Overheard in Seville

Bulletin of the Santayana Society

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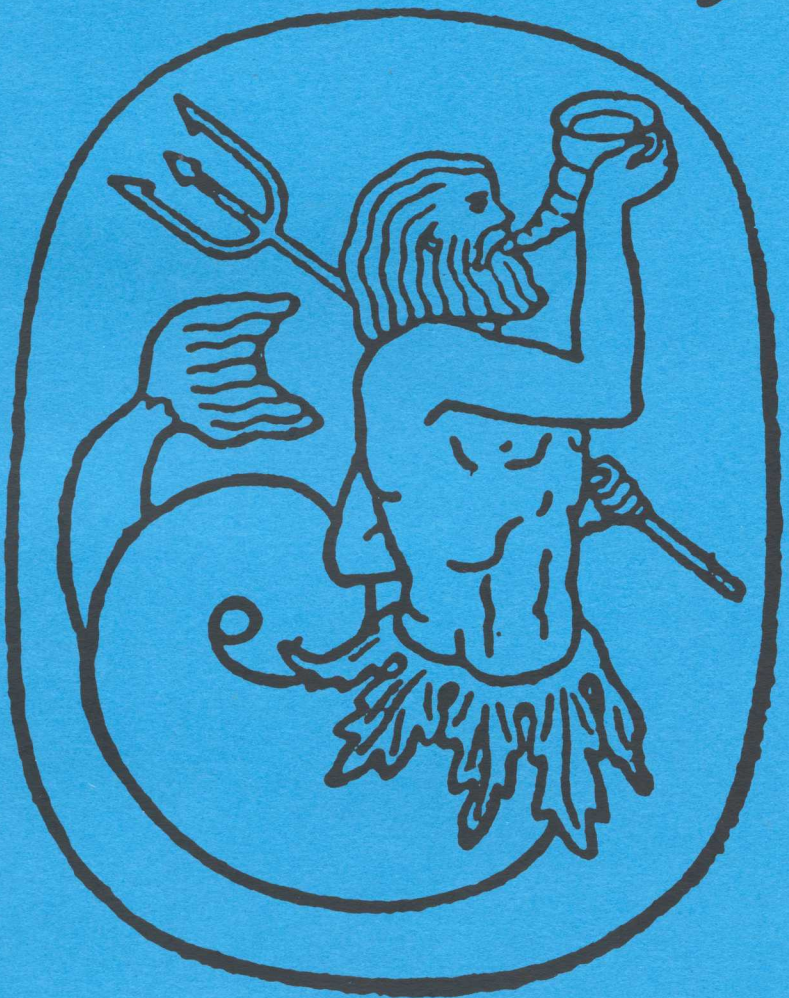

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The Possibility of an Empiricist Naturalism: Dewey and Santayana

John Dewey and George Santayana were the outstanding defenders of philosophical naturalism during the first half of the 20th century. Yet neither recognized the other's philosophy as a genuine naturalism.[1] The most severe accusation leveled at the other was the harboring of Cartesian assumptions, infecting naturalism with psychological subjectivity. Dewey distrusted Santayana's realms of spirit and essence, and Santayana deplored Dewey's perspectival empiricism. Yet each philosopher regarded his own naturalism as the best way to completely exorcize Cartesian ghosts. Their philosophies compete still for the future of naturalism (and also challenge the reductive materialism dominant after their deaths), but whose philosophy should prevail? Examining their views on experience and nature is a good place to start. Their contentious debates should not prevent us from seeking common ground, since there may be more agreement than either was able to appreciate.

