

SANTAYANA AND HIS “HERO”

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I. INTRODUCTION

When George Santayana left us in 1952, it was easy to see where he ranked among philosophers in at least two respects. In the domain of eloquence, Santayana is clearly among his profession’s pantheon. Together with such predecessors as Plato, Rousseau, and Nietzsche, Santayana is one of philosophy’s greatest prose stylists. Virtually all of his books have a number of quotable passages, most famously his comment that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹ Santayana also has to his name a best-selling philosophical novel, *The Last Puritan*. And his massive autobiography, *Persons and Places*, is an enjoyable read as much for its literary flair as for the profundity of its ideas.

Unfortunately, in another domain, Santayana’s legacy hasn’t fared nearly as well. I’m referring to his originality ... or should I say, his lack thereof. Near the end of *Persons and Places*, Santayana couldn’t resist the chance to mock his own reputation. Referring to a British thinker who was asked why [Santayana] was “overlooked among contemporary philosophers,” Santayana quotes this man as saying “Because he has no originality. Everything in him is drawn from Plato and Leibniz.”²

Now that’s a little harsh, and hopefully Santayana recognized as much. But there is some truth to what that Brit was talking about, especially if you’re allowed to replace one of the names he mentioned. There is no doubt that Santayana was influenced deeply by Plato, steeped as he was in looking at reality in terms of ideals and essences. But Santayana’s other greatest

¹ George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense* (New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905), 284.

² George Santayana, *Persons and Places (PP)* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987), 541.

influence was the man he would acknowledge to be his favorite philosopher of the last millennium. I am referring to Leibniz's contemporary, Baruch Spinoza.

Over and over again, Santayana reveals his debt to Spinoza. In "several respects," Santayana said, Spinoza "laid the foundation of my philosophy."³ Santayana elsewhere referred to Spinoza as his "hero."⁴ But even more meaningful than such tributes was Santayana's statement that of all the modern philosophers, only Spinoza was a philosopher "in the vital sense."⁵ By that, he meant that Spinoza, unlike the other moderns in his field, "substitute[d] the society of ideas for that of things[,] ... survey[ed] the world of existence in its truth and beauty rather than in its personal perspectives[,] ... practiced ... spiritual discipline, suffered [a] change of heart, ... and [did not] live on exactly like other professors."⁶ For Santayana, to live "like other professors" was tantamount to being a bore.

In this essay, I will argue that Santayana's philosophy is best appreciated as a complement to Spinoza's. In some respects, Santayana disagreed with the sage of Amsterdam, but much more often, especially as he grew older, his ideas came to resemble those of his hero. To the student of Spinoza like me, perhaps what is most exciting about reading Santayana is locating instances where he does not merely parrot Spinoza, but attempts to further develop and improve upon his mentor's teachings. If Hegel is correct that to be a philosopher, "one must first be a Spinozist,"⁷ rest assured that Santayana took that admonition to heart. But he also appreciated that to be a philosopher, one must not *only* be a Spinozist. After all, who was Spinoza but a mortal who lived precisely half as long as Santayana and unfortunately had to leave many of the great questions unexamined? We are privileged that Santayana walked the earth for 88 years and dedicated his most mature decades to addressing some of those very questions in his characteristically eloquent manner.

³ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 522.

⁵ George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England (SE)* (London: Constable & Co., 1922), 120.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

⁷ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton U. Press, 1989), 29.

II. SANTAYANA THE MAN

In order truly to be original, perhaps a thinker must first be rooted in a particular culture – something which the genius either gulps down with gusto, like a Maimonides, or comes passionately to question, like a Spinoza. And from these roots, the thinker can shoot up like a sequoia to heights that have never yet been attained.

If that is true, perhaps Santayana's lack of originality is a function of the rootless life in which he lived, not merely in his youth but as an adult as well. George Santayana was born in December 1863 in Madrid, the child of two Spanish parents. As a young boy, he resided for years with his father in the Spanish town of Avila, while his mother lived across the pond in Boston, raising the children of her first marriage to an American of English descent. At the age of nine, Santayana joined his mother and half-siblings and spent the next 40 years of his life based in America. Most of those years were centered around Harvard, where he attended college and then served as a professor of philosophy. Santayana never became an American citizen, however, and as a Harvard professor, he considered himself to be an outsider, preferring, in his own words, the company of “undergraduates and fashionable ladies,”⁸ and spending his holidays abroad. In 1912, he resigned his Harvard professorship and freed himself to live full-time in his continent of birth. His homes included London, Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Madrid, Avila, the Riviera, Florence and, ultimately, Rome, where he spent the final years of his life.

