
Santayana, James, and the Virtues of Personal Philosophy

Neil W. Williams

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1. Introduction

On paper, the relationship between William James and George Santayana is simple. Santayana arrived in Harvard in 1882, where James was one of the young professors of philosophy who ‘represented the dangers and scandals of free thought’ (P&P: 245). Santayana took two classes with James in his senior year (1885-86) in English Philosophy and Advanced Study and Research in Psychology. After graduation, Santayana was the co-recipient of the coveted Harvard Walker Travelling Fellowship, and James supported his travels in Europe with introductions to European academics and intermittent correspondence. Upon returning to Harvard and completing his thesis in 1889, Santayana was almost immediately asked to cover some of James’s courses. Santayana continued to teach at Harvard and, with James’s collegial support, was promoted to full professor in 1898. They remained colleagues until James’s retirement in 1907.¹ Santayana himself left Harvard not too long afterwards, in 1912.

To Santayana then, James was first a teacher, a mentor, and later a colleague. The two read and commented on each other’s work and corresponded frequently. The older man was unfailingly supportive of the younger’s career, and though he disagreed with the content of what he wrote,

¹ See (McCormick, 2003, pp. 34; 74; 97).

James was always delighted by Santayana's philosophy. Further, the two were allies against a certain creeping technicality and professionalism within academic philosophy, which violated their sense of what was truly valuable about the discipline. But the two were never really friends. Santayana once wrote of a brief acquaintance that: "there were things in us fundamentally inaccessible to one another" (P&P: 189). This seems to be equally true of his relationship with James. The two men were too different in temperament to ever be fully comfortable with one another. James's active, gregarious, and spontaneous personality, which put many others at their ease, made Santayana uncomfortable.² Perhaps this is what Bertrand Russell meant, when he reportedly commented that 'James was altogether too much for Santayana'.³ On the other hand, Santayana was too detached and passive for James to ever fathom his character truly. He once wrote incredulously to his wife, Alice: '[Santayana is] the oddest *spectator* of life ... as if he took *no* active interest in anything'.⁴ As Dickinson S. Miller, a one-time student of both thinkers, once commented: 'William James and George Santayana were a contrast almost too absolute and perfect to be real'.⁵

Arguably, in many philosophical comparisons, such a difference in personality would not be relevant. But – as this chapter will explore – James and Santayana were united in thinking that philosophy should be a sincere expression of the personality of the philosopher. As such, both thinkers produced philosophical theories which honestly mapped the contours of reality as viewed from the perspective of their own character. Given their opposing temperaments, we might expect their philosophies to disagree on every point. But surprisingly, there is in fact extensive agreement between the two thinkers. Indeed, the influence the two had on each other's thought is an encouraging reminder of the capacity of two radically different thinkers to find common philosophical ground. Charting this influence, this chapter will start by exploring some of the correspondence between the two thinkers (§2), before exploring the anti-foundational epistemology which underpins much of their thought (§3). This anti-foundationalism, I argue, leads both to a meta-philosophy which emphasized the virtue of *honesty* over more technical and academic approaches (§4). Finally, the chapter will explore Santayana's criticism of the 'will to believe' argument, which hinges on the accusation that James's philosophy lacks the virtue of *wisdom* (§5).

² Santayana comments that: 'I was uncomfortable in [James's] presence. He was so extremely natural that there was no knowing what his nature was, or what to expect next; so that one was driven to behave and talk conventionally, as in the most artificial society' (MS: 166-167).

³ Reported by Cory (1963). Cory also mentions Santayana's concern, upon meeting James for the first time, that the older man thought that he was a 'sissy' compared with James's own 'intensely masculine' intellectual presence (Cory, 1963, p. 42).

⁴ James followed this observation with a complement: 'But absolutely sincere and simple'. WJ to AJ, Apr 1905. CWJ 10:9.

⁵ (Miller, 1921, p. 356). Miller is not alone in this assertion. Allen writes that 'Santayana and James could never really understand each other' (Allen, 1967, p. 303). Howgate comments that due to differences in temperament, Santayana 'understood neither James nor Royce' (Howgate, 1961, p. 192). Josiah Royce was Santayana's doctoral supervisor, and later colleague at Harvard. And Fisher comments that the 'ultimate philosophical differences' between Santayana and James were 'so great ... that one might wonder whether either could speak meaningfully at all to the other' (Fisher, 1965, p. 70).

2. Character and Correspondence

From early in their acquaintance, James was struck by the talent and unique character of his student. Introducing Santayana to his British friend Shadworth H. Hodgson, James offered the following description:

He is half-Spaniard, half Yankee, and a genuine philosophic intelligence if ever there was one. He has the real dialectical zest, of playing with distinctions for the mere sweet fun of the thing, but is withal of a most serious turn – a Catholic in fact. A capital writer, both of prose and verse, good classic scholar, perfectly modest and simple character – I hardly know a more interesting young fellow, if you once get at him.⁶

Hodgson was the president of the Aristotelian Society, and James was clearly concerned that Santayana would not take enough advantage of his Walker Fellowship, noting that his student was of a ‘rather reserved’ character.⁷

From the perspective of James’s outgoing and social character, Santayana’s removed approach to the world appeared quite alien. In an otherwise supportive letter to the president of Harvard, Charles William Eliot, James commented that Santayana was ‘a very honest and unworldly character, a spectator rather than an actor by temperament’, but that besides this ‘element of weakness’ he was ‘both a “gentleman” and a “scholar” in the real sense of the words.’⁸ Two years later, writing this time to endorse Santayana’s promotion to full professor, James wrote to a resistant Eliot that Santayana’s mind – whatever ‘shortcomings’ it might involve – was of a ‘rare and precious type’ which would undoubtedly ‘enrich’ the Harvard department: ‘we shall not often have a chance at a Santayana, with his style, his subtlety of perception, and his cold-blooded truthfulness’.⁹ For James, always an advocate for more diverse communities of inquiry, it was precisely Santayana’s difference from himself and other American thinkers which presented a reason for his promotion.¹⁰