For both Dewey and Santayana, along with Charles Peirce and William James, the primary issues that philosophy must confront revolve around the issues crucial to viability of naturalism and of empiricism. They both deliberately took a contrary stand against Cartesian rationalism and dualism, starting their rebellion by adopting three anti-Cartesian principles. Dewey and Santayana agreed with empiricism's epistemological principle that knowledge arises solely from human experience. Furthermore, they agreed with realism's metaphysical principle that there is an external reality whose existence is not dependent on mind. They also agreed with naturalism's biological principle that the study of human intelligence must start from the fact that human beings are organisms growing and surviving in a natural environment. But after these mutual agreements, discord erupts quickly. Three philosophical inquiries, legacies from Descartes, are discussed in this essay. First, can perceptual experience directly apprehend its external object? Second, could experience be in any sense natural? Third, are meanings in the natural world? Dewey defended affirmative answers to all three questions, and understood (or misunderstood) Santayana to be denying all three questions. If Santayana must indeed take the opposed stand on these three questions, their naturalisms cannot be fully reconciled.

The first inquiry tests direct realism. Dewey, like James, rejected consciousness as an ontological reality, arguing that objects in perception are not subjectively internal mental entities. The only naturalistic alternative, Dewey held, is the position that external physical objects are directly and immediately had in experience. There is a price to be paid for this kind of empiricism to avoid phenomenalism and positivism, and Dewey paid it willingly. This empiricism must adopt the view that perspectival and relational qualities (like displayed color or apparent shape) are just as naturally real as intrinsic and non-relational qualities. It is notoriously easy to demonstrate how perception must fail to apprehend an external object (and thus apprehend indirectly through representations) *if* we premise that the object's "real" properties are fixed and independent of context. However, that premise could not be the conclusion of empirical observation, but only adopted *a priori*; so Dewey concluded that an *empiricist* naturalism must be contextual and perspectival. Santayana took notice of

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[1] This essay is a substantially revised version of a paper delivered at the 2002 Santayana Society meeting in Philadelphia. I am grateful to the meeting organizers and participants, and especially to Larry Hickman and Herman Saatkamp, Jr. for their encouragement and suggestions.

Dewey's contextualism — and summarily judged Dewey's naturalism to be only "half-hearted." Santayana clearly expected a mature naturalism to overcome any entanglement or dependency on so limited and transient a thing as experience. To endorse perspective and context amounted to conceding subjectivism for Santayana. Dewey disagreed, arguing that immediate, direct empiricism is the only way to defeat Cartesian rationalism, subjectivism, *and* skepticism. In Dewey's view, direct experience is the direct opposite of subjectivism, and additionally rescues empiricism from skepticism.

Dewey's contextual empiricism, while fallibilistic, abhorred skepticism. Dewey took seriously the key epistemological problem of representationalism's inherent instability, depicting it on a knife's edge wavering between solipsistic skepticism and idealism. It is indeed difficult to maintain realism in an empiricist fashion after denying the possibility of having any direct experience of reality. Since upholding realism though rationalist methods was unpalatable for both Dewey and Santayana, they had to answer whether empiricism and representationalism were compatible. Dewey found them incompatible: knowledge of the representationalist's external reality is not possible since no inner idea can ever be verified, and whether an idea even meaningfully refers to any reality is unknowable. Santayana likewise had nothing but scorn for Cartesian inner mental ideas, most noticeably expressed in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923). Dewey could only admire Santayana's rough treatment of subjectivism, as he demonstrated how its skepticism collapses into a solipsism of the present. By rejecting subjectivism, was Santayana now declaring his acceptance of direct perception and immediate empiricism? What a turnabout that would be! This, after all, is the same Santayana who rejected William James's radical empiricism, declared consciousness and thought to be non-material in *Reason in Common Sense* (1905), and dismissed naive realism's defense of direct perception during the 1910s.[2] No, Santayana had been consistently clear: perception's secondary qualities of colors, sounds, tastes, etc., are not in the environing natural world.

But what about Santayana's "Three Proofs of Realism" (1920) and the conclusion of *Scepticism and Animal Faith*? Santayana's illustration of the child reaching for the moon, not for his perception of the moon, is far more poetic and powerful than any story about a lecturer dramatically exposing his own hand. Santayana's moral is that we are realists when interpreting others' behavior — why not be similarly charitable in our own case? Santayana's "animal faith" is the instinctive and automatic confidence that our dealings are with the world's objects and not with mere inner ideas. Therefore, might we conclude, Santayana's animal faith in natural things *is* Dewey's direct perception and immediate empiricism. After all, Santayana's phenomenological account of what perception is like hardly differs from Dewey's meaning of "experience." Could Dewey have seen this?