While he wrote so masterfully in English, Santayana never felt a sense of belonging in the United States, or in any other English-speaking country. Then again, he never felt at home in France, Spain, or Italy either. While technically a citizen of Spain throughout his life, he saw himself primarily not as a citizen, but as a habitual traveler. Indeed, in language that provides a glimpse of his universalistic philosophy, the older Santayana compared himself to a temporary guest in a “busy and animated establishment” otherwise known as the World.⁹ He claimed that the guest “has no right to demand what is not provided. He must be thankful for any little concessions that may be made to his personal tastes, if he is tactful and moderate in his

⁸ *PP*, 395.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 539.

requirements, pays his bills promptly and gives decent tips.”¹⁰ In the idea of a cosmic host, you’ll find perhaps the closest metaphor for the way he approached his great beloved, Nature.

As to the way he treated those natural creatures otherwise known as human beings, Santayana is often referred to as aloof and elitist. If you read his autobiography, you can tell that he loved numerous individuals, but he clearly coveted the company of luminaries, and seemed to observe human society the way a scientist might observe an ant hill. For his friends, the mature Santayana preferred brilliant malleable young minds, accomplished intellectuals, public benefactors ... and, last but not least, dead poets and philosophers.

III. GOD ... OR NATURE

Any discussion of Santayana as a disciple of Spinoza must begin with God, *or Nature*, a term that Spinoza sometimes utilized to refer to the deity. For Spinoza, God is the Omnificent One. Everything that is done, said, or thought -- be it now or at some other time -- is done, said, or thought by God. Muslims adopt that idea to refer to Allah, claiming that Allah alone is responsible for all that occurs. But in their case, they speak of Allah as being metaphysically separate from nature, whereas in Spinoza’s case, he views nature and God as identical in substance. All the animals, vegetables, particles and thoughts in the world are *in* Spinoza’s God, rather than being the fruits of a separate “creation.”

Spinoza’s God is also the great beloved. To be sure, such love was unrequited, for to truly love Spinoza’s God is to not endeavor for Him to love you in return.¹¹ Still, this is the one type of unrequited love that brings joy, and not depression. Spinoza centered his ethical philosophy on the goal of blessedness, and centered his concept of blessedness on the “*intellectual love of God*.” Spinoza would surely have adopted Einstein’s maxim that the most incomprehensible thing about the world is its comprehensibility, which is another way of saying that we can come to know Spinoza’s God much more intricately than at first it may appear. To be sure, Spinoza recognized that there is much about God that is transcendent; he expressed this by saying that God has infinite attributes, of which we know only two: extension and thought.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 540.

¹¹ Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics (Ethics)*, Unabridged Elwes Translation (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 256 (Prop. V.33).

Still, to admit that we are far from omniscient when it comes to God is not to say that we need to be essentially ignorant about Him. After all, to Spinoza, the eternal God is compelled by His nature to express Himself just as He has done in this world, and the results of this self-expression are on display in the form of natural laws. As these laws are the windows on God, the study of science, math, and philosophy can enable God to come into deeper and deeper focus. Armed with this powerful vision, we can come to encounter natural forms -- be they people, animals, or rocks -- with an intuitive sense of their relationship with other natural forms and with the infinite, eternal, and yes, transcendent *Unity* that grounds all that exists. That is what Spinoza meant by the intellectual love of God. That is what he understood as the path to blessedness.

But enough with the mentor. Now, let's look at the protégé. He emulated his predecessor by refusing to accept any God steeped in mythology or revelation. In fact, when he wrote *Reason in Religion*, one of his earliest works on the topic, Santayana revealed the atheism of his youth. In referring to Spinozism, he said that this philosophy "passed very justly for atheism, for that divine governance and policy had been denied by which alone God was made manifest to the Hebrews."¹² In other words, the young Santayana was willing to accept that the word "God" was best used to refer to the mythical judge and legislator who mankind created from our ideals and for our own utilitarian purposes; brilliant poetry, perhaps, but literally nothing more than a phantom.

The older Santayana, from his perch in Rome, remained bemused by the teachings of theology. Yet he also came to appreciate Spinoza's wisdom in attempting to reclaim the name of God, rather than ceding its meaning to ancient peoples and modern theologians. This is especially evident from a scene in Santayana's autobiography, where he describes an event that transpired while he was touring the historical Italian town of Paestum.¹³

At the railroad station at Paestum, Santayana heard a little girl ask her daddy if the amazing train that they were witnessing was made by God. To that question, Santayana explained, the father replied, "No, God didn't make it. It was made by the hand of man. *Le braccia dell'uomo l'hanno fatto.*" And then Santayana went on to describe the man as "puff[ing

¹² George Santayana, *Reason in Religion (RR)* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), 145.

¹³ Santayana's philosophical reflections of his trip to Paestum can be found at PP, 451-4. While Santayana does not specify the precise date of the visit, it appears to have taken place in 1903.

on] his cigar with a defiant resentful self-satisfaction as if he were addressing a meeting of conspirators.”