Though James did not live to see the publication of most of Santayana’s core philosophical works, he greatly enjoyed those he did read. He described Santayana’s doctoral thesis as ‘simply an exquisite production’.¹¹ His praise for *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (1900) was effusive, though he disagreed with the content of Santayana’s thought:

⁶ WJ to S. Hodgson., Mar 1887. CWJ 6:208-209.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ WJ to C. Eliot, Jan 1896. CWJ 8:124. This observation was echoed – with less sympathy – by other Harvard colleagues. G.H. Palmer wrote of Santayana that: ‘[h]is subtle and beautiful mind has a strange lack of reality. The man is merely an amused observer, without stake in the world he inhabits.’ GHP to WJ, Dec 1892. CWJ 7:360.

⁹ WJ to C. Eliot, Jan 1898. CWJ 8:340. James – with colleagues Josiah Royce and Hugo Münsterberg – supported Santayana’s advancement against Eliot’s concerns about his ‘withdrawn’ and ‘abnormal’ character. See Eliot’s letter to Münsterberg, Jan 1898, quoted in McCormick, 2003: 97

¹⁰ D.S. Miller recalls that James ‘always delighted and exulted in Mr. Santayana’ and once referred to him as the ‘greatest man in Harvard University’ (Miller, 1921, p. 356).

¹¹ WJ to AJ, May 1889. CWJ 6:484.

The great event in my life recently has been the reading of Santayana's book. Although I absolutely reject the Platonism of it, I have literally squealed with delight at the imperturbable perfection with which the position is laid down page after page. [...] I now understand Santayana, the man. I never understood him before. But what a perfection of rottenness in a philosophy! I don't think I ever knew the anti-realistic view to be propounded with so impudently superior an air. It is refreshing to see a representative of moribund Latinity rise up and administer such reproof to us barbarians in the hour of our *triumph*. [...] Nevertheless, how fantastic a philosophy! [...] The barbarians are in the line of mental growth, and those who do insist that the ideal and the real are dynamically continuous are those by whom the world is to be saved. But I'm nevertheless delighted that the other view, always existing in the world, should at last have found so splendidly impertinent an expression among ourselves.¹²

James was similarly ambivalent in his review of *The Life of Reason* (1905), which he declared to be 'great' but also 'profoundly alienating' and unsympathetic in tone.¹³ James's main concern with Santayana's early works seems to be with his 'aestheticism' and Platonic emphasis on the contemplation of ideals independent of their relationship to human action. James's philosophy, on the contrary, was primarily ameliorative. To call something "ideal" for James is to claim that the world would be better for its inclusion, and to be motivated to change the world in the light of that ideal (e.g. WB: 135). We will return to this concern in the next section (§3).

What, then, were Santayana's impressions of his teacher and colleague? Reflecting on his time at Harvard, Santayana suggests that the impact James made on him had less to do with the content of his courses, and more to do with the 'spirit and background of his teaching' (PGS: 15):

The William James who had been my master was not this William James of the later years, whose pragmatism and pure empiricism and romantic metaphysics have made such a stir in the world. It was rather the puzzled but brilliant doctor, impatient of metaphysics, whom I had known in my undergraduate days ... Chief of [what I learnt from him ...] was a sense for the immediate: for the unadulterated, unexplained, instant fact of experience.' (PGS: 15).

Santayana consistently expressed admiration for James's psychological work, and for his *Principles of Psychology* (1891) in particular. In Santayana's review of this work, he praises James's sympathetic, empirical, and non-systematic approach to the subject. It is James's 'generous nature' which allows the 'perennial problems of the human mind' to be 'discussed so modestly, so solidly, [and] with such a deep and pathetic sincerity (IW: 99-100).¹⁴ James' genius,

¹² WJ to G.H. Palmer, Apr 1900. CWJ 9:180-182.

¹³ WJ to D.S. Miller, Nov 1905. CWJ 11:112.

¹⁴ This review was published unsigned in the *Atlantic* (1891), and later reprinted in *The Idler and His Works* (1957). James himself was quite honoured by the review, which he found to be a 'beautiful composition' and 'wonderfully just' (WJ to GS, Mar 1891. CWJ 7:148).

according to Santayana, was for ‘literary psychology’ – for the careful attention to, and evocative expression of, lived experience. James was an ‘impulsive poet’ of the ‘lyric quality’ of lived experience. It was *this* James which Santayana prided himself on remaining a disciple of in his later years, rather than the James of pragmatism or radical empiricism (PGS: 16-17).¹⁵

What mistake did James’s later work make, according to Santayana, which his earlier psychological work did not? James’s pragmatism – articulated most obviously in *Pragmatism* (1907) and its sequel *The Meaning of Truth* (1909) – was a philosophical method which attempted to locate the meaning of philosophical concepts in their practical and experiential effects (e.g. P: 29-30; P: 45ff). His “radical empiricism” – articulated in a series of articles published in 1903-1905, and posthumously collected in *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (1912) – was the sketch of a metaphysical system in which the foundational nature of reality was “pure experience” (e.g. ERE: 14). Santayana had opinions on – and criticisms of – both philosophies. But I suspect the original sin which James committed was what Santayana might call *philosophical heresy*. Santayana applies the label of “heretic” to philosophers who diverge from philosophical orthodoxy either by embracing a kind of pre-rational mysticism, or by taking insights from a special area of knowledge and applying them to reality as a whole. This second kind of heretic is like a scout assuming the role of general: ‘[e]xcited by some little fact he has discerned, he shouts back his orders to the whole army, of whose extent and situation he has no notion’ (PH: 563). This was the mistake of the later James, according to Santayana. Excited by his close study of lived human experience, he ‘proceeded to turn immediate experience into ultimate physics’. But the idea that the experience of an unimportant race of animals, ‘in one corner of the natural world’, might form the foundations of reality itself was – from the perspective of Santayana’s materialist naturalism – a kind of superstition (PSG: 16-17).¹⁶