Dewey read in the concluding chapters of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* many passages like the following, admirably expressing the standpoint of immediate empiricism and direct realism:

> ...the substance in which I am proposing to believe is not metaphysical but physical substance. It is the varied stuff of the world which I meet in action — the wood of this tree that I am felling, the wind that is stirring its branches, the flesh and bones of the man who is jumping out of the way. Belief in substance is not imported into animal perception by

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[2] See Santayana, "The Coming Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1914): 449-463, and "Literal and Symbolic Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1918): 421-444.

> language or by philosophy, but is the soul of animal perception from the beginning, and the perpetual deliverance of animal experience.[3]

Elsewhere Santayana also agrees with Dewey that perception is not a passive registering of qualities unadulterated by the organism's own activity. Nothing in perception could serve as an epistemologically pure given for foundational certainty. Santayana consistently rejected the "myth of the given" and he instead pursued a sophisticated theory of knowledge through symbols. Since Santayana could not be justly accused of taking ideas to be substantial entities, much less simplistic representational copies, his theory of signs is no traditional dualistic approach. Nevertheless, Dewey remained unconvinced that, despite appearances, Santayana's notion of animal faith overlaps his own direct and immediate realism.

It was Santayana's theory of significance and meaning which particularly aroused Dewey's suspicion of Cartesian subjectivism. Signs are of, but not in, the natural world, according to Santayana. Santayana found empiricism and indirect realism compatible, by arguing that animal faith authorizes the philosophical position that signs are *about* material entities without also *being* material entities. Signs cannot be substantial efficacious substances, lest they lose their genuine function. Transcendentalizing philosophers mistakenly take the symbols of things to be more real that the things themselves:

> The images of sense and science will not delude me if instead hypostatizing them, as those philosophers did the terms of their dialectic, I regard them as graphic symbols for home and the way there. 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. This faith, which it would be dishonest not to confess that I share, does no violence to a sceptical analysis of experience; on the contrary, it takes advantage of that analysis to interpret this volatile experience as all animals do and must, as a set of symbols for existences that cannot enter into experience, and which, since they are not elements in knowledge, no analysis of knowledge can touch—they are in another realm of being.[4]

There has been no sharp reversal towards direct perception, despite the phenomenology of animal faith. In perception we are dealing, not with natural objects, but signs of diverse kinds. Interestingly, Santayana shares with Dewey (and Peirce and James) the position that most of our experiences are not instances of knowledge. Santayana's account of our intuition of essences (he sometimes talks about 'data') should not trouble a Deweyan pragmatist, although Dewey himself accused Santayana of subjectively hypostatizing to "discover" essences. An immediate empiricist must have, as Dewey did, a category of 'data' which can be used in the process of knowing but are not themselves known.

Although there is insufficient space here to properly discuss Santayana's theory of signs and knowledge, we can see why Santayana was not impressed by Dewey's skeptical worries over indirect realism. Santayana held that our ideas of reality do not have to mirror or resemble any features of reality, much less be identical with them, so asking for verification by checking up on correspondence is irrelevant. Knowledge of nature is symbolic and not any sort of copy. So long as there is an alternative explanation for the "adequacy" of our ideas to their physical objects, Santayana's indirect realism is immune from the verification problem. Santayana did offer an explanation for the adequacy of ideas to reality, which depicts the psyche's functionings generating patterns of spiritual intuitions. If there could be an "indirect"

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[3] Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 201.

[4] Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith*, pp. 106-107.

form of pragmatism, it is Santayana's theory of knowledge, as knowledge can be adequate to our interactions with reality only through a passively indirect route.