Santayana himself recognized that for most people, or most *professors*, this scene would have been innocuous enough. But Santayana fancied himself a philosopher in the vital sense of the term. As such, he was horrified by this “vulgar” atheist.

“I saw the claw of Satan strike that child’s soul and try to kill the idea of God in it. Why should I mind that? Was the idea of God alive at all in me? No: if you mean the traditional idea. But that was a symbol, vague, variable, mythical, anthropomorphic; the symbol for an overwhelming reality, a symbol that named and unified in human speech the incalculable powers on which our destiny depends. To observe, record, and measure the method by which these powers operate is not to banish the idea of God; it is what the Hebrews called meditating on his ways. The modern hatred of religion is not, like that of the Greek philosophers, a hatred of poetry, for which they wished to substitute cosmology, mathematics, or dialectic, still maintaining the reverence of man for what is super-human. The modern hatred of religion is hatred of the truth, hatred of all sublimity, hatred of the laughter of the gods. It is puerile human vanity trying to justify itself by a lie. Here, then, most opportunely, at the railway station returning from Paestum, where I had been admiring the courage and the dignity with which the Dorians recognized their place in nature, and filled it to perfection, I found the brutal expression of the opposite mood, the mood of impatience, conceit, low-minded ambition, mechanical inflation, and the worship of material comforts.”

If you read that passage closely, you will notice that Santayana shared with the vulgar atheist the distaste for conventional theology. But there is a sense of spirituality that he retained, and it wounded him to see an adult snuff out that sense in an impressionable child. The older Santayana, like his mentor, appreciated how dependent we are on nature and her “incalculable powers.” No less than Spinoza, Santayana also grasped the notion of transcendence, for which he substituted the word “sublimity.” And he appreciated that by engaging in science, we are hardly banishing the idea of the Divine Being, but actually “meditating on His ways.” Indeed, it

is clear that the mature Santayana shares Spinoza's "reverence for what is super-human." In all these respects, the pupil took on the mantle of the teacher.

In 1932, when he was asked to come to the Hague to speak in celebration of the 300th anniversary of Spinoza's birth, Santayana delivered a paper entitled *Ultimate Religion*, in which he grappled squarely with the question of his own belief in God. His paper revealed not merely his debt to Spinozism, but some of the ways in which the two philosophers diverged.

One glaring difference between these two thinkers involves their respective styles. Santayana, far from emulating his mentor's "geometrical method," believed that philosophy shouldn't be about proofs, but *vision*. "I detest disputation and distrust proofs and disproofs," he wrote.¹⁴ Instead, he thought of his task as revealing intellectual vistas, or to use the term that he invoked at the Hague, "expressing an impression."

As to the impression he expressed, it was not nearly as mystical as that of Spinoza. To be sure, Santayana claimed that we are all dependent on a single "*omnificent*" natural power. Yet, he refused to speculate on whether that power is "simple or compound, continuous or spasmodic, intentional or blind."¹⁵ Santayana would only say that he stands before it, "simply receptive, somewhat as, in Rome, I might stand before the great fountain of Trevi."¹⁶ For Spinoza, the sense of unity was imbedded in the concept of a limitless deity that both underlies and contains all that exists, now and forever. For Santayana, the sense of unity was wrapped up in how he viewed his own humanity. Santayana described the human condition – or at least his own – as that of a "suffering spirit" overtaken by the natural power on which it depends, and "tragically single, no matter how multifarious may be the causes of [its] destiny."¹⁷ You see, just as Spinoza's heresy was a response to his native Judaism, Santayana's was a response to his native Christianity.

¹⁴ Anthony Woodward, *Living in the Eternal: A Study of George Santayana (LE)* (Nashville: Vanderbilt U. Press, 1988), 66.

¹⁵ From George Santayana, *Ultimate Religion (UR)*, paper delivered at the Hague, 1932, and republished in *Classic American Philosophers*, edited by Max H. Fisch (Fordham U. Press, 1996), 320.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

At the Hague, Santayana began by praising Spinoza's courage. Then, he proceeded to model that attribute by explaining certain respects in which he found Spinoza's philosophy to be misguided. It couldn't possibly have been the kind of *tribute* his audience had expected, but to the student of either philosopher, it's a gold mine.

Santayana's primary criticism of Spinoza concerns the extent to which Spinoza viewed God as intelligible to the human mind. Quite clearly, Santayana viewed himself as doing to Spinoza what Spinoza did to all the theologians before him – namely, debunking anthropocentric myths. For Spinoza, it was enough to point out that his God does NOT love us. He is NOT merciful, just, patient, vengeful, or willful. He did NOT communicate directly to Moses from a burning bush, or part the sea, or torture the Egyptians. But what He HAS done is reveal Himself in great detail to those who study logic, science, and math, and who have learned to nurture virtuous emotions. In particular, Spinoza's God has revealed regularities in nature, and it is our blessed privilege as rational entities to learn about and love these regularities, and all the unique forms that similarly manifest the divine nature. For just as the truths of math or logic are eternal – meaning that they necessarily exist as part of the very fabric of being – so can this be said about *ALL* things and ideas that occur in nature. To Spinoza, everything that exists represents the unfolding through space, time and infinite other dimensions of a God whose nature is simply to express Himself. And we are blessed by the fact that it is in our nature, if we develop our rational faculty, to discern much of what He has expressed.

