

# Santayana and Wittgenstein on Scepticism

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*Apart from the attempt to understand the world, philosophy has other functions to fulfil. It can enlarge the imagination by the construction of a cosmic epic, or it can suggest a way of life less wayward and accidental than that of the unreflective. A philosopher who attempts either of these tasks must be judged by a standard of values, aesthetic or ethical, rather than by intellectual correctness.*

Bertrand Russell, “The Philosophy of Santayana”, p. 453.

## I. Introduction

At first sight, the attempt to compare the philosophical positions of George Santayana (1863-1952) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) could be deemed as somewhat bizarre or extravagant. As has been pointed out,<sup>1</sup> both philosophers belong to such different philosophical traditions with such divergent methods, aims, styles and sensibilities that they seem “improbable candidates for comparative study”. Furthermore, if it is true that “philosophical fashions and reputations tend to fade once a thinker has died”,<sup>2</sup> this is especially clear in Santayana’s case. In this respect, Santayana’s highly personal and literary style of writing has not been very helpful – even today there is a tendency to see him as a literary, rather than a philosophical figure – nor has his rather disdainful lack of interest in the core methodological questions that were at the origins of the contemporary philosophical movements whose birth and development he witnessed. This set of circumstances helps, in some way, to explain the situation in the philosophical literature: in the last 60 years or so, scholars of Santayana and Wittgenstein seem, as a rule, to have ignored each other. Of course, all rules have exceptions, and a

few may be quoted in this respect. For example, in his book *The Claim of Reason*, Stanley Cavell mentions in passing that Wittgenstein shares with Santayana (as well as with existentialists) a “sense of the precariousness and arbitrariness of existence”, a “knowledge of the depth of contingency”.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Michael Hodges and John Lachs published the only book (as far as I know) [Hodges and Lachs (2000)] that focuses on the relationships between the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Santayana. *Thinking in the Ruins* is, without a doubt, a good and daring book. In spite of the obvious dissimilarities, the comparison between Santayana and Wittgenstein that Hodges and Lachs undertake undeniably has a point. Both philosophers have much more in *common* than Cavell’s fleeting remark suggests. They were *contemporaries* whose acquaintances<sup>4</sup> and pathways crisscrossed several times, although it seems that they never met personally. The amazing similarities between the two figures range from personal biographies to philosophical goals, not to mention their political conservatism, their standards of “decency” (Wittgenstein)/ “honesty” (Santayana), or their shared contempt towards professional philosophers.<sup>5</sup> Valuable as they are, however, I think that Hodges and Lachs’ pioneering insights need to be taken even further and in other directions. My contribution will focus on the ways in which Santayana and Wittgenstein treat scepticism. It is not only the relevance of the topic which has determined my choice; I think – and I hope to demonstrate as such in this paper – that the comparison can have a philosophical, and not merely a historical point.

It is well known that the problem of scepticism attracted Wittgenstein’s attention during a very early period of his philosophical career and there are good reasons for supposing that this happened under the influence of Tolstoy’s *My Confession*.<sup>6</sup> Near the end of the *Tractatus*, scepticism is mentioned alongside “The riddle” (6.5), the impotence of science both vis á vis the most important human problems (6.52), and the “proper” status of “the problem of life” (6.21). Wittgenstein declares therein – in what seems to be an attempt at stopping scepticism from the cradle – that “Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical” (6.51). After this brief indictment, Wittgenstein did not *apparently* pay any further attention to the topic and the question presumably remained in dry dock until his famous visit to Malcolm in Cornell in 1949<sup>7</sup>. While there, Wittgenstein intensively discussed several issues concerning scepticism with Malcolm and, on his return to Europe, started to write down his ruminations on scepticism, on the nature and the status of our basic beliefs, etc. He was to keep writing on these top-

ics until the eve of his death. The bulk of these writings is what we know today as *On Certainty* [Wittgenstein (1969)].

Santayana's interest in scepticism, on the other hand, may be traced back to his work *The Life of Reason; or the Phases of Human Progress* [Santayana (1905-1906)]. This monumental work in five volumes is an attempt to map out a kind of naturalistic "biography of the human mind", in which *scepticism* is only one of its main topics. Nearly twenty years later, however, Santayana decided to recast his whole philosophical system. To that end, he set about the task of substituting the introspective psychology of his earlier writings by a set of ontological distinctions (the "realms" of being). The first step was accomplished in a book entitled *Scepticism and Animal Faith* [Santayana (1923)]. The comments I shall make here concerning Santayana's treatment of scepticism rely basically on this work.