From this overview, we might conclude that whilst Santayana took much from James’s personal, empirical, and non-systematic *approach* to philosophy and psychology, he found little merit in the content of James’s mature philosophy.¹⁷ But this is not the case. In “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” (1911), written a year after James’s death, Santayana identifies him as one of only three thinkers who could be regarded as expressing ‘the genuine, the long silent American mind’ (GTAP: 13).¹⁸ The central idea of this essay is that there is a tension in American intellectual life between the inherited tradition of the European settlers – the “genteel” tradition of the title, characterised by Calvinistic Protestantism and Transcendental metaphysics – and the inchoate philosophical perspective of the American

¹⁵ Santayana might underplay James’s influence. Flower and Murphey point out that *The Sense of Beauty* is not only informed by James’s *Principles*, but is also structured as an investigation into aesthetic experience in much the same vein as James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* was a scientific examination of religious experience (Flower & Murphey, 1977, p. 775).

¹⁶ Putting this point more kindly in *Character and Opinion*. Santayana suggests that James’s excellence in literary psychology led him to identify experience as ultimate reality: ‘[w]here one’s gift is, there will one’s faith be also; and to this poet appearance was the only reality’ (COUS: 53).

¹⁷ In a letter written towards the end of his life, Santayana suggests he inherited his ‘strong sense of the “contingency” of all facts and of their primacy in the order of discovery’ from James, but that he rejected James’s claim that ‘momentary feelings were the ontological basis of the universe’ (GS to T. Munson, Mar 1948. LGS 8:36).

¹⁸ The other two being James’ brother, the author Henry James, and the poet Walt Whitman.

public, which prioritised activity and practicality. The genteel tradition persisted in American academies for want of an academic expression of any alternative (GTAP: 18).

In the work and thought of James, the genteel tradition faced its first true challenge. Despite having a clear sympathy and familiarity with European thought, James also had ‘a prophetic sympathy with the dawning sentiments of the age, with the moods of the dumb majority’ (GTAP: 13). James broke from the genteel tradition in three novel ways. The first was a radically democratic approach to the community of inquiry, which included voices typically ignored by academic philosophers. The second was the idea that intelligence did not exist to copy reality, but to help us successfully navigate it. As Santayana put this point: ‘[i]deas are not mirrors, they are weapons’ (GTAP: 15). This instrumentalism found best expression in James’s pragmatism.¹⁹ Thirdly, James rejected transcendental metaphysics and idealism, and presented an account of the universe in which it was unfinished and could be improved through the ‘finite efforts’ and ‘concrete endeavours’ of beings like us. The universe is ‘an experiment’ for James, ‘it is unfinished’ (GTAP: 15). Santayana presents James’s novelty of vision succinctly in the followed passage:

[A]n impassioned empiricism, welcoming popular religious witnesses to the unseen, reducing science to an instrument of success in action, and declaring the universe to be wild and young, and not to be harnessed by the logic of any school (GTAP: 18).

Though Santayana had reason to disagree with James on some of these points, he respected him as an original and challenging thinker.²⁰ Far from being unable to speak to each other’s visions of philosophy, as we shall see in the following sections the two thinkers shared key epistemological insights (§3) and respected each other as original and *sincere* philosophers (§4).

¹⁹ Pragmatism too was identified by Santayana as being a “characteristically American” philosophy: “there are in pragmatism echoes of various popular moral forces, like democracy, impressionism, love of the concrete, respect for success, trust in will and action, and the habit of relying on the future, rather than the past, to justify one’s methods and opinions’ (WD: 124-125).

²⁰ Admittedly, as Santayana became a more established philosophical figure, his opinions of James’s abilities became less charitable. Later, Santayana would reflect that though James resisted the “genteel tradition”, he was in other ways constrained by it: ‘held back by old instincts, subject to old delusions, restless, spasmodic, self-interrupted: as if some impetuous bird kept flying aloft, but always stopped in mid-air, pulled back with a jerk by an invisible wire’ (MS: 166). Santayana increasingly saw James as an impulsive rather than careful thinker – his judgements were ‘based on a casual spurt of sympathy or antipathy’ (PGS: 499). Though Santayana ‘trusted his heart’ he didn’t ‘respect his judgement’ (MS: 166).

3. Anti-foundationalism and Animal Faith

As we saw above (§2), James's primary criticism of Santayana's philosophy was its apparent passivity or "aestheticism". Santayana appeared to separate ideals from action and suggest that the contemplation of ideals as beautiful was itself good. James had previously argued that such an attitude of aesthetic contemplation was morally corrupting. Ideals must be seen as motives to act to improve the world (WB: 135). Without the connection between ideal and action, the moral agent is lulled into a kind of *akrasia*, where the pressing moral issues of the world become mere sources of reflection, rather than calls to action (e.g. WB: 128-132). It was this that led James to call Santayana's philosophy 'the perfection of rottenness' (CWJ 9:180-182). This kind of response seems to have typified American responses to Santayana; he was seen as a brilliant thinker who was nonetheless diametrically opposed to emerging consensus on the importance of action and meliorism over intellectual reflection.²¹

At the time, Santayana refuted James's interpretation. In a letter, he suggested that 'apart from temperament, I am nearer to you than you now believe'. Santayana, indeed, insisted on the irrelevance of ideals which were not 'called for by something that exists' and whose actualisation would not be an actual good.²² Reflecting on James's criticism years later, Santayana suspected that James's sensitivity to the aestheticism of his account blinded him to their shared commitment to "animal faith":

"James, I need hardly say, was ready enough to snap his fingers at dialectical proofs, and deeply consented to appeal to faith, and to undertake sporting risks in the most serious matters. But he over-looked the fact that I too relied on animal faith in science and common life" (PGS: 498-499).