So said the mentor. But to Santayana, that perspective didn't go far enough. We mustn't stop with the truth that God is not a man. We mustn't stop with the Spinozist claim that to compare God's mind with ours is like comparing the dog-star in the sky with the animal that barks.¹⁸ We must recognize that this intelligibility Spinozists speak of – this *comprehensibility*, to use Einstein's word – is a myth. We must recognize that God, if there is such a thing, is truly infinite, and that we are but tiny creatures by comparison. To quote Santayana, “there may be dark abysses before which intelligence must be silent, for fear of going mad.”¹⁹ There may also be different universes. For surely, Santayana thought, the laws of this universe are *arbitrary*.

¹⁸ *Ethics*, 61 (Prop. I.17.N.)

¹⁹ *UR.*, 322.

In Part I of his *Ethics*, Spinoza claimed that “things could not have been brought into being in any other manner.”²⁰ In response, Santayana referred to a human being as an “accident in an accident.”²¹ Rather than viewing existence as did Spinoza as the unfolding of perfect, and ultimately immutable Being, he saw it as irrational, absurd and constantly changing. For the Spinozist idea that everything is necessary, Santayana substituted the idea that because we cannot know anything about what is necessary, we are best off viewing everything as contingent. To be sure, everything might ultimately be unified by a single, great power, but we flatter ourselves to think that we humans can speak about such a power, let alone comprehend it.

How did Santayana come to see human intelligence in such an uncharitable light? Perhaps it comes from his view that minds are mere byproducts of matter, not as Spinoza said, a co-extensive attribute of God. For Spinoza, God, as a unity, is the sole causative agent in the world, and both mind and matter are truly the same thing (attributes of the divine substance) perceived in two different ways.²² To Santayana, however, matter – in other words, *Nature* -- is supreme, and minds are clearly subordinate. It is the material realm only that moves and shakes reality. Our minds are left to witness the world, but they can ultimately do nothing about changing it.

I’ve often wondered why Santayana came to elevate matter so much. My own vision is more like that of Spinoza, who placed mind and matter on the same pedestal. But that is not to say that Santayana hasn’t scored points with me in this dispute with his mentor. While Santayana may aptly be faulted for turning matter into an idol, Spinoza may also be taken to task for the humility he lacked in exaggerating the potency of the human mind.

Spinoza, remember, was the product of 17th century Europe, a time when incessant religious wars were threatening the foundations of our emotional security. Stepping into this breach, a heretic like Spinoza must have felt obliged to offer his own brand of security -- his own Rock of Gibraltar. Hence, the constant use of the word “God” for Being itself, the elevation of the concept of “blessedness,” and the assurance that we the people can largely comprehend the ways of God, despite God’s eternal and infinite nature.

²⁰ *Ethics*, 70 (Prop. I.33).

²¹ *PP*, 411.

²² *Ethics*, 86-87 (Prop. II.7, N.)

Santayana revered Spinoza for courageously challenging so much of the conventional wisdom of the 17th century. But now, centuries later, we are able to challenge still more. If we join Spinoza in promoting the idea of God as truly infinite, absolute, and limitless, are we not obliged to laugh at the notion that this God is so profoundly intelligible to the human mind? Are we not obliged to at least question any claim that *the* universe, as we call it, is the *only* universe? Are we not compelled to ask whether the order we observe isn't a mere blip in a larger realm of chaos? Or whether what transpires here is nothing more than an accident of irrational matter?

Ultimately, if you compare the two perspectives of these philosophers when it comes to God, or nature, you are left with a contrast between what they perceive as the great Unity. As I have noted, Spinoza located that Unity in Being itself, which he alternatively referred to as Nature, Substance, and God. And we the people find ourselves *in* God, together with all other animals, vegetables, minerals, particles, thoughts, and an infinity of other things that we are too primitive to perceive. But at least what we can perceive we can encounter with reason and love, and that is the key to our happiness. By contrast, to Santayana, we know little about the unity that grounds all of life, or even *if* life is grounded by a single, simple power. What we do know, is the unity that stems from being human. A unity born of solitude. Of mortality. Of the knowledge that what is most meaningful to us, our spirit, is completely impotent in the face of the natural forces we constantly encounter.