## II. A Thought-Experiment

The first part of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* takes the form of a thought-experiment<sup>8</sup>. After some preliminary remarks, Santayana asks: Why do people embark on an activity such as criticism? He thinks that critical activity is the result of an *accident* in human history, an accident due to many unhappy experiences of perplexity and error. His account is mainly of a genetic kind. When people's attention is attracted to some remarkable thing, for example the rainbow, they do not examine this event from different points of view "but all the casual resources of fancy are called forth in conceiving it, and this total reaction of the mind precipitates a dogma; the rainbow is taken for an omen, or for a trace left in the sky by the passage of some beautiful and elusive goddess" [Santayana (1923) p. 6]. However, the same perception that has given birth to a dogma today may give birth to a different one tomorrow. Of course, it is not *logically* impossible to conceive a world in which different dogmas could peacefully co-exist. In the realm of dogmas, however, there is also a kind of "struggle for life". "In the jungle", says Santayana, "one tree strangles another, and luxuriance itself is murderous. So is luxuriance in the human mind. What kills spontaneous fictions, what recalls the impassioned fancy from its improvisation, is the angry voice of some contrary fancy. [...] Criticism arises *out of the conflict* of dogmas" [*ibid.*]; and a clash between dogmas is only a clash between beliefs. For belief, the most ordinary belief, is always a dogma.

As can be expected, two different groups of “supporters” can always be found for each two different dogmas in conflict (in fact people do ferociously *disagree* on a number of very important things), and the emergence of a kind of “method” for establishing what *ought* to be believed cannot be surprising. Scepticism thus appears as a sort of *dissatisfaction* with any method whatsoever for evaluating beliefs. From the outset, Santayana admits “the brute necessity of believing something as life lasts”. Nevertheless, he is fully conscious that this fact does not license a *hasty dismissal* of scepticism. He therefore undertakes a kind of “thought-experiment” in which he concedes from the very beginning that sceptics should be allowed to doubt everything they can in order to discover whether they have any beliefs that are altogether beyond doubt. Here are his own words: “let me then push scepticism *as far as I logically can*, and endeavour to clear my mind of illusion, even at the price of intellectual suicide” [Santayana (1923) p. 10, my italics]. Furthermore, Santayana, as opposed to Wittgenstein, is apparently unconcerned with the *meanings* of the expressions used to state sceptical doubts. He acknowledges from the very outset that the sceptic has the *right* to present his case, *provided that he proceeds honestly*. (We shall see later what Santayana means by “honestly”.)

Santayana’s testing of the sceptic’s case passes through several stages. Religious beliefs, legends and histories are easy preys to criticism. What Santayana calls “romantic solipsism” “in which the self making up the universe is a moral person endowed with memory and vanity” [Santayana (1923), p. 13] is the next catch. His rejection of this kind of solipsism is not based on its being *unthinkable* or *self-contradictory*. Santayana thinks of it as “an interesting state of mind” indeed: in such a state “all the complementary objects that might be requisite to give point and body to the idea of oneself, *might* be only ideas and not facts; and a solitary deity imagining a world or remembering his own past constitutes a perfectly conceivable universe” [*ibid.*]. However, his main reason for putting it aside is that romantic solipsism is a *dishonest* stance. The romantic solipsist claims to have reached the top-end of the experiment, when what he is in fact doing is *arbitrarily* stopping at one stage in the journey of testing his beliefs for certainty. The romantic solipsist thinks of himself as having had certain experiences in a certain order. Santayana’s retort is that one cannot conceive how one being without beliefs in the physical world could be able to check the general reliability of his memory and, therefore, how he could trust any past memories without making *a leap in the dark*. It is important here to note

that Santayana is not putting forward this argument as a *killing* objection against romantic solipsism; his point only seems to be that the solipsist progress is not *enough*, that there can be an *additional* stage in which he can reach a *greater* rational security. If this is so, the romantic solipsist has no *right* to entertain the beliefs he is claiming to have without being thereby committed to an unjustified form of dogmatism. If this is so, the beliefs of the romantic solipsist need to be further strained “through the utmost rigours of scepticism” [Santayana (1923), p. 9] and the thought-experiment must proceed further.