For the purposes of this chapter, we can understand "animal faith" as a set of beliefs which are a-rational, in the sense of not rooted in empirical or intellectual evidence, but rather in our status as organic creatures operating within an environment. Santayana is quite correct that he shared this idea with James. Indeed, he seems to have been influenced by James's account of "necessary truths" in the *Principles* when developing this concept.²³ Santayana describes "necessary truths" in his review of this work as 'expressions of certain ingrained habits of thought, habits which cannot be revised while human nature remains what it is' (IW: 100). This concept is very close to what Santayana would come to call "animal faith".

The notion of animal faith forms the basis of the anti-foundationalist epistemology which Santayana shares with James, and with the pragmatists more widely. All these thinkers reject the Cartesian idea that knowledge must be grounded in indubitable beliefs. There is no available fact or belief which is free from human interpretation, and which is not mediated

²¹ As Sprigge put the point: "Santayana appears to have been admired for the beauty of his writing and the precision of his thought, but regarded as somehow sinful and un-American, one who would lure youth away from the world of deeds and enterprise [...] to a dream world of poetic reverie" (Sprigge, 1995, p. 14).

²² GS to WJ, 1900. LGS 1:213.

²³ See, e.g. Chapter XXVIII of *Principles* (PP: 1215ff). McCormick comments on the "remarkable similarity" between the two ideas (McCormick, 2003, p. 88).

through human sensory apparatus and interests. There is no such thing as an *in principle* indubitable belief, such that it is impossible to imagine an experience which might call that belief them into question. But though this would seem to commit us to a kind of debilitating scepticism, Santayana and the pragmatists avoid this outcome through faith in instinctual habits of belief.

A central tenet of pragmatism is that beliefs should be understood as *habits of action* which can be evaluated according to how well they allow us to predict and navigate future experience. Beliefs which do not correspond to possible actions and experiences are meaningless, for the pragmatist. Doubt is a state defined as the absence of belief, characterised by a real uncertainty about how to act, or what to expect from the future (e.g. PP: 914). Doubt, then, is not an idle state of thought, but an uncomfortable state of confusion, brought about through interruption of our capacity to act in the world. However, the more fundamental and instinctual our belief are, and the more they are rooted in our daily lives and actions, the more immune they are to such doubt. As James says, it is virtually impossible to doubt the reality of whatever is in '*intimate and continuous connection with my life*' (PP: 926). Beliefs which are practically insulated against doubt in this way include belief in the external world, in other minds, and in space and time (P: 85). This faith in instinctual beliefs grounds the pragmatist's anti-scepticism. As real doubt is not possible without an initiating experience that interrupts our habits of action, and as our action relies upon instinctive beliefs which are highly unlikely to encounter experiences which call them into question, then we have no reason to take seriously the kind of global doubt which scepticism represents.

This pragmatic response to scepticism is not at all dissimilar to the strategy which Santayana adopts in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. Though scepticism is possible, and might even be, for Santayana, laudable, it is not liveable. Our action in the world relies on instinctive and a-rational animal faith:

“That such external things exist, that I exist myself, and live more or less prosperously in the midst of them, is a faith not founded on reason but precipitated in action, and in that intent, which is virtual action, involved in perception” (SAF: 106).

For both Santayana and the pragmatists, then, we respond to scepticism not with reason, but with a healthy faith 'in the existence and order of nature, a faith in the assumptions made inevitably in daily life' (P&P: 241). Such faith is required for all human action, discourse, and inquiry. Though this might not be enough to prove realism to a philosopher who is 'debauched by learning' (P: 88), it is sufficient to 'show an honest man that he is ... a realist at heart' (TPR: 184).

Neither James nor Santayana hold that the 'innate and inherited' nature of these 'habits and intellectual instincts' make them infallible. In some contexts, these instinctual beliefs can lead us astray, and this is more likely the further our inquiries take us from the context in which those beliefs first arose (e.g. P: 90). For these articles of animal faith, Santayana tells us, 'no guarantee can possibly be offered'. They are, after all, the foundations upon which our

practices of giving and asking for reasons take place, and so it is unproductive to ask for the rationality of these foundations. Often these ideas are shown to be false, and ‘perhaps the event will some day falsify them all’. But whilst we engage in our practices, ‘this faith must endure’ (SAF: 180). For his own part, James suggests that our own store of common-sense beliefs and instinctual habits should always be considered a ‘collection of extraordinarily successful hypotheses’ and so subject to revision or rejection in light of appropriate experience (P: 94). Interestingly, this combination of fallibilism and anti-scepticism rooted in common-sense realism is often taken to be a distinctive mark of classical pragmatism.²⁴ This indicates that Santayana shared more with the pragmatists than he was willing to admit. We will return to this consideration in the final section (§5).²⁵

4. Personality and Professionalism

As it is impossible to discover indubitable truths which place our philosophy on unshakeable foundations, we must proceed on the basis of something less certain. As we have seen, our faith in instinctive and common-sense beliefs supplies some practical grounds for our philosophising (§3). But animal faith only gets us so far. James and Santayana also agreed on an account of philosophy as an expression of *personal* vision.