Recall Santayana's precise words in referring to his conception of unity: it is found "in my own solitude, in the unity of this suffering spirit. ... My destiny is single, tragically single, no matter how multifarious may be the causes of my destiny."²³ It is precisely this sense of singularity, this sense of oneness, that determined Santayana's perspective on ethics – just as Spinoza's sense of ethics was determined by basking in the oneness of an all-encompassing, transcendent, and yet largely-knowable God.

IV. LIVING THE GOOD LIFE

In the realm of ethics, Santayana's autobiography included both a statement of his debt to Spinoza and a description of his mentor's shortcomings. "I regard Spinoza as the only modern

²³ UR, 320.

philosopher in the line of orthodox physics ... Orthodox physics should inspire and support orthodox ethics; and perhaps the chief source of my enthusiasm for him has been the magnificent clearness of his orthodoxy on this point. Morality is something natural. It arises and varies ... with the nature of the creature whose morality it is. Morality is something relative: not that its precepts in any case are optional or arbitrary; for each man they are defined by his innate character and possible forms of happiness and action. His momentary passions or judgments are partial expressions of his nature, but not adequate or infallible; and ignorance of the circumstances may mislead in practice, as ignorance of self may mislead in desire. But this fixed good is relative to each species and each individual; so that in considering the moral ideal of any philosopher, two questions arise. First, does he, like Spinoza, understand the natural basis of morality, or is he confused and superstitious on the subject? Second, how humane and representative is his sense for the good, and how far, by his disposition or sympathetic intelligence, does he appreciate all the types of excellence toward which life may be directed?"²⁴

Before we get to Santayana's criticism of Spinoza's status as a moralist, let's first understand his tribute, for it is both massive and insightful. To begin, Santayana praises Spinoza for once again basing his philosophy on natural wisdom, and not revelation ... or, if you prefer, mythology. Spinoza is said to have accurately located the source of morality in "the nature of the creature whose morality it is." Spinoza is what is known among philosophers as both a psychological and ethical egoist. He believes that we do in fact act in a way that we believe is most conducive to our own greatest good, and that we *ought* in fact do so. To Spinoza, as for Santayana, there is simply no alternative.

And what is that good? Here are Spinoza's words, which Santayana would surely adopt: "[W]e in no case desire a thing because we deem it good, but contrariwise, we deem a thing good because we desire it; consequently, we deem a thing evil that which we shrink from; everyone, therefore, according to his own particular emotions, judges or estimates what is good, what is bad, what is better, what is worse."²⁵ So, in an attempt to lead the good life, we do, and in fact *must*, follow our own unique desires and other emotions.

²⁴ *PP*, 234-5.

²⁵ *Ethics*, 156 (Prop. III, 39, N.)

Santayana uses these ideas to embrace moral relativism ... but only up to a point. The good, he argues, is different for each person and for each species, but that is not to say that the precepts of morality are “optional or arbitrary.” Thus, there are some moral issues on which all members of our species are obliged to take a single position – such as living in accordance with the Golden Rule. And there are other moral issues on which different people can appropriately take different positions in accordance with their unique natures. But even with respect to these latter issues, for any given person, the choice may be clear enough that he or she should feel *compelled* to follow a particular path. If, on the one hand, I’m able to play ball like Michael Jordan or, on the other hand, practice law like Dan Spiro, I’d better choose that first path. After all, for Santayana, as for Spinoza, our goal in life should be to best cultivate our unique powers as an individual and therefore live in harmony with our nature.

In all those respects, Santayana said, Spinoza was his “master and model.”²⁶ And yet, when push came to shove, Santayana proclaimed that Spinoza’s judgment *lacked* authority on moral matters. The reason for this assessment stems from Spinoza’s allegedly narrow sense of focus on what it means to live the good life. According to Santayana, a moral authority must be a “complete humanist,” and Spinoza was not.²⁷ “He had no idea of human greatness and no sympathy with human sorrow. His notion of the soul was too plebian and too quietistic. He was a Jew not of *Exodus* or *Kings* but of Amsterdam. He was too Dutch, too much the merchant and artisan, with nothing of the soldier, the poet, the prince, or the lover.”²⁸

Famously, when Napoleon set his eyes on the multi-dimensional Goethe, he proclaimed, “Voilà un homme.” Santayana would have concurred in that assessment, but would not have said the same about Spinoza. Behold an *intellect*, he would have said. Perhaps even, he would have added, behold a *saint*. But Spinoza’s life was too imbalanced -- too cerebral – for him to have been viewed by Santayana as a true *sage* when it comes to making moral judgments.