In the *final* stage of the thought-experiment, the *protagonist* is the “solipsist of the present moment” (an expression coined by Santayana, by the way). Such a solipsist should regard as “gratuitous dogmas” “the postulates on which empirical knowledge is based, namely, that there has been a past, that it was as it is now thought to be, that there will be a future and that it must, for some inconceivable reason, resemble the past and obey the same laws” [Santayana (1923), p. 14]. Santayana insists that this is the only *honest* stance for a true sceptic and dismisses as “misunderstandings” the attempts to present it as self-refuting. For example, one could argue that a mind that calls any moment the “present” moment virtually *transcends* it and posits a past and a future beyond it. Santayana replies, however, that such arguments confuse the *convictions of the solipsist* with those of a spectator who describes them from *outside*. A solipsist of this kind could, in principle, use other men’s language, but he *cannot* be committed to its implications. Such implications may render it very difficult for him to remember his solitude, but no more than “the figures of men and beasts, legends and Apocalypses” that can be part of his “vision”. The predicament of the solipsist of the present moment is psychologically *difficult* indeed, but not contradictory; after all, “it is hard for the greedy intellect to keep its cake without eating it” [Santayana (1923), p. 16]. Furthermore, this kind of solipsist is someone who becomes “an *incredulous* spectator of his own romance” [*ibid.*, p. 15, my italics]. “Incredulous” is here the right word indeed. The ideas that the solipsist of the present moment entertains have no *internal* qualities at all that could mark them as *pointing* to something outside themselves; they only turn into *beliefs* when “by precipitating tendencies to action they persuade me that they are *signs of things*; and these things are not ideas simply hypostatised, but are believed to be compacted of many parts, and full of ambushed powers entirely absent from ideas” [*ibid.*, p. 16, my italics]. The passage from ideas to beliefs is certainly

*almost* mechanical (“the belief”, says Santayana, “is imposed on me surreptitiously by a latent reaction of my body on the object producing the idea”) and that accounts for the difficulty of the true scepticism (“permitted only to the young philosopher, in his first intellectual despair” [*ibid.*, p. 34]). Everybody who is not a solipsist of the present moment *believes* some things for which he cannot offer proper rational support. However, Santayana claims that although this *latent reaction* can hardly be avoided, “it may be discounted in reflection, if a man has experience and the poise of a philosopher” [*ibid.*, p. 16].

A consequence of the above picture is that there cannot be *real* change for the true sceptic; he must content himself with the intuition of change, what he calls the *specious* change. Everything given intuitively is only an appearance. For a change to be real, its first term must have occurred “out the relation to the subsequent phases which had not yet arisen and only became manifest in the sequel: as the Old Testament, if really earlier than the New Testament, must have existed alone first, when it could not be called old. If it had existed only in the Christian Bible, under that perspective which renders and calls it old, it would be old only speciously, and all revelation would have been really simultaneous” [Santayana (1923), p. 25]. Now, belief in change cannot be a belief in specious change, but in *real* change. As has been pointed out, it is true that belief is almost irresistible in animal perception due to biological reasons and cannot be suspended for *long* in our current thinking. However, Santayana insists that it may be theoretically suspended for a *moment* in the interest of criticism.

Furthermore, the distinction between *subject* and *object* should suffer a similar fate in the hands of the true sceptic; the solipsist of the present moment cannot afford such a luxury either. “It might seem for a moment as if this pressing actuality of experience implied a relation between a subject and an object, so that an indescribable being called ego or self was given with and involved in any actual fact. This analysis, however, is merely *grammatical*, and if pressed issues in mythical notions” [Santayana (1923), p. 22, my italics]. Again, it could be psychologically difficult to dispense with an “I” or “ego”; but at this stage of the thought-experiment it is clear that the solipsist cannot be in the presence of anything except the *object itself*. For one thing: “Analysis can never find in the object what, by hypothesis is not there, and the object, by definition, is all that is found”. Of course, we could be prey here, Santayana warns us, of a *new* familiar misunderstanding: there is a “much later discovered biological truth”; namely,

that in order to perceive an object we need a subject, a subject that bears natural relations with the world surrounding it. However, this natural fact *cannot* by itself guarantee the logical necessity of deriving a metaphysical subject from the object itself. Now, if that subject cannot be found in the object, any attempt at postulating it, can only turn out to be a movement backwards towards the *insecurity* that the solipsist is trying to avoid.