On a more personal account of philosophy, our first principles emerge in part from our own character, interests, and temperament. James famously expressed such a view in his *Pragmatism* lectures, where he argued that the history of philosophy was to a large extent a ‘clash of temperaments’. Philosophers themselves are typically unwilling to admit this, however, and so try to find objective grounds for what their individual biases dispose them to think (P: 11).²⁶ This broadly pragmatist idea was central to James’s approach. James held that philosophy should be more than an intellectual artifact; it should be a lived ‘expression of a man’s intimate character’ (PU: 14).²⁷ As Santayana expresses a similar point, our first philosophical principles can only be ‘confession or propaganda’ (PGS: 551).²⁸ Given this account, a core virtue of philosophy is *honesty, sincerity, or genuineness*. A philosophy which has this virtue must be – according to Santayana – one which ‘inspires and expresses the life of those who cherish it’ (GTAP: 4). Philosophy of this personal kind will substitute the ‘pursuit of omniscience’ for the ‘pursuit of sincerity’ and see any system of philosophy as a ‘personal work of art’, rather than an objective account of reality (PH: 564).

Each thinker respected the other for having this virtue of sincerity. Santayana frequently expressed that James had the virtue of ‘genuineness’ in his philosophy (IW: 100). James’s

²⁴ See, e.g. (Putnam, 1994, p. 152).

²⁵ Santayana once suggested in correspondence that he might ‘agree almost entirely with what James means: but I often hate what he says. If he gave up subjectivism, indeterminism, and ghosts there would be little in “pragmatism” ... I could object to.’ (GS to H.M. Kallen, Feb 1908. LGS I:379).

²⁶ See (Williams, 2023)

²⁷ See also P: 45ff.

²⁸ See (Tiller, 2008, p. 135) for comment.

philosophy was like Emerson's in its 'personal spontaneity', accompanied by a 'personal vitality' which belonged to James alone (GTAP: 13). By comparing James to Emerson, Santayana was perhaps returning a compliment. Responding to *The Life of Reason*, James wrote to a friend that Santayana was 'a paragon of Emersonianism – declare your intuitions, though no other man share them; and the integrity with which he does it is as fine as it is rare'. Unfortunately, Santayana came off slightly worse in the comparison. In his personal approach to philosophy, Santayana was Emerson's first 'rival and successor' but had a cooler, 'alienating' and 'unsympathic' tone.²⁹ Santayana responded to this interpretation emotionally:

[Y]ou say I am less hospitable than Emerson. Of course. Emerson might pipe his wood-notes and chirp at the universe most blandly; his genius might be tender and profound and Hamlet-like, and that is all beyond my range and contrary to my purpose. I am a Latin, and nothing seems serious to me except politics, except the sort of men that your ideas will involve and the sort of happiness they will be capable of. The rest is exquisite moonshine.³⁰

Once again, Santayana sounds remarkably pragmatist in his response. Santayana insists not only that philosophy should emerge from his own vision of reality, but also that it should be a response to 'politics' – to real people and their potential happinesses. Such a statement would not be out of place in James's *Pragmatism* lectures.

This personal conception of philosophy seemed to have formed for Santayana during his Walker Fellowship. In correspondence with James, Santayana admits to having become disenchanted with the technical style of European philosophising – with its 'absurd pretensions to be scientific' and attention to problems which were 'essentially vain'.³¹ Rather than seeing philosophy as an attempt to solve problems, his trip persuaded Santayana that philosophy – like art – should be seen as an attempt to 'express a half-discovered reality'.³² According to personal philosophy, our opinions are guided by our 'sympathies' rather than by objective reason alone.³³ In reply, James broadly agreed – suggesting that he expected no 'absolute illumination' from philosophy, but only the argumentative reinforcement of 'certain emotional impulses'.³⁴ James rarely compared philosophy with art, however. As we have seen (§2), James resisted what he saw as Santayana's "aestheticism". For James, philosophy *should* attempt to solve the problems of human beings, and improve the world they lived in.

Sincerity is a philosophical virtue in part because it protects us from the detrimental effects of philosophical systematising. Honestly admitting that our philosophy is informed by our character requires us to renounce any claim that it is an objective 'system of the universe' (PH: 564). Santayana seemingly inherited his suspicion of philosophical systems from James. In his

²⁹ WJ to D.S. Miller, Nov 1905. CWJ II:112.

³⁰ GS to WJ, Dec 1905. LGS 1:330.

³¹ GS to WJ, July 1888. LGS 1:96.

³² GS to WJ, Dec 1887. LGS 1:90.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ WJ to GS, Jan 1888. CWJ 6:299.

review of *Principles*, Santayana argues that James's individual approach to the subject was more than 'human warmth and personal flavour', but also:

a safe-guard against pretension and hollowness. Those who deal with the abstract and the general, who think impersonally and along the lines of a universal system, are almost sure to ignore their own ignorance. They acquire what has been called the architectonic instinct; their conceptions of things are bound to be symmetrical and balanced, and to fit into one another with perfect precision [...] Their cold breath congeals the surface of truth into some system; and on that thin ice they glide merrily over all the chasms in their knowledge. But Professor James's simplicity and genuineness have saved him from this danger (IW: 99).

Systematizing in philosophy has certain vices – ignorance and inattention included – which genuineness and sincerity prevent. Though both thinkers would go on to develop “systems” of their own, neither fell into these vices. James's pragmatism was a critical method designed to revivify and practically apply philosophical concepts (e.g. P:33), and his pluralistic and radical empiricism was always expressed in the form of a hypothesis rather than a necessary truth (e.g. PU: 149). Indeed, James's metaphysics was undogmatic and pluralistic to such an extent that he rejected the idea that any one system of thought could completely describe reality (e.g. P: 68; PU: 145).³⁵ As Santayana pithily said of James's fallibilistic philosophy: 'we are likely to be more or less wrong anyhow, but we might be wholly sincere' (COUS: 52). Santayana too presented a system, but one which only aspired to be 'the expression of a reflective, selective, and free mind' (MS: 156). As he comments in *Animal Faith*: 'I stand in philosophy exactly where I stand in daily life: I should not be honest otherwise' (SAF: vi).