Santayana’s critique impacts profoundly on his view of blessedness. To Santayana, the wise followers of Spinoza’s fundamental ethical insights should not satisfy themselves with the so-called *intellectual* love of God. “The intellect,” Santayana argued, “is not the whole of human

²⁶ *PP*, 235.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

nature, nor even the whole of pure spirit in man. Reason may be the differentia of man; it is surely not his essence. His essence, at best, is animality qualified by reason.”²⁹ Hence, when we attempt to lead the good life, we are well advised to cultivate not only our ability to comprehend the world, but, for example, also our ability to appreciate all forms of beauty and to use our powers so as to satisfy the needs of other people. “That the intellect might be perfectly happy in contemplating the truth of the universe,” Santayana said, “does not render the universe good to every other faculty; good to the heart, good to the flesh, good to the eye, good to the conscience or [good to] the sense of justice. Of all systems an optimistic system is the most oppressive.”³⁰

If you had trouble understanding that last sentence, consider another way in which Santayana borrowed from Spinoza: he grounded his metaphysical philosophy on the idea that human conduct was completely dependent on the larger forces of nature or God, and yet nevertheless focused his ethical philosophy on finding a path to human freedom. As a result, whatever is most oppressive is obviously to be avoided at all costs. To Santayana, Leibniz’s idea that this is the “best of all possible worlds,” despite all the pain and suffering within it, is not only intolerable, it’s oppressive. As I’ll explain momentarily, it wasn’t Leibniz that Santayana used to supplement his Spinozism so much as Plato.

Returning now to the issue of blessedness, recall that Santayana perceived the human condition in the world as, at best, a simple guest in a grand establishment who dares not ask for much, lest he lose what little he has. Recall that he also viewed the human spirit as isolated, characterized by suffering, and ultimately dependent on the ostensibly-arbitrary whirlwind known as the realm of matter, or nature. How then does such a solitary soul find blessedness?

Santayana’s answer is given in a simple sentence, one that combines both his Spinozism *and* his Platonism. The answer, is by *living in the eternal*.

Google that phrase and the word “Spinoza” and you’ll immediately see one Santayana reference after another. It was Santayana who used the phrase to describe his own philosophy, even though Spinoza was its primary inspiration. “Living in the Eternal” became the title of a nice little book by Anthony Woodward, which was subtitled “A Study of George Santayana.”

²⁹ UR, 322.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

Woodward began the book by referring to a *Life* magazine story about Santayana published in 1944, soon after the Allied soldiers arrived in Rome. Santayana was discussed by the *Life* journalist as follows: “Of communism and fascism,” he said, ‘doubtless there are good things in both.’ Of war he knew nothing. Said he, “I live in the Eternal.””³¹

That is, of course, a Spinozist ideal. In the final part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza stated that even though a person’s consciousness does not continue after his body dies, “the human mind cannot be absolutely destroyed with the body, but there remains something of it which is eternal.”³² Many have been puzzled by that statement, but not Santayana. His explanation, provided in an Introduction to a 1910 publication about Spinoza’s *Ethics*, reveals much about Spinoza’s notion of immortality, and perhaps even more about Santayana’s conception of the good life.

“To see things under the form of eternity is to see them in their historic and moral truth, not as they seemed as they passed, but as they remain when they are over. ... A man who understands himself under the form of eternity knows the quality that eternally belongs to him, and knows that he cannot wholly die, even if he would; for when the movement of his life is over, the truth of his life remains. The fact of him is a part forever of the infinite context of facts. This sort of immortality belongs passively to everything; but to the intellectual part of man it belongs actively also, because, in so far as it knows the eternity of truth, and is absorbed in it, the mind *lives* in that eternity. In caring only for the eternal, it has ceased to care for that part of itself which can die. ... [Of all the animals, man] alone knows that he must die; but that very knowledge raises him, in a sense, above mortality, by making him a sharer in the vision of eternal truth. The truth is cruel, but it can be loved, and it makes free those who have loved it.”³³

At the end of his philosophical novel, Santayana pointed out the clearest example of what is eternal for human beings: namely, the stories of our own lives. Those story lines are timeless, just as the greatest ideas of humankind are timeless. What is not timeless are most of the worldly concerns of petty functionaries, which Plato compared to shadows on a cave wall.

³¹ *LE*, 1.

³² *Ethics*, 259 (Prop. V.33).

³³ George Santayana, from *Introduction to Spinoza’s Ethics* (London: 1910), xviii-xix.

Note also the way Santayana ended his statement about eternity -- by reminding us of both the cruelty of truth, and of the liberating quality of love. It is precisely in that liberating ideal that Santayana's *Platonism*, as opposed to his Spinozism, comes to the fore.

Spinoza's beloved, you see, isn't the God that his ancestors described in the form of myths and legends. His God is what is *real*. Spinoza preached an intellectual love. Not a love of some distant, mythical heaven, but a love of what we find here on Earth with our minds. A love of what is apparent to our senses, but also knowable through our intuition. Ultimately, he preached a love of the One who, in the words of the Qur'an, is closer to us than our jugular vein.³⁴

Santayana's beloved isn't so much the real, as the *ideal*. For him, what is most real is matter. And we all can concur about how imposing and devastating the realm of matter can be. But we also are privileged to possess what he called spirit, or consciousness, and that spirit allows us to construct in our mind a realm of ideal essences. To Santayana, an essence refers to any unit of rational meaning. Taken collectively, the realm of essences are the determinate forms we construct to find meaning out of the flux and chaos of nature. It is in this realm that we can find our salvation, our blessedness, on Earth – in other words, we are able not only to live in the eternal, but to live *happily* in the eternal, at least for periods of time.