The last step in this philosophical exercise is to *abolish* any existence. A true sceptic should by now be engaged only with the datum (“the whole of what solicits [his] attention at any moment”). According to Santayana, existence now *points* to something being in external relations to things outside it, and nothing in the datum itself points with *absolute security* to such external relations. Therefore, “belief in the existence of anything, including myself, is something incapable of proof, and resting, like all belief, on some irrational persuasion or prompting of life” [Santayana (1923), p. 35]. However, Santayana is ready to explain that the above declaration does *not* mean that things, including myself, do not exist: “Certainly”, he claims, “as a matter of fact, when I deny existence I exist; but doubtless many of the other facts I have been denying, because I found no evidence for them, were true also. *To bring me evidence of their existence is no duty imposed on facts, nor a habit of theirs: I must employ private detectives*” [*ibid.*]. The point here is that, according to Santayana, existence is essentially related to external relations. If something exists, then it should be in any kind whatsoever of external relations with something. Now, the solipsist of the present moment is unable to find that the datum, which attracts his attention at each moment, bears in an indubitable way any external relations with something else. Not even this extreme sceptic is able to find any certainty for what could appear to be the most real: his own experiencing of the datum. The only *criterion of certainty* left by now should be that of “presence” or “intuitive possession”. Such a criterion declares that anything not immediately before the mind is at risk, that we can trust only what we see. “Existence, then, not being included in any immediate datum, is a fact always open to doubt” [*SAF*, pp. 39-40].

It is at this point that the solipsist of the present moment reaches *absolute certainty*, because here he is no longer taking any risks. Perhaps for a moment he may fancy that he has found a realm of *indubitable facts*. However, Santayana is prompt to pour cold water on his hopes:

“Hence an important conclusion which at first seems paradoxical but which reflection will support; namely that the notion that the datum exists is unmeaning, and if insisted upon is false. That which exists is the *fact that the datum is given at that particular moment* [...] in the universe; the intuition, *not the datum*, is the fact that occurs, and this fact, if known at all, must be asserted at some other moment by an adventurous belief which may be true or false. That which *is certain and given*, on the contrary, is something of which existence *cannot* be predicated, and which, until it is used as a description of something else, cannot be either true or false” [Santayana (1923), p. 45].

Therefore, scepticism may be defeated only by *our being certain of what is directly present*. But inside the walls of certainty, the only thing we can do is to *stare* at the datum, so to speak, with wide open eyes. It is true that we cannot be wrong in what we “see”; however, the certainty that we get at the end of the day is empty. As Santayana has stated, the price paid by the sceptic is plain “intellectual suicide”. As long as we claim to get justified belief on the basis of the established criterion (“presence” or “intuitive possession”), we shall be defeated by the solipsist. If, on the contrary, we are prone to think that he is the loser, that the result of the thought-experiment is that we have discovered a set of self-guaranteeing truths absolutely exempt from doubt, then we should abandon any hope of connecting “the given”, “the datum”, with the world we live in. It is of interest to remark here that Santayana’s result is basically in line with that of McDowell concerning the “Cartesian picture” as stated, for instance, in “Singular Thought and Inner Space”. The problem is, in McDowell words, how “the fully Cartesian picture is entitled to characterize its inner facts in content-involving terms. For, if what is completely certain has the features that both assert it has, then there is a serious question about how it can be that the given, the datum, is not *blank* or *blind*, but purports to be revelatory of the world we live in” [McDowell (1986), p. 152].

I take Santayana’s thought-experiment to be only one possible, perhaps debatable<sup>9</sup>, way of developing the Cartesian quest for certainty to its fullest extent. What we get, in fact, is certainty at the price of emptiness. The “datum” of the solipsist of the present moment has absolute certainty (it is an “essence”, as Santayana calls it). Precisely for this reason, however, it cannot bear any relations at all with the “external” world (the “existences”);



it is essentially autonomous and unconnected. This is indeed a very intriguing outcome. We were searching for certainty *vis à vis* the sceptical challenge, we found it, but we have immediately realized that it is powerless to guarantee one single item of knowledge. How can it be that the datum, which is absolutely certain, has turned out to be *nothing*? What puzzles us here bears a certain similarity with the amazement expressed by Wittgenstein's opponent in *Philosophical Investigations* § 304. There, he complains that "again and again [you] reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*". Wittgenstein replies: "Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! [...] a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said." That is precisely the status of the datum: it is not a something (it is not an existence), but it is not a nothing either (it is an essence). Nothing could be said about the datum, because trying to say something about the datum is to express an adventurous belief about "the fact that the datum is given in a particular moment", a belief that can be true or false, therefore uncertain, and something uncertain cannot be a datum. The datum has *not* turned into nothing; we are perplexed only because we thought wrongly that it was a *something*!

