue, “The Scent of Philosophies,” Democritus⁶ argues that philosophies produce an odor, or rather, that the person believing and espousing a given worldview gives off a scent as a result of his (or conceivably her) orientation. This would imply that a philosophy is not a disembodied set of propositions but a part of a living being’s psyche—part of its very “flesh,” if we may consider the body and the soul together to constitute the flesh. According to Democritus, the smell is either clean or putrid depending on how fertile the exchange has been between the world and the soul that perceives it. He furthermore refers to the scent of a philosophy as its “odoriferous virtue” (*Dialogues*, 5), implying that the quality of the smell is somehow indicative of the philosophy’s (and its adherent’s) excellence. In his vibrant description of these odors, he implies that they are symptoms of a given philosophy’s health (*Dialogues*, 3-4). Democritus then reinforces this notion in a later dialogue, where he suggests that his own eternal representation as an older man is an indication of his own wise philosophy during life that allowed him to thrive into his later years (*Dialogues*, 36). This notion of a philosophy as a relatively healthy or unhealthy psychological orientation derived from more or less fruitful interactions with the world is what I have in mind when I argue for an ethics of metaphysics. In agreement with Aristotle, I am suggesting that ethics cannot be separated from an account of the nature of the organism whose possibilities for excellence are under scrutiny. Worldviews are, taken somewhat

5 This psychological approach may be said, not incidentally, to characterize Santayana’s general treatment of other philosophers. *Egotism in German Philosophy*, for example, represents a particularly scathing assessment, but Santayana’s diagnostic manner can arguably be seen throughout his works.

6 Hereafter, when I refer to Democritus and other figures, I will, unless otherwise indicated, always mean the characters of the *Dialogues* rather than the historical figures themselves.

literally, views of the world that are held by living beings. They are perspectives on the nature of reality, dependent on empirical transactions between psyche and its environment but not necessarily reducible to the transactions themselves. As products of a given organism's interaction with its surroundings, one dependent on both the constitution of the particular psyche and the ability of its environment to sustain it, some philosophies will be more robust than others. They will attend to or ignore important features of the world, and their adherents can thrive or falter as a result.

What, then, constitutes a healthy philosophy? Santayana acknowledges in several of his works that nature is abundant and diverse enough to accommodate a variety of interpretations, and neither he nor I mean to suggest that only one speculative philosophy can be correct or fruitful. Any philosophy sufficiently in concert with nature can be said to be a true one. Furthermore, the viability of a belief system depends as much on the kind of organism one is as on the world that is to be explained. However, Santayana does argue that a sign of vitality in a philosophy is its ability to distinguish between substance and illusion, and a theory that attends too heavily to perceptions, qualities, and ideas to the neglect of their material source is likely to be ill adapted to natural conditions and thus harmful to the human psyche that believes in it. While, as Democritus asserts, "[v]egetables, in so far as they think at all are dreamers and idealists, and neither nature nor I have any quarrel with vegetables," (*Dialogues*, 8) any more complex form of life must navigate the world through the use of its senses, seek out food, and actively defend itself from predators and other threats. "Thus a creature endowed with locomotion lies under a mighty compulsion to discover the truth" (*Dialogues*, 77). Travelling invites a host of new environments to manage and master, and it is important that the psyche become adept at determining which sensations indicate friends and foes, benefits and harms. Furthermore, a rational psyche, dependent on abstract concepts for its successful socio-environmental navigation, will have to be even more skilled at determining which ideas can be affirmed as useful and effective and which attachments are mere idolatry.

Santayana's overall point is that a philosophy too in love with its own images may be ill-equipped for action, and so, as Democritus notes, "roses and cabbages should not be founders of sects" (*Dialogues*, 9). Ultimately, the transcendentalists and radical empiricists of Santayana's day are the objects of this criticism, as Santayana believes these theorists have turned experience into a substance and rejected the concept of a material substrate as nonsensical. In taking images for existing things, they have confused "blooming [with] knowing" (*Dialogues*, 9). In the fifth dialogue, "Lovers of Illusion," Democritus chastises Dionysius for having been a poor king due to his impractical attachment to poetical imagery:

Your philosophy would be perfect, if instead of being a king you had been a cabbage. The cabbage cannot move; it therefore matters nothing if its soul ignores the motions and positions of outer things or fails to distinguish them according to their natures [...]. But a cabbage cannot give direction to others; it makes a poor king. So, Dionysius, did you, for circumstances escaped you. Ah, if you had only been a cabbage, how entirely

your attention might have been devoted to that more than Homeric epic about yourself! [*Dialogues*, 77].