You can see already why Santayana so valued the arts, for they provided temporary respites where the “suffering soul” can glimpse some idealized reality. But more than finding those glimpses in art, he found them in society. Santayana's goal was to look at any particular person and recognize that person's ideal state. When Santayana constructed his own “ultimate religion” during his speech at the Hague, he said that “to love things spiritually” means to “see them all prophetically in their possible beauty. To love things as they are would be a mockery of things: a true lover must love them as they would wish to be.”³⁵

When we see a klutzy golfer who looks like George Costanza, does that mean we should envision him as the golfer he would wish to be, say Tiger Woods? No. But when we see that klutzy Costanza, Santayana would argue, we are still obliged to imagine him at his best – and not

³⁴ Surah 50, verse 16.

³⁵ *UR*, 323.

just as a golfer, but as a person. If we wish to live a blessed life, we must find in every soul “that desired perfection, that eternal beauty, which lies sealed in the heart of each living thing.”³⁶

Imagine encountering a brilliant, but troubled man, who was recently caught engaging in violent criminal activity. Would Santayana suggest envisioning that this man has instead lived an exemplary life? Of course not. Santayana was an authentic philosopher, and as such, he was too devoted to the *truth* to adopt such a perspective. But we need not become a Pollyanna to heed Santayana’s advice. For example, we could choose to isolate the brilliance in this criminal’s soul, and conceive of a future stage of his development in which he’s turned into a creative artist who can channel his violent impulses constructively through literature or music.

In short, at the time this brilliant criminal was locked up for his horrible deeds, his eternal beauty truly was surely “sealed” in his heart. But to quote Spinoza, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”³⁷ And perhaps the job of he who wishes truly to live in the eternal requires the difficult task of identifying even in the most depraved among us, that which is beautiful.

V. THINKING DIALECTICALLY

In his book, *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher*, Irving Singer contends that Santayana viewed the life of reason as the harmonizing of opposing poles. Singer provided several examples of these poles, most notably, “Platonism vs. naturalism, classicism vs. romanticism, idealization vs. realism, and poetry vs. prose.”³⁸ Truly, a whole chapter could be written on how Santayana addressed *any* pair of these poles, including his attempt to synthesize them into a more nuanced and insightful approach than what has come before him.

Undoubtedly, Singer is correct that Santayana was a devotee of synthesis who entertained a variety of viewpoints – in ethics, metaphysics, even politics. I’ve said little about that last domain only because it seemed to be relatively less important to Santayana. But I can assure you that he entertained political ideas, for there was plenty of real estate in his head for intellectual

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

³⁷ *Ethics*, 271 (Prop. V.42, N.).

³⁸ Irving Singer, *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 2000), 131.

play, and there were few playing fields in which he refused to join in the action. To summarize the voyage of his political thoughts, the young Santayana flirted with ideologies like socialism and fascism because he was turned off by the busyness and petty concerns of liberals, and was attracted to what he called a “consecrated” life – meaning one firmly devoted to exalted aims. By the 1940s, though, as you might imagine, Santayana came more deeply to appreciate the virtues of liberalism when compared to its alternatives.

If asked to identify one dichotomy that best defines Santayana’s philosophy, I would point to the contrast between the “spiritual” and the “pious.” Santayana defined these two concepts in opposition to each other, and yet it is clear that he viewed harmonizing them as among his greatest tasks. It is also clear that between these two poles, Santayana preferred one intellectually and the other viscerally.

Piety and spirituality were the main focal points of *Reason in Religion*. Santayana defined piety as “man’s reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment.” He stated that “pious men discern God in the excellent of things,”³⁹ and that his own atheism, “like that of Spinoza, is true piety toward the universe and denies only gods fashioned by men in their own image, to be servants of their human interests.”⁴⁰

Santayana wrote eloquently about classical architecture and virtues, and had a healthy respect for institutions that have stood the test of time, including his native Catholicism. But in terms of piety, I seriously doubt Santayana had a better model than Spinoza himself. He spoke of Spinozism as adopting the view that man should be a pious Levite, with the stars shining above him. In such a realm, there is no room for human passion. And as you should know by now, Santayana needed to make room for that.

Or at least, so he wrote. In *Religion in Religion*, after discussing piety, Santayana went on to say that “religion has a second and *higher* side, which looks to the end toward which we move. ... This aspiring side of religion may be called Spirituality. Spirituality is nobler than piety, because what would fulfill our being and make it worth having is what alone lends value to

³⁹ *RR*, 142.