Santayana actually thinks that scepticism conceived in this way is both logically and practically possible (although in the latter case only for a short period of time and "practised by the young philosopher, in his first intellectual despair"). Nonetheless, he finds healthy support in scepticism for the intellect: "There are certain motives [...] which render ultimate scepticism precious to a spiritual mind, as a sanctuary for grosser illusions" [Santayana (1923), p. 40]. Of course, he thinks that scepticism has *no effect* at all on our ordinary transactions with the world; it leaves the world unchanged. However, he stated on several occasions that the person that passes through the sceptical thought-experiment does not remain unchanged. On the contrary, the transit through scepticism is for Santayana a vital process which, in some way, changes the person that undergoes it. It makes humans more humble, so to speak, in the sense that they turn out to be more *prone* to accept that in order to establish that, for example, they think and live, they must appeal to *animal faith*<sup>10</sup>. "If they were too proud for that, and simply stared at the datum, the last thing they will see would be themselves".

### III. Unjustified dogmatism?

By now, lots of Wittgensteinians will presumably be ready to accuse Santayana of flagrant and unacceptable *dogmatism*<sup>11</sup>. To rely on “animal faith” to avoid the uncomfortable predicament of the solipsist of the present moment would not be essentially different from, for example, Moore’s, Austin’s or Cavell’s rejoinders of scepticism. If we accept Marie McGinn’s diagnosis in *Sense and Certainty* [McGinn (1989)] as a paradigm of a widespread interpretation of Wittgenstein, the three aforementioned philosophers use the fact that scepticism is *unbearable* as a *sufficient* basis for denying any compulsory force in sceptical conclusions. Santayana, on the other hand, would be employing similar tactics when he appeals to the gulf opened up between thought and action, between theory and practice, as a result of sceptical arguments. When this gap appears, philosophy, says Santayana, has lost its “honesty”. That is to say, philosophy no longer stands where it should; and for him philosophy should stand *exactly* where *life* stands. Therefore, the *irrelevance* of scepticism and the justification for bypassing it seems to follow as a plausible consequence.

Now, it is worth looking at Santayana’s stance a little closer. To begin with, Santayana – as well as Wittgenstein – *is not* prepared in principle to dismiss sceptical arguments merely *on account* of their radical *disagreement* with real life. It is true that from the very beginning of *Scepticism and Animal Faith* Santayana announces his great respect “for a certain shrewd orthodoxy which the sentiment and practice of laymen maintain everywhere”, [Santayana (1923), p. v] (and on that score, he agrees with Wittgenstein). However, he never rejects the *soundness* of genuine scepticism on this account. What Santayana freely admits is that the whole thought-experiment has a *speculative character* and that he cannot admit in this respect any “sacrifice of truth to utility”. His point is rather that: “there is [...] a wise direction of curiosity upon things on the human scale, and within the range of art. Speculation beyond those limits cannot be controlled, and is *irresponsible*” [*ibid.*, p. 105, my italics].

Furthermore, he feels himself entitled to assert “I am a dogmatist”, “complete scepticism is [...] not *inconsistent* with animal faith; the admission that nothing given exists is not incompatible with belief in things not given” [Santayana (1923), p. 105, my italics]. According to Santayana, to be a dogmatist is a result, so to speak, of taking scepticism *seriously*. For the honest sceptic, “scepticism” does not mean “disbelief”: “disbelief is not