Dewey's "immediate" empiricism, from Santayana's viewpoint, fails to appreciate the real nature of signs and threatens to return philosophy to phenomenalism. What can be said in Dewey's defense? Immediacy in Dewey's sense primarily meant that the perceptual experience is not an inner state of consciousness pointing outwards towards a physical object never in experience. The perceived object is "immediately" and not "mediately" in experience, and hence the object is what it is experienced to be. This claim caused a great deal of confusion for his readers, because dual senses of "immediacy" were available. Some experiences are immediate in second sense, that they are not relationally linked with anything else (such as another experience, or some physical object). But Dewey's immediate empiricism explicitly holds that most, if not all, perceptions are relationally linked. If we recall Dewey's direct realism, then we can grasp why Dewey held that external things are relationally linked to other things, things either present in the same experience or potentially in future experience.

Dewey well understood that this theory of natural relations is quite incoherent for the tradition of Cartesian/Kantian epistemology, which instead holds that relations are the responsibility of the active mind, not of passive natural things. Natural relations are also impossible for the sort of sensationalistic empiricism grounded on nominalistic materialism, which was the only living form of empiricism when Dewey and Santayana began their careers. Dewey, like James, wanted nothing to do with nominalistic empiricism, save for the innocent admission that the qualities of experience are probably never exactly alike. Dewey and Santayana did agree on rejecting natural necessity, holding that necessity is a feature of logical relations, not natural relations. However, Santayana had great difficulty finding any real relations in initial perception. Hegelians like Royce made their careers from arguing how atomized ideas could never produce lived experience, thus requiring an actively synthesizing mind. James's response was to question whether experience even at the most basic level is ever so atomized, and Dewey followed this radical empiricist approach.

Santayana took a very different route, bypassing the Cartesian/Kantian heritage, by questioning whether consciousness should be responsible for producing anything. If consciousness never is required to do anything, to make any difference anywhere, then disconnected intuitions are no trouble at all, so long as Santayana's account of intuitions matches the phenomenology of lived experience. And we could question that match. But Santayana's ability to challenge to the Hegelians only requires that spirit be relieved of the duty to make anything happen. And that is exactly what Santayana does, by carefully defining matter and spirit so that only matter does anything, through mechanistic causality. Spirit is the realm of intuited essences and contemplated forms. It is a condition of their meaningfulness that everything in the realm of spirit be utterly impotent. Dewey, like Peirce and James, could never agree that meanings are impotent. Thus the disagreement between Dewey and Santayana must include the question of the nature of meaning. To repeat, this is a different issue from any disagreement they had over essences themselves. Even on Deweyan principles, no objection could be adequately raised to Santayana's realm of essence, since pragmatism also needs the logical category of terms. Dewey's objections to Santayana's theory of meaning rather centers on the role of intuited essences in the alleged realm of spirit.

Dewey's philosophy, like James's, held that relations are immediately present in ordinary experience, and thus no postulation of a hidden mental synthesis of atomic impressions is empirically justifiable. Dewey grounded his theory of knowledge on a direct realism of natural relations. He then added the principle that the intellectual

aspect of an experience of a thing is precisely its capacity to suggest another now-absent thing which is potentially within future experience. Taken together, the three principles of direct realism, natural relations, and cognitive suggestiveness is the core of Dewey's theory of meaning and value. Having satisfactorily accounted for natural meaning without using a separate unnatural activity of mind or ontological consciousness, Dewey did not need a transcendent theory of meaning. Dewey refused to explicitly affirm that the object of an idea must transcend experience, because he saw such a doctrine as a revival of the absurd Kantian thing-in-itself. Dewey still felt free to use the term "experience" in a naturalized manner, only standing for a portion or field of nature having an organism at one focus and an object of attention at the other focus. Dewey's empiricist naturalism adds a naturalized empiricism to an epistemological empiricism, holding that experience is naturally real *and* the source of all knowledge. To say that meanings are in experienced natural objects, as Dewey claimed, is at once to claim that meaning cannot attach to forever transcendent entities, *and* to claim that natural objects have meaning, not just the experience of them. To a typical realist, this dual claim is incoherent: a real object, if it had its own meaning, would have that meaning independently, regardless of whether it was ever experienced. Alternatively, a realist could take the opposite position, as Santayana did, that natural entities are inherently meaningless, because only spirit can bind together intuitions into meanings. Dewey pointedly noticed that for Santayana existence is meaningless, in his review of *Scepticism and Animal Faith.* Having decided that the material world is inherently meaningless, how could Santayana do otherwise than locate everything humanly significant and valuable in the realm of spirit?