⁴⁰ *SE*, 246.

that being's source."⁴¹ Man, Santayana continued, "is spiritual when he lives in the presence of the ideal."⁴² To Santayana, spirituality refers to our passion to make a difference in the world. Note that he is talking about the spirit in the classical, not the Christian sense of the term – when he says "spirit," he means it in the most robust way possible.

So where is the synthesis? In the heroism of the Greeks and Romans, to which Santayana so often returned in his writing. He spoke of the spiritual virility that manifested itself at times as romancing a woman, and at other times as conquering a nation. This virility, though, can be found in abundance in classical literature, architecture, and yes, religion – all of which we associate with piety. To use Plato's terminology, Santayana discussed with reverence that human capacity known as the thymos – the spirited faculty – which is so pronounced among the great warriors. He clearly admired those who appreciated the classical forms and teachings, but who were not content simply to watch. He admired those who aspire to change the world, rationally identifying their goals, and then courageously doing whatever it takes to bring these goals to fruition. Similarly, he hated mysticism in all its forms, contending that it is "the most primitive of feelings and only visits formed minds in moments of intellectual arrest and dissolution."⁴³

That was the teaching of Santayana the philosopher, or at least the young Santayana. But if you read his autobiography, you will see that Santayana *the man* was no Pericles, and not even a Goethe. This was a man who confined his life to reading, writing, talking, watching, and sleeping. That's pretty much it. Lacking as he did any sign of a thymos, Santayana in his later years developed doctrines in which *the good* involved little more than understanding the world and appreciating its beauty. For all that his pen lionized the feats of soldiers and lovers, we see little evidence that he fought, and if he did make love it was surely a closeted one, hardly suitable for a great romantic soul. In short, his spirit never reached the level of his piety, which is sad, given how unwilling he was to achieve the same level of mystical pleasure that allowed his mentor to rest in peace.

⁴¹ *RR*, 193.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 277.

VI. CONCLUSION

“Piety to mankind must be three-fourths pity,”⁴⁴ wrote Santayana in *Reason in Religion*, before going on to wax eloquent about the human condition as one of misery and vice, filth and blood. But this was the same man who in *Ultimate Religion* wrote about the value of finding the eternal beauty in everything and every one. How are we possibly to put all this together?

I would start by reflecting on a passage in *The Last Puritan* when the title character ruminates about himself. “Hadn’t he always felt that the human side of the universe was its evil side,” asked the so-called Last Puritan, “that only the great non-human world – the stars, the sea, and the woods – could be truly self-justified and friendly to the mind? Ah, if he could only learn to look at human things inhumanly, mightn’t they, too, become intelligible and inoffensive?”⁴⁵

For Santayana, people were anything but inoffensive. He wrote with palpable disdain about the worldliness of his fellow professors and businessmen, and the fanaticism of those who were obsessed with political ideologies. He clearly wanted to live in the eternal, and found that eternal in nature, in art, and especially in those select men and women who were capable of great ideas and actions. But even Santayana did not have the luxury of invariably surrounding himself with such notables. And as a disciple of Spinoza, Santayana recognized that it is neither an option to escape from human society nor allow it to sap us of our happiness and our strength.

So what do we do? We turn back to the idea of piety and focus on the objects of our piety – all the beloveds that we have come to admire, or at least to cherish. If we are fortunate enough like Spinoza to find meaning in the word God, or like Santayana to revere the concept of nature, we allow our feelings of piety to extend to those concepts. We nurture that love. And then we devote ourselves to how best to *honor* that to which we are attached, whether it goes by the name God, nature or whatever. I suspect that we will soon realize that it is impossible to bestow this honor in any authentic sense without extending our arms to our fellow human beings, and I’m not just talking about the kind of people Santayana spoke about knowing in his

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁵ George Santayana, *The Last Puritan* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 268.

autobiography – luminaries like John D. Rockefeller, William James, Isabella Stuart Gardner, and Bertrand Russell. I’m talking about the people who couldn’t even recognize some of those names, or care less about the ones they recognize.

Santayana might have been asking for too much when he wrote in *Ultimate Religion* about the goal of loving all things as they would wish themselves to be. But perhaps, what we can accomplish is to honor all things for what they really are and what they have the potential to become, and in spite of the fact that they may not live up to our ideals, let alone their own. It is a goal much more befitting Spinoza than Santayana, and yet perhaps this is as it should be. As Santayana himself recognized, “I cannot be mentioned without a smile in the same breath with Spinoza for greatness of intellect.”⁴⁶ Then again, as he went on to say, nor can Spinoza “be compared with me for Spanish blood.”⁴⁷ Right on both counts, as Santayana so often was.

⁴⁶ *PP*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*