sceptical; it is *belief* in the falseness of a previous assertion”. True sceptics merely consider belief and take into account its inherent uncertainty. They discover, in short, that all belief is a dogma. Now, they cannot *say* that any belief, much less all belief, is *wrong* (see Section II above). Santayana’s thought-experiment tries to make it clear that when scepticism is pushed “as far as one logically can”, we cannot avoid the conclusion that “the given” (the datum) – which purports to be absolutely certain – is completely *useless* for our initial proposal and this result *bewilders* us. *First*, since we embarked on the thought-experiment because a belief is apparently a *dogma*, dogmas struggle for life and we have no sure criterion for deciding which of them is true: “Scepticism is a suspicion of error about facts, and to suspect about facts is to share the enterprise of knowledge” [Santayana (1923), p. 8]. *Second*, what we sought after was to *strain* those dogmas “through the utmost rigours of scepticism”; that is, what we were looking for was to find a realm of *indubitable objects*. But, *third*, although it seemed for a moment as if the solipsist of the present moment had achieved the goal, we immediately realized that “the given” or “the datum” is something, so to speak, *encapsulated*, something that *does not* reside in a larger world, but constitutes the only one that there is. This is what Santayana calls “to clear one’s mind of illusion, even at the price of intellectual suicide” [*ibid.*, p. 10]. *Fourth*, the thought-experiment concludes with the total destruction of the building blocks with which we tried to address the initial problem. This is a case in which our endeavours reveal themselves as *nonsense*, while, at the same time, we cannot get rid of the result because we keep granting it a certain *compulsory* force. Santayana’s confession that he is a dogmatist and that “complete [genuine] scepticism” is not “inconsistent with animal faith” is, I take it, to *admit* this perplexing predicament and to *accept* that there is nothing one can do except *submit* to physical necessity<sup>12</sup>. On the one hand, the reflexive character of the thought-experiment makes it *irresponsible vis á vis* the world; but this kind of criticism is in itself *unstable*, oscillating between nonsensicality and dishonesty: “the critical attitude”, says Santayana, “when it refuses to rest at some point upon vulgar faith, inhibits all belief, denies all claims of knowledge, and becomes dishonest, because *it itself claims to know*” [Santayana (1923), p. 187, my italics].

I cautiously consider Santayana to be committed here to what James Conant has called in a recent paper [“Varieties of Scepticism”, Conant (2004)] “the Kantian way with scepticism”. The Kantian way with scepti-

cism consists, in its *positive* part, in “a *radical following* through of the implicit assumptions of a sceptical position up to the point at which the position founders in incoherence”. In turn, the *negative* part seeks “to find a way to respond to the Cartesian that *bypasses* the task of having to enter into the details of Cartesian examples, exploring how they are motivated, and considering how they differ from ordinary examples of knowledge” [Conant (2004), p. 124]. It is true that Santayana’s motivations for commencing his thought-experiment are Cartesian (again in Conant’s terminology) and not of the Kantian variety.<sup>13</sup> In principle, Santayana’s problem appears to be *epistemological*: we are *suspicious* about facts and we are trying to isolate true beliefs; that is, beliefs which really (i.e. not dogmatically) are *symbols* of facts. However, as the experiment proceeds, this Cartesian search for epistemic security gradually changes, being replaced eventually by the “Kantian way”. Santayana sets out on his journey at a point in which he takes the possibility of experience *for granted*, *although* he has the *suspicion* that beliefs based on experience may not correspond to facts. This philosophical anxiety brings him to a point (the solipsism of the present moment) at which *certainty* is purchased at the cost of *nonsense*; a point at which the whole idea of a world to which we have access through the senses “vanishes in thin air”.<sup>14</sup> Now, the problem we are left with instead is not the problem of which beliefs, if any, are true, but the very different (Kantian) problem of the *conditions of possibility* for beliefs about the external world.

This is the point at which one may claim that Wittgenstein’s and Santayana’s treatments of scepticism *converge* somewhat. It is not easy to see things this way because there is a tendency to think that only Wittgenstein’s later works (especially *On Certainty*) are the *main*, if not *the* exclusive, source of Wittgenstein’s dealings with scepticism.<sup>15</sup> However, in “Varieties of Scepticism”, Conant argues convincingly, for example, contra Cavell<sup>16</sup>, in favour of interpreting the famous Kripke’s rule-following paradox of *Philosophical Investigations* § 201 [Kripke (1982)] as a “Kantian variety” of scepticism. It is also plausible to think of, for example, the private language argument in its more traditional mould (§ 243 ff.) as one argument (among many others) of the Kantian variety, but this is not a question that I shall pursue here.