Santayana's indirect realism therefore doubly defends the realm of consciousness or "spirit" and its intuitions of essences as a distinct ontological reality. Spirit is the realm of consciousness, what we assuredly have all the time while particular natural objects may come and go; and spirit is the realm of meaning, that gives human life its aesthetic flavor and moral value. Santayana often argues as if defending the realm of spirit was primarily for the sake of protecting secondary qualities like colors and sounds (qualia, in updated terminology) but that is only a minor corollary. Questioning the existence of qualia, the sport of contemporary philosophers of mind, could not by itself open any gap between Dewey and Santayana. Although Dewey protested against an ontologically separate mind, Santayana would not accuse Dewey of *eliminating* phenomenal qualities. Qualities may remain after an ontological consciousness has gone — but for Santayana, extracting substantial consciousness leaves only qualities of the thinnest sort. For James and Dewey, extracting substantial consciousness leaves qualities of things where they are found — in natural things. Qualities are natural features of contextually transacting natural objects of sufficient complexity. But Santayana did not consider "natural qualities" to be a viable option. Hence Santayana accused James and Dewey of holding that "nothing but the immediate are real" in the sense that only the Humean menagerie of fleeting phenomena are real. Santayana thus rejected immediate empiricism as hostile to a robust naturalism, and specifically accused James and Dewey of a psychological fallacy of converting reference to things into reference to ideas. Propping up immediate qualities without any substantial reality behind them is precisely the empiricist's game, from Santayana's perspective, and it is a game only. Real things must be more than their functions in phenomenal experience, and natural things are not just the sum of the perspectives which can be had of them. Let the phenomenal world be a world, Santayana says; but such a world is only a foreground, and a foreground requires at least a background. How can an ontological empiricist conceive of the background? Only in essences, decides Santayana, and that is enough to show how the

empiricist illicitly erects essences into existences. But matters are even worse for the empiricist. A genuine conception of *nature* really is neither of foreground nor of background, as Santayana declares in his critique of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*.[5] Nature must be self-contained and complete without being relative to any portion or point of view.

Dewey's reply emphasizes how his version of direct realism is hardly stuck at the surface level, since experience can penetrate into nature's depths. But this reply really does nothing to answer Santayana's complaint. Santayana easily grants that the phenomenal world can be *a* world — Santayana locates it in the realm of spirit. The real question is whether the phenomenal world is *the* natural world, and Dewey's reply does not necessarily establish their equivalence. Following Santayana's difficulties over "immediate" empiricism, Dewey assumed that Santayana's critique is directed only at an alleged subjective phenomenalism. But Santayana's critique goes deeper, to the fundamental question of whether an immediate empiricist philosophy can be a naturalism. On Santayana's preferred definitions, they are incompatible. But how do things stand from Dewey's viewpoint? Santayana was unprepared to recognize Dewey's contextual naturalism as a viable option. Unwilling to locate the secondary qualities of experience in the natural world, they must be non-existent and private to each human spirit. Experience must be subjective in at least this one sense, since each psyche generates its own intuitions. Admittedly, the role that Santayana required for the psyche was not very different from the role that the nervous system played for Dewey. The organic functioning of the nervous system is necessary for experience, and such functioning should not be reductively identified with experience. Where precisely was the source of their disagreement?