The epic referred to by Democritus is one that Dionysius has previously imagined composing. It is not a tale of adventures or conquests, but a product of a Narcissus-like⁷ fascination with his own passing experiences: every image, thought, and feeling produced by his soul as though for his particular amusement gets devoted attention in his life story. This appreciation of the passing moment as a play of appearances may be perfectly appropriate to a cabbage, which has nothing to do but grow. However, a philosophy fit for human flourishing—both individually and as a species—to say nothing of leadership, must be able to distinguish among different feelings, ideas, and sensations in order to determine the truth about practical matters. Santayana is concerned that a philosophy too attentive to and adoring of a theorist's own experiences, simply because they amount to the most immediate and direct objects that consciousness encounters, will confuse a reality in which it is happily at home for that of the, perhaps more hostile, surrounding world.

In contrast with those worldviews that concentrate intently on the phenomena of subjective life—not only in terms of aesthetic pleasure but also with an eye for logical relations or moral appeal—Santayana advocates for a philosophy of disillusionment, one that recognizes conscious existence as, at best, a more normal form of madness than the extremes suffered by those experiencing psychosis or serious social pathology. By calling us mad Santayana means that all mental life is appearance and so we are all, effectively, having visions. No perception or idea of substance can be adequate to that substance, so what we see is not what is materially there, and to see what is not there is, in a sense, to be mad. The sane are only differentiated from the truly mad because their visions are more commonplace, functional, and in accord with natural and social surroundings. To explain what keeps madness “normal” and, by implication, our knowledge accurate and fruitful, Democritus introduces two deities, Punishment and Agreement, that “flank human folly and keep it within bounds” (*Dialogues*, 47). Our subjective tales that we tell ourselves about the world, the myths that shape our sense of reality, are normal to the degree that they are in adaptive agreement with our environment and with members of our social groups. When our stories stray too far from these parameters, either physical reality (perhaps in the guise of an oncoming truck) or social natures (e.g., prisons and wars) will let us know or cut us short. (Not every transgression against nature is excessive, and so not all punishments will be so severe, but these more extreme corrections by nature are the focus of Democritus's discourse.) Both Punishment and Agreement contribute to human flourishing, one by cutting short our practical mistakes and social wrongs, the other by rewarding us with a sense of harmony with both one another and the natural world, taking its highest form in complete friendship. Together, these deities indicate, enforce, and reaffirm the

7 I use this term in place of the more common “narcissistic” because I want to suggest the dream-like quality of Narcissus's own fascination with his reflection, not the self-importance and egotism of the personality disorder, though egotism of a sort is surely at work here.

normalcy of our visions.⁸

As a result of the illusory nature of subjectivity, then, Santayana argues that our knowledge practices should discount subjectivity rather than hypostatize, glorify, dote on, or overly scrutinize it. At the same time, the illusions are important, for without appearances conscious organisms could have no experience or knowledge at all. As Democritus puts it, “true science in discounting appearance does not dismiss appearance, but sees substance through it” (*Dialogues*, 17). Furthermore, attention to appearances for their aesthetic qualities can be the most enjoyable and refreshing intervals of human life. Democritus affirms as pleasant and merry this aspect of his fellow shades, namely as lovers of illusion, precisely because they “detest action and laugh at science, and cultivate only exquisite sensation and free discourse” (*Dialogues*, 10). What Democritus means here is that Dionysius, Aristippus, and Alcibiades are honest in their attentions to appearances for their own sake and wiser than moralists like Plato (and, ostensibly, Santayana’s own contemporaries), who would burden existence with their own hypostatized images. So long as we do not take illusion to be the sum total of life, either by ignoring practical concerns or by weighing down appearance with substance, then appreciation of and reflection on the passing scene can amount to the most pleasant aspect of life and the ultimate fruition of our conscious existence. In the end, though, for a worldview to be a sound one, knowledge of ourselves, one another, and our surrounding world would have to take precedence. For our psyches to produce sane and congenial images at all, they must be healthy and in harmony with nature, and so any possibility for the more spiritual aspects of our lives relies, first, on successful interactions with our environments. Santayana considers Democritus’s position to be the healthiest because it distinguishes between knowledge and imagination, practicality and play. Our sanity, he believes, lies in self-knowledge regarding our inevitable madness and acknowledgement that it is only by way of illusions that we may learn something of our material source.

Interestingly, it is this exact recognition of normal madness, which Democritus affirms as sanity, that leads Santayana’s Stranger to rebuke Democritus for asserting that matter is nothing but atoms and the void. Santayana gives rare credit to his contemporaries in pointing out their discovery that “the farther we travel from appearance the more we expose ourselves to illusion” (*Dialogues*, 84). In other words, because of our inevitable reliance on sensations and ideas for knowledge of matter, every interpretation of matter will be an illusion, too. Scientific models and theories are imaginative constructions used to explain something that is more and other than them. Democritus’s atomistic theory, then, is only a hypothesis regarding the nature of matter, not an exact likeness of nature itself. As the Stranger says to Democritus, “[y]our scientific imagination draws a picture of minute geometrical

8 This is not to say that the messages we receive are so straightforward or uniform. Given our organismic complexity, we often receive competing information about what is good or harmful for us. It is also the case that our social agreements may be at odds with the facts and result in punishments from the surrounding environment, as when we become collectively attached to a flawed belief system and reinforce one another’s assumptions. In this case, our behavior is reinforced through the agreements of friendship, but we may find ourselves painfully corrected if those allegiances are mistaken in fact.

solids swimming in space: this picture did not exist until your genius composed it [...]" (*Dialogues*, 84). If Democritus thinks that his geometric constructions are literally true, that matter is exactly as he envisions it, then he is as guilty of idolatry as Plato and is "forgetting that reason [...] is a form of madness, checked only by Punishment and Agreement" (*Dialogues*, 85).