Their advocacy of a personal and lived philosophy placed the two thinkers at odds with the increasing professionalism of their discipline. Within academia, philosophy was coming to be seen as the application of precise logical methods to increasingly narrow and abstract areas of concern. For James, too much technicality spelt “failure” in philosophy.³⁶ He insisted on engaging with public audiences rather than academic ones in a way that made professional academics suspicious as to the depth of his thought. As a result, though he experienced wide acclaim in his own lifetime and posthumously, he was rarely respected as a technical philosopher. As Santayana observed, though he was universally liked, academics, professionals, and even students questioned the credentials of a man as individual and unpretentious as James, who 'didn't talk like a book, and didn't write like a book, except like one of his own' (COUS: 63). Writing to Santayana after a trip to Rome, James unfavourable compares the 'belligerent young enthusiasm' of the Italian philosophers with the 'gray-plaster temperament of our bald-headed young PhDs, boring each other in Seminaries'. Repelled by the narrowing of philosophy at Harvard, James tried to recruit Santayana into a subtle coup: '[c]an't you and I, who in spite of such divergence have yet so much in common in our *Weltanschauung* start a systematic movement at Harvard against the desiccating & pedantifying

³⁵ Santayana comments in *Persons and Places* that 'James detested any system of the universe that professed to enclose everything' (P&P: 242).

³⁶ WJ to G.H. Howison, Jul 1898. CWJ 8:399.

process’?³⁷ Santayana, of course, was already planning his own exit from Harvard, eventually flourishing as a philosopher, critic, and writer outside of the pressures of professional academia.

There is potential problem with such a personal view of philosophy. If philosophical accounts are personal works of art, and all criticism can only be internal to these accounts (PGS: 551), then it would seem that philosophers are doomed to talk past each other. But this is not the case. As we have seen, our philosophies always grow from shared instincts and beliefs (§3). Further, the external world provides interruptions and shocks – brute experiences which our philosophy must treat as mind-independent facts (e.g. SAF: 142; MT: 112). Personal visions are built upon these shared foundations. Similar temperaments and personalities, too, will share an outlook: ‘similar minds can understand the same things ... they can share and divine one another’s thoughts’ (SAF: 87). Two similar philosophers of broadly similar temperament will share a world of discourse.

Sadly, this was not the case with James and Santayana. There is a quiet tragedy at the heart of their relationship. For two thinkers who put such emphasis on philosophy as an expression of personality, and who worked with and read each other closely, the two men could never really recognise each other. Responding to James’s interpretation of *Life of Reason*, Santayana commented that he was ‘very generous’ but that he did ‘not yet see my philosophy, nor my temper inside’. James’s praise and blame touched ‘only the periphery’ of his account.³⁸ Reflecting on James later in life, Santayana commented that:

‘I [...] was sure of his goodwill and kindness, of which I had many proofs; but I was also sure that he never understood me, and that when he talked to me there was a manikin in his head, called G.S. and entirely fantastic, which he was addressing. No doubt I profited materially by this illusion, because he would have liked me less if he had understood me better; but the sense of that illusion made spontaneous friendship impossible. I was uncomfortable in his presence. (MS: 166).

Their exchange on many philosophical issues were profitable to each of them. James clearly took Santayana’s comments on his radical empiricism papers (often relayed through a mutual correspondent, C.A. Strong) seriously, and was glad to find that Santayana agreed with him on many points. But even when they agreed, Santayana’s perspective was ‘still one of the secrets of the universe’ which James lived to see unveiled.³⁹ For his part, Santayana found it annoying to disagree with a ‘haphazard person like James’, where differences came ‘from focusing things differently, from being *schief* [oblique]’.⁴⁰ But if the two were too temperamentally different to truly grasp each other’s philosophical vision, they were at least united in seeing philosophy as a personal and human response to the world. They could at the very least be *honest* with each other. As Santayana once wrote to James: ‘I seldom write to any

³⁷ WJ to GS, May 1905. CWJ 11: 28-29.

³⁸ GS to WJ, Dec 1905. LGS 1: 330. Santayana later tells a story of James, fresh from reading *Life of Reason*, stopping him in the street ‘aglow with [...] paternally humorous encouragement’ and offering a ‘hardly recognisable’ interpretation of his work (PGS: 499).

³⁹ WJ to GS, Feb 1905. CWJ 10: 545.

⁴⁰ GS to H.M. Kallen, Feb 1908. LGS 1:379.

anyone so frankly [...] But I know *you* are human, and tolerant to anything, however alien, that smells of blood'.⁴¹

5. Wisdom and the Will to Believe

As we have seen, Santayana shared a great deal in common with the pragmatists – including an anti-foundationalist epistemology, fallibilism, a focus on lived experience, and a response to scepticism rooted in instinctual and common-sense faith (§3). But perhaps in part because of the temperamental differences just discussed (§4), Santayana downplayed these similarities, and was generally critical of pragmatism, especially its theory of truth. Unfortunately, Santayana echoed many of Bertrand Russell's criticisms of James's pragmatism, most of which are now commonly accepted to be based on misinterpretations or caricatures.⁴² He was also critical of pragmatists' commitment to a coherentist theory of truth, which he worried was too detached from external reality (e.g. RB: 448-9). But – as we have seen – the pragmatists also allowed for brute experiences of mind-independent reality to shape our beliefs (MT: 112). Santayana was also concerned that the pragmatist analysis focused solely on the instrumental value of true ideas, which he again thought missed the importance of human-independent reality. But James – and other pragmatists – agreed that ideas are only instrumentally valuable if they bring us into contact with mind-independent reality (e.g. MT: 106; 112; 117).⁴³ On the whole, then, Santayana's criticisms of pragmatism were often based on misinterpretations, which is surprising considering the significant overlap between pragmatism and his own account.⁴⁴

We turn instead to Santayana's criticism of another central feature of James's philosophy: his "will to believe" thesis. This thesis holds that we can legitimately adopt certain beliefs on 'faith', or in advance of evidence of their truth. James and Santayana agree that faith is an irreducible part of our epistemological, philosophical, and personal lives (§3). As such, unlike other James's critics, Santayana does not disagree with James's view on *principle*. His criticism comes from a position which is more sympathetic to James's approach, and as such it is ultimately more convincing. Though the details of this argument cannot be considered here, it will be profitable to explore Santayana's criticism, as it illuminates what I take to be the key difference between the two thinkers.