However, what Conant calls the “Wittgensteinian way with scepticism” has an *additional component* that should be considered as a *supplement* (and not as an *alternative*) to the Kantian way. By means of this additional

movement (“the movement towards the ordinary”, as Conant calls it), Wittgenstein would try “to bring the sceptic back to the place where he started, where he already is and never left, but in such a way that he is able to recognise it for the first time” [Conant (2005) p. 125]. I take it that Conant is referring here essentially to Wittgenstein’s analyses in *On Certainty*, to *Tractatus* 6.51 and, perhaps, to some particular fragments of the *Blue and Brown Books* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Now, Santayana explicitly opposes this form of attacking scepticism. And if we consider that this is one of the most original features of Wittgenstein’s treatment of scepticism (“the movement down the dialectical ladder”, again in Conant’s words), then this is precisely the point at which Wittgenstein and Santayana part company. Santayana’s reasons should be clear by now. From the very outset, he considers that the sceptic does not need *any particular credentials* for using terms like “knowledge”, “doubt”, etc., whether in the philosophical or in the ordinary sense. He seems to think that philosophers have the right to practise “disengaged reflection”, with the consequence that his thought-experiment is *speculative*, from beginning to end. This means that it is perfectly possible for a solipsist of the present moment to lead a life in which his scepticism peacefully coexists, without any interference, with his animal existence. The real problem arises when the sceptic is dishonest, when he *succumbs* to belief; that is, when he uncritically takes an idea (or an “essence”) for a thing. “The error”, says Santayana, “came from a wild belief about it; and the possibility of error came from a wild propensity to belief. Relief now the pressure of that animal haste and that hungry presumption; the error is washed out of illusion; it is no illusion now, but an idea” [Santayana (1923), p. 73]. Not surprisingly, this washing away of illusion brings us back again and again to the last stage of the thought-experiment, in which the solipsist of the present moment lives his world (*the world*).

One should not underestimate the differences between Wittgenstein’s and Santayana’s treatments of scepticism with respect to this point. These differences reveal a profound disagreement between the two philosophers as regards their conception of meaning and even in their vision of philosophy. As Conant has remarked, the originality of Wittgenstein’s treatment of scepticism lies in “pushing the sceptic in the opposite direction from the one in which Kant seeks to push it” [Conant (2004), p. 125]. Wittgenstein would not be content with the “Kantian (and Santayana’s) way” of following the sceptic’s presuppositions to their ultimate consequences. His deep

concern with the *bewitchment* that language exerts on us impels him to examining “the initial steps in the Cartesian sceptic’s progress towards doubt, identifying how the sceptic passes from ordinary to philosophical doubt, pinpointing the decisive movement in the philosophical conjuring trick and diagnosing why it is the one that is bound to seem most innocent” [*ibid.*].<sup>17</sup> If the originality of Wittgenstein’s treatment of scepticism resides mainly in this point, nothing of this kind may be found in Santayana. For the latter, Wittgenstein’s analysis of the *real* conditions of use of doxastic or epistemic terms would lie very far from the concerns of the Santayanian philosopher, who, emancipated from existences, takes delight in the realm of the “essence”. However, one should not overestimate these differences either. Both Santayana and Wittgenstein aim, in Cavell’s words, to remove the sceptic’s *theatricality* [Cavell (1979), p. 273]. In fact, sceptical arguments are deprived of their appeal both when “[we] bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” [*Philosophical Investigations*, §116] (the “original” Wittgensteinian way) and “pass from a piece of disguised nonsense into something that is patent nonsense” [*ibid.*, §464]. The latter is what both Santayana and Wittgenstein are trying to do. It is an open question who offers a better and livelier description of the details of the sceptic’s predicament.