At the end of this set of the dialogues, however, Santayana gives Democritus the last word. In response to the Stranger (who, again, represents Santayana), Democritus retorts, in effect (and perhaps in sympathy with many scientists), that this skepticism shows the Stranger to be a product of his time. The Stranger thinks that the truth of a statement implies that the statement, model, or theory should be identical to matter, that we must have seen atoms and that there must be some pictorial resemblance for our theories to be true (*Dialogues*, 86-7). By contrast, Democritus explains, sensations are as illusory as anything, and the proof of the truth of a theory is practical, not pictorial. In claiming a representation is true, the scientist is not under the delusion that reality looks exactly like the model. Images of atoms shaped like solar systems, carbon chains with little "Hs" and "Cs," brain regions lit up in different colors in textbook drawings or fMRI images—no scientist is claiming that atoms, molecules, and brains are exactly like this or that their parts are so neatly delineated. Rather, these images are taken as signs of what is going on in matter, or more accurately, of some behavior of a given aspect of nature in response to the scientist's experimental prodding. To Democritus, and by Santayana's own admission elsewhere,⁹ the Stranger is ultimately a poet, and not a friend of knowledge (*Dialogues*, 88).

It may be poetry, however, that is better at producing worldviews, and a scientist capable of reconstructing our cosmological visions must be imaginative indeed. Perhaps being a product of my own time, I see the greater health of Santayana's, that is, the Stranger's, position. Even if the models and theories that science uses are but implements for accessing the pulls and pushes of matter, and even if the scientist, in her experiments, "sees through" the tool in order to get at what lies beyond it, it can be very important to reflect on the models themselves and to recall their status as models. In doing so, we remember that experiments and explanations always carve out some aspect of matter and invoke particular kinds of responses to the neglect of others. Treating scientific models as heuristic devices, however well grounded, can curb our tendencies to dogmatic absolutism and make us more adaptive to new ideas. A cosmology, moreover—something that pulls the wide variety of scientific discoveries into a coherent overarching explanation—will inevitably rely on poetic metaphors and figurative constructions. Finally, a philosophical worldview—a metaphysics—will need to place this scientific cosmology in the context of an even broader set of truths regarding human life and its worth. For this undertaking, we need the literary talents of wise humanists who recognize the importance of scientific discoveries and their practical relevance for human well-being, but also the qualities of life that make life worth living.

In sum, my idea of an ethics of metaphysics treats worldviews as tools for self-knowledge and for wise engagement with one's natural and social environments. It presumes that there are more and less healthy ways of making sense of our

9 SANTAYANA, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, ix.

surroundings and that these paradigmatic assumptions form the background conditions for deciding how to act both individually and collectively. As such, my position interprets speculative theories on pragmatic ethical grounds, where the worth of a metaphysics is to be measured by the consequences of believing in and acting on it. Furthermore—and because, with Santayana, I understand a worldview to be a product of a given kind of organism—a metaphysics cannot be an absolute account of reality, only a human one, and one that can appropriately guide a human life. As Santayana's Democritus points out, a cabbage's metaphysics might be perfectly healthy, acceptable, and true enough for the life of a vegetable, but it cannot offer a conception of reality sufficient for a human being to flourish. We can take this dissecting humor further and point out that different types of people—in terms of varying personalities or living conditions and climates—are likely to form different sorts of worldviews. In short, there are likely to be a plurality of viable metaphysical theories and no absolute or completely disinterested ground for critiquing them. This is not to say that we have no basis for criticizing one another's beliefs. Rather, the test in each case will be the—contestable—assessment of how well the beings who hold these points of view are likely to thrive. Such pragmatic arguments do take speculative philosophy away from the cleanliness, precision, and certainty of pure logic, but as a pragmatist, I claim that these theories were never solely logical, however intricate and careful their forms of argumentation. Whether we consider Descartes's mechanism, Leibniz's monads, or Spinoza's *Deus, sive Natura*, each abstract formulation aimed to solve practical problems dear to the interests of each philosopher. As such, these theories of ultimate reality were of ethical import and had consequences for people's lives. Attention to metaphysics matters, then, because these broad and encompassing views tell us who we are and where and how we find ourselves in the world. Thus they provide us with a framework from which to act. They can exalt us beyond all reason, diminish us to nothing, or bring us into an agreeable harmony with nature.

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