James's argument can be presented simply in the following way. When we face a choice between two or more beliefs, each of which are equally supported (or unsupported) by the available evidence, we are permitted to adopt on faith that belief which best accords with our

⁴¹ GS to WJ, Dec 1904. LGS I: 332.

⁴² See, for example, "The Critique of Pragmatism" (WD: 124-137).

⁴³ Sprigge comments that the pragmatist view of truth is not far removed from Santayana's concept of 'symbolic truth' but that the pragmatist misses the notion of 'literal truth' (Sprigge, 1995, p. 168). But in fact, the pragmatists *did* distinguish in a similar vein between 'pragmatic truth' and 'absolute truth' (e.g. MT: 143).

⁴⁴ See (Lachs, 2003, pp. 155–166) for a detailed exploration of Santayana's relationship with pragmatism. The main difference Lachs notes between Santayana and the pragmatists is the extreme nature of his realism (165), and his lack of faith in the possibility of amelioration (166).

own natures and interests. This was only permissible in specific circumstances – when the choice was *forced*, when the choice would make a *momentous* difference in the life of the believer, and when both possibilities were *live* or plausible (WB: 14-15). Beliefs adopted in this way were not immune from evidence, and like any other belief could be subject to revision or rejection in light of future experience. Indeed, James thought that in some cases adopting and acting according to a belief was a necessary precursor to accessing the evidence for its truth or falsity. For this reason, James called beliefs adopted on faith ‘working hypotheses’ (WB: 79).

We can helpfully frame Santayana’s criticism of the will to believe in terms of the epistemic virtues of *courage* and *wisdom*. Santayana’s criticism is that though James adequately captures the role of *courage* in our epistemic lives, he misses the role that *wisdom* must play. Wisdom is lacking in two senses: in lacking a clear notion of the *good life*, and in lacking an adequate sense of which beliefs are *reasonable* to adopt on faith. Let us take each in turn.

In *Character and Opinion*, Santayana presents James’s view in the following way. In certain situations, which James outlines, we cannot escape the ‘risk of error’, and must adopt a belief according to one ‘bias’ or another. Given this, we might as well adopt that belief which would ‘profit us most’ and help us to lead a ‘good life’. The problem which Santayana has with this view is that pragmatism lacks a clear account what the good life consists of in. James seems to simply assume that the values of ‘liberal Protestantism’ are universal. This, in Santayana’s view, leads to a ‘thin and barbarous’ concept of the good life, lacking a substantive account of what renders ‘human existence good, excellent, beautiful, happy, and worth having as a whole’ (COUS: 59).⁴⁵ Santayana was generally suspicious of liberal Protestantism, but his criticism goes beyond this. After all, James’s argument can be used to defend Hinduism, paganism, atheism, or any religious, spiritual, or metaphysical belief just as easily as it could defend liberal Christianity. The general form of Santayana’s criticism is that if beliefs are to be adopted and justified in part on prudential, rather than evidential, grounds, we must have the *wisdom* to know what is truly valuable to human life. Without this wisdom, we will be adopting epistemically risky beliefs without any guarantee that they will further our genuine interests.

James identifies a specific set of cases in which adopting beliefs in advance of evidence is not only permissible but (instrumentally) rational. These are cases in which our adopting and acting on a belief will itself contribute to bringing about the state of affairs which will prove it to be true. In such cases, ‘*faith creates its own verification*’ (WB: 80). James’s classic case is one in which a mountaineer must jump a chasm to save their life. If they believe they will make the jump, then their confidence will allow them to do so, thus verifying their faith. In such cases, James argues that it is ‘wisdom’ to ‘believe what one desires’ (ibid). Santayana also disagrees with James on this point:

Why does the belief that you can jump a ditch help you to jump it? Because it is a symptom of the fact that you could jump it, that your legs were fit and that the ditch was two yards wide and not twenty. [...] Assurance is contemptable and fatal

⁴⁵ As Santayana comments elsewhere: ‘pragmatism [...] involves an ethical system, because we can’t determine what is useful or satisfactory without, to some extent, articulating our ideals. This is something which James doesn’t include in philosophy’ (GS to H.M. Kallen, Feb 1908. LGS 1: 379).

unless it is self-knowledge. [...] What is good is not the presumption of power, but the possession of it: a clear head, aware of its resources, not a fuddled optimism, calling up spirits from the vasty deep. Courage is not a virtue, said Socrates, unless it is also wisdom (COUS: 61).

The critical point here is clear. Epistemic risk – and so epistemic courage – is only rational when it is accompanied by wisdom, understood as a kind of self-knowledge. This is perhaps less convincing in the mountaineer case – when the alternative to taking epistemic risk is death. But in less extreme cases, Santayana’s point stands: James misses the role that wisdom – in the sense of self-knowledge – must play in informing our decision when taking an epistemic risk. The presence of wisdom will make the difference between rational belief adoption in a situation of epistemic risk, and a kind of vicious credulity.