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## Notes

1. Cfr. Hodges and Lachs (2000), p. 1.
2. Cfr. Stroll (1994), p. 14.
3. Cavell (1979), p. 236.
4. Bertrand Russell, for example, was a personal friend of Santayana's. In a very Wittgensteinian way, Santayana came to the aid of Russell in 1937, when the latter found himself in financial difficulties. Furthermore, Russell wrote a contribution to the second volume of "The Library of Living Philosophers" series, *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, in which he makes a flattering comparison between Santayana and Spinoza. However, he is sometimes highly critical of, for example, Santayana's thesis concerning the divorce of essence from existence and the "animal faith" postulate [Russell (1951)].
5. In Russell (1951), p. 454 one can read: "To understand Santayana, it is necessary to bear in mind some general features of his circumstances and temperament. While his environment has been mainly American, his tastes and preferences have remained predominantly Spanish. This clash [...] produced a rare explicitness and self-knowledge as regard values. *Those who have always lived in sympathetic surroundings have had no occasion to become aware of the impersonal part of their springs in action, since no one has questioned it. Unsympathetic surroundings, on the contrary, generate, in a reflective mind, an intellectual defensive system*" [my italics]. Russell's reflection could be applied *pari passu* to Wittgenstein, a typical Central European living in Cambridge's "unsympathetic" surroundings who also develops an "intellectual defensive system". By the way, Santayana, in contrast to Wittgenstein, never renounced his Spanish Citizenship.
6. Cfr. Valdés (forthcoming).
7. Of course, this widespread point of view is highly debatable. One has only to recall that Kripke's *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* [Kripke (1982)] deals with a central theme of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. However, Cavell (1990), for example, questions whether Kripke is really talking there about scepticism. On the other hand, Conant (2004) – to whom I shall refer later – makes a forceful defence of the existence of, at least, two varieties of scepticism in Wittgenstein's work.
8. There are several expositions of Santayana's path to scepticism from which I have benefited here. In this respect, I would like to cite Hodges and Lachs (2000), Sprigge (1974), Faerna (2007) and Moreno (2007). The opportune designation "thought-experiment" is used by Moreno in the aforementioned book.
9. For example, Russell (1951) is very critical regarding Santayana's divorce between essence and existence. Curiously enough, this was a thesis that Russell adopted during a period of his philosophical career.
10. I take it that what Santayana understands by "Animal Faith" is something similar to Russell's "Instinctive Belief" in Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, OUP, 1967, p. 11. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Wittgenstein uses a very similar expression, presumably with a similar sense, in *On Certainty* (358-59, 475), my italics:

Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly



thought as well.)

But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond justified or unjustified; as it were, as something *animal*.

I want to regard man here as an *animal*; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination [...].

11. In fact, I am of the opinion that Santayana's treatment of scepticism is a clear case of dogmatism [see Valdés-Villanueva (2007)]. However, his dogmatism belongs to a very peculiar kind (one could say that it is "overt" or "confessed" dogmatism) and, as we shall see, it is a typical (and almost certainly wrong) reaction to the bafflement produced by the result of the thought-experiment regarding scepticism.
12. Compare the predicament of the solipsist of the present moment with the list of features of the Kantian genre of Scepticism given by Conant [Conant (2004), pp. 11ff.].
13. This is Conant's formulation of the Cartesian/Kantian opposition: "The most familiar way of formulating the contrast between these two problematics is as *one of knowledge vs. the conditions of knowledge*. Thus one is often told something along the following lines: the Cartesian wants to arrive at knowledge; the Kantian wants to arrive at the ground of the possibility of knowledge" [Conant (2004) p. 99].
14. This expression is used by Kripke (1982), p. 22 and alludes to the intriguing consequence of the "Kripkenstein" sceptical paradox: "the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air". (Quoted in Cavell (1990), p. 80 and Conant (2004), p. 124.) It is clear that I use Kripke's expression here with a different, though not unrelated, sense.
15. *Tractatus* 6.51 would be only a "statement of purpose" to be developed thirty years later.
16. There is a discussion in Cavell (1990) about the scope of Kripke's examples in Kripke (1982). In particular, Cavell rejects them as cases of scepticism. Apparently Cavell only accepts as "proper" scepticism what Conant calls "the Cartesian variety". However, his basis for this claim is rather weak, as Conant has pointed out: "A lot of scholars would agree with Cavell's contention that what Kripke calls "Wittgenstein's sceptical solution" is not anything Wittgenstein would countenance as a 'solution' to a philosophical problem. However, Cavell moves precipitously from this observation to the conclusion that if Kripke's solution is not Wittgenstein's, then 'the problem to which Kripke offers the solution is not (quite) Wittgenstein's either.' This is a non-sequitur" [Conant (2004), p. 123].
17. It is important to remember here that Conant does not conceive the "Wittgensteinian way" as an alternative to the "Kantian way", but as a *supplement*. "The Kantian way compels the sceptic to progress further and further forward, further and further from the ordinary, and deeper and deeper into philosophical perplexity [...] The Wittgensteinian way adds to this pressure and additional one that seeks to bring the sceptic back to the place where he started, where he already is, but in such a way that he is able to recognise it for the first time" [Conant (2004), p. 125].