Dewey accused Santayana of psychologizing philosophy by assuming (falsely) that the psyche's activities *alone* are responsible for experience, effectively isolating experience and its signs from anything beyond the organism. For Dewey, it is not merely the nervous system's activities that give rise to experience, but the nervous system's activities in concert with the natural processes of the surrounding environment. That is why, for Dewey, experience is not of the internal changes within — experience is of the entire context of transacting natural objects, of which the organism is only one. Dewey's empirically naturalistic claim that experience is *of* nature therefore converges completely with his naturalistically empirical claim that experience is *in* nature. The reason why experience is another name for a portion of nature with an organism at one focus is because experience arises only where an organism's nervous system is *responding* to the surrounding nature. Meaningful experience, and hence values and ideals as well, must be about nature as well as in nature, and therefore meanings can be (partly) responsible for creating changes of nature. This transactional and ecological theory of meaning goes a long way towards explaining how Dewey's philosophy permits purposeful experience to affect nature, offering a solution to the Cartesian and epiphenomenalist puzzle of agency and freedom.

Dewey labeled Santayana's philosophy as a "naturalistic idealism," for its complete isolation of ideals from nature. Dewey took a functionalist approach to values and ideals, holding that their meaningfulness possesses teleological efficacy (in a biological, not Hegelian, sense) in experience since they lead action towards intended goals. Dewey therefore regarded Santayana's realms as unnaturally and paradoxically preventing meanings from affecting a natural world which is conceivable only through essences.

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[5] Santayana, "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," *Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1925): 678-679.

> No modern thinker has pointed out so persuasively as Santayana that "every phase of the ideal world emanates from the natural," that "sense, art, religion, society express nature exuberantly." And yet unless one reads him wrong, he then confounds his would-be disciples and confuses his critics by holding that nature is truly presented only in an esthetic contemplation of essences reached by physical science, an envisagement reached through a dialectic which "is a transubstantiation of matter, a passage from existence to eternity." This passage moreover is so utter that there is no road back. The stable ideal meanings which are the fruit of nature are forbidden, in the degree in which they are its highest and truest fruits, from dropping seeds in nature to its further fructification.[6]

Failing to grasp why Dewey insisted on locating meaning in nature by taking things to be signs by function, not by existence per se, Santayana could only take immediate empiricism to be illicitly psychologizing philosophy. Dewey, for his part, was unable to see any advantages to treating nature as intrinsically meaningless and transcendent of experience. Santayana's complaint that Dewey's false naturalism is corrupted by social convention could hardly impress Dewey. How else could experience and culture coincide?

> Mr. Santayana says that the foreground as conceived by me is a social world, a social medium. This he terms, somewhat invidiously, I think, convention. But, accepting the word "convention," I state what I have already implied, that "convention" is not conventional, or specious, but is the interaction of natural things when that interaction becomes communication. A "sign" may be conventional, as when a sound or a mark on a piece of paper — themselves physical existences — symbolizes other things; but being a sign, the sign-function, has its roots in natural existences; human association is the fruit of those roots. I can understand Santayana's idea that the social medium is conventional in a prejudicial sense only as another illustration of that structural dislocation of non-human and human existence which I have called a broken-backed naturalism.[7]

Neither Dewey nor Santayana could recognize the other's philosophy as a satisfactory naturalism. Each accused the other of harboring remnants of the Cartesian legacy. They disagreed whether perceptual experience could directly apprehend its external object, whether experience could be natural, and whether meanings reside in the natural world. These divergent stances, despite their numerous other agreements, cautions against any attempt to synthesize their philosophies to create a robust and lasting naturalism. For Santayana, an empiricist naturalism is impossible and absurd; for Dewey, an empiricist naturalism is the only reasonable option remaining to an anti-skeptical and anti-idealist philosophy. Dewey's direct and immediate realism is compatible with Santayana's theory of the psyche, but not with his theory of spiritual signs. Santayana's other fundamental commitments, to anti-contextualism and to mechanistic causality, prevented his pragmatic inclinations from dominating his type of naturalism.

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[6] Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), p. 54

[7] Dewey, "Half-Hearted Naturalism," in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 3, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 80.