Though I suspect James has things to say in response to this criticism, this is not the time to mount that defence. What is most interesting for the purposes of this chapter is to consider why Santayana criticises James’s “will to believe” argument, when it seemingly shares so much with his own argument for “animal faith”. After all, both arguments justify beliefs held on faith, a-rationally, independently of available evidence. Santayana’s defence of “animal faith” focuses on the kinds of beliefs which are grounded in our biological natures, which it is impossible for creatures like us *not* to act upon, and which are foundational to our practices of inquiry and discourse. These are beliefs which *every* believer must adopt a-rationally. James’s theory, on the other hand, apparently defends the right of *individuals* to adopt beliefs on faith, in response to the requirements of their own temperaments and personalities. Of course, whereas our animal faiths are held as practically infallible – as a kind of dogma (PGS: 533) – the kinds of personally adopted faiths which James defends must be adopted as highly fallible and in full awareness of their epistemic status as risky hypotheses (WB: 32).

This apparently minor difference brings us to the heart of the temperamental and philosophical difference between the two thinkers. Unlike James’s other critics, Santayana has no issue with beliefs being adopted a-rationally. His main objection appears to be James’s *individualism* and *voluntarism*. Animal faiths are not *chosen*, whereas the kinds of personal faiths James defends are. James presents an epistemic agent capable of weighing up the different available beliefs for plausibility, risk, and prudential value, and making a considered choice. As beliefs are habits of action, this epistemic voluntarism is a continuation of James’s defence of free will (e.g. WB: 130). Vital to James’s philosophical approach was that human agents could, through effort and action, improve the world around them, and that their ‘faiths and ideals’ were a vital component in that ameliorative action (e.g. ML: 416). For Santayana this is implausible, as he sees the mind is essentially epiphenomenal – a mere observer or spectator which could not in its passivity effect any change.⁴⁶ If human agents cannot effect change on the world around them, or enact epistemic choice, then James’s argument lacks purchase. We are led back to the temperamental difference between the two thinkers. For the

⁴⁶ See (Flower & Murphey, 1977, pp. 798–799) for discussion of Santayana’s epiphenomenalism.

“spectator” Santayana, James defence of epistemic voluntarism was unwise and unnecessary. For the active James, Santayana’s passivity and “aestheticism” was anathema.

6. Conclusion

James and Santayana had a cordial and collegial relationship. As would be expected from such different characters, this relationship was sometimes ‘rather prickly’, but was on the whole characterised by respect (§2).⁴⁷ It is common among commentators to emphasize the difference in temperament between the two thinkers, often to the extent that meaningful discourse between the two seems barely possible.⁴⁸ But as I hope this chapter has shown, relations between the two were more meaningful than is sometimes presented. Far from being unable to talk to one another, these two distinct thinkers had substantial overlap in their thought. Both were committed, for instance, to the primacy of lived experience over any systematic or theoretical accounts of reality. Both denied foundationalism and scepticism, reframing their epistemology around the a-rational faith in instinctual and common-sense beliefs (§3). Both were committed to a vision of philosophy as the sincere expression of the philosopher’s character and rejected the increasing professionalism and technicality they saw in their students and colleagues (§4).

Of course, we shouldn’t be surprised that two philosophers of such differing temperaments, who each held that philosophy should be an expression of an individual’s character, disagreed on some substantive points. Both produced philosophical visions which were loyal to reality as their temperaments perceived it. James’s philosophy prioritised the role that human agency played in improving the world, and his pragmatism presented a method for practically clarifying our concepts for better application in this endeavour. Santayana prioritized the material and the essential, and interpreted human consciousness as an epiphenomenal spectator, unable to effect real change. These differences are present in the criticisms each made of the other’s work – such as Santayana’s accusation that James overlooked the importance of wisdom when prioritizing belief’s role in guiding beneficial action (§5). But to paint them as incapable of meaningful conversation does a disservice to both. Indeed, their fruitful conversations whilst James was alive, and Santayana’s continued reflection on James’s work throughout his career, shows the depth of impact they had on each other’s thought. There is a moral to be found here. Often, critics of James worry that giving too much of a role to personal expression can render philosophical discussion impossible (see Williams 2023). But if two thinkers as temperamentally distinct as James and Santayana can have such profitable exchanges throughout their lives, there is hope for the rest of us too.

⁴⁷ (Sprigge, 1995, p. 26).

⁴⁸ See footnote 5.

Bibliography

All references to William James' published works are to the *Works of William James* [WWJ], Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (eds.) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (19 volumes, 1975 – 1988). The following abbreviations are used:

ERE	<i>Essays in Radical Empiricism</i> . WWJ 3.
ML	<i>Manuscript Lectures</i> . WWJ 19.
MT	<i>The Meaning of Truth</i> . WWJ 2.
P	<i>Pragmatism</i> . WWJ 1.
PP	<i>The Principles of Psychology</i> , 3 vols. WWJ 8-10.
PU	<i>Pluralistic Universe</i> . WWJ 4.
WB	<i>The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy</i> . WWJ 6.

References to William James' correspondence use the following abbreviations:

CWJ	<i>The Correspondence of William James</i> . 12 volumes (1992-2004). John McDermott, John Lacks, Ignas K. Skrupskelis, Elizabeth M. Berkely, Fredson Bowers, and Fredrick H. Burkhardt (eds.). Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
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References to the Works of George Santayana use the following abbreviations:

COUS	<i>Character and Opinion in the United States</i> (1921)
GTAP	"The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911)
IW	<i>The Idler and His Works and Other Essays</i> (1957)
MS	<i>The Middle Span</i> (1945)
PGS	<i>The Philosophy of George Santayana</i> (1940)
P&P	<i>Persons and Places</i> (1944)
PH	"Philosophical Heresy" (1915)
RB	<i>Realms of Being</i> (1942)
SAF	<i>Scepticism and Animal Faith</i> (1923)
TPR	"Three Proofs of Realism" (1920)
WD	<i>Winds of Doctrine</i> (1913)

References to the correspondence of George Santayana will use the following abbreviation:

LGS	<i>The Letters of George Santayana</i> . 8 volumes (2001 – 2008). William G. Holzberger, Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., and Marianne S. Wokeck (eds). MIT Press.
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