George Santayana, a leading figure in classical American Philosophy, was born in 1863 in Madrid, Spain. 
His father studied law and eventually became governor of Batang Island in the Philippines, and his 
mother was the daughter of a Spanish diplomat. When Santayana was eight, his father sent him to live 
with his mother, who had relocated to Boston to raise children from a previous marriage. He entered 
Harvard College in 1882, and after completing his doctorate there, was appointed an instructor of 
philosophy at Harvard, a position he held until 1912. While at Harvard, the American philosopher William 
James was among his teachers, and his notable students included T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert 
Frost, and Conrad Aiken, all of whose work reflects his influence. He was a popular teacher, yet 
resigned despite the protests of the college, feeling that American academia had become offensively 
business-oriented, and that philosophy as a discipline had lost its sense of the “good life” and the 
celebration that is the philosopher’s essential task. After spending the years of the Great War in 
Oxford, he traveled extensively throughout Europe for the rest of his life, producing a voluminous 
oeuvre that includes poetry, essays, a best-selling novel and an autobiography.

In 1923, Santayana published Skepticism and Animal Faith, generally considered the inaugural work of 
his mature naturalist philosophy. In contrast to his earlier writing, this work represents an “ontological 
turn” toward materialism and away from the subjectivist, anthropocentric philosophy that dominated his 
previous period. This shift in Santayana’s thinking was generally consistent with the broader modernist 
trend of rejecting the idealism of the nineteenth century. He believed that consciousness is a 
byproduct of nature, and took as the starting point of his philosophical system the simple fact that 
human beings are animals acting in the natural world. John Lachs, who has written extensively on 
Santayana, explains the work’s central concept, “animal faith,” as follows: “Although this environment is 
vast and sometimes treacherous, we approach it with ‘animal faith,’ an unreflective confidence in its 
basic structures. For a philosophy to have relevance to life it must be a discernment and critical 
articulation of the details of this trust” (Lachs 42).

This animal faith in certain features of the natural environment is not a matter of reason; it is simply 
expressed in an animal’s observable interaction with its environment. Nor is such faith religious or 
spiritual, but more akin to “common sense,” which may or may not reach the level of consciousness. For 
Santayana, the philosopher’s task is to determine through observation what the tenets of this common 
faith are, as a means of understanding humanity’s place in the world. This project represents a radical 
break with rationalist philosophy, whose criterion for knowledge is certainty. Santayana considers such a 
criterion laughably impractical, even dishonest, and routinely illustrates the dishonesty of the rationalist 
position with reference to the most basic natural behaviors, such as eating. For example, there is no 
use in theorizing that the bread in my pantry is nothing more than an effect of consciousness if, 
whenever I am hungry, I eat it without hesitation. In rejecting the idea that the world is determined by 
cognition, and claiming instead that the world is there to be encountered, often in a semi-or even 
unconscious manner, Santayana’s thought shares something with the pragmatism of his teacher and 
colleague William James. One can detect this similarity in the preface to Skepticism and Animal Faith: 
“I think that common sense, in a rough dogged way, is technically sounder than the special schools of 
philosophy, each of which squints and overlooks half the facts and half the difficulties in its eagerness
to find in some detail the key to the whole ... I stand in philosophy exactly where I stand in daily life; I should not be honest otherwise” (Skepticism 3-4).

While Santayana's starting point is the observable interaction between animals and the natural world, he leaves the empirical study of nature to science. “Speculations about the natural world, such as those of the Ionian philosophers, are not metaphysics, but simply cosmology or natural philosophy. Now in natural philosophy I am a decided materialist — apparently the only one living ... I do not profess to know what matter is in itself, and feel no confidence in the divination of those esprits forts who, leading a life of vice, thought the universe must be composed of nothing but dice and billiard-balls” (Skepticism 5). Thus, Santayana draws a clear line between metaphysics and his own interest in matter and nature, which is to identify the pervasive, often subterranean and automatic beliefs we have about them. Lachs argues that “his belief in the autonomy of science functioned like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it served to control the excesses of philosophers in trying to compete with science on the basis of mere speculation or moral demands. On the other hand, however, it placed sharp limits on the scope of science, restricting its valid application to the sphere of nature alone” (Lachs 7). The metaphysical inadequacy of science is reflected in the fact that we never lose our sense of wonder at the sheer irrational facts of life and death, no matter how many “facts” we may learn about the composition of matter (Lachs 14).

Matter, Santayana famously said, is “the insane emphasis” of existence (Lachs 13). His radical materialism extends to the claim that matter is the basis for all thought; without matter, there would be no consciousness, no morality, and no spirit. The organism's expectations and fears vis-à-vis its environment determine the shape of its internal life, its views, and whatever may be called subjectivity. The “soul” too is material, arising out of organic experience. In Santayana’s system, the “psyche” or animating force of an organism has nothing to do with cognition but rather with natural contingency: “The environment determines the occasions on which intuitions arise, the psyche — the inherited organization of the animal — determines their form, and ancient conditions of life on earth no doubt determined which psyches should arise and prosper; and probably many forms of intuition, unthinkable to man, express the facts and the rhythms of nature to other animal minds” (Skepticism 81-2). The idea that nature determines excellence is Aristotelian, and Santayana had, in addition to his American pragmatism, an avowed affinity for classical Greek philosophy (Hodges and Lachs 47).

The first section of Skepticism and Animal Faith establishes, in Cartesian fashion, a method of reasoning through doubt. But ultimately, Santayana's doubt is more total than Descartes’, since he holds that nothing, not even the existence of the mind or the self, can be known with certainty. This conclusion, however, does not trouble him. Rather, he presents his philosophical system as an alternative to skepticism, to which he objects primarily because its practitioners contemplate thought without reference to embodied experience. Any product of such mediation will bear no resemblance to human behavior, as it ignores one of the basic tenets of animal faith: that a world of objects exists independently of the animal, and that he can affect and be affected by it. Among the other tenets of animal faith are a belief in memory and sensory information, and the organism's ability to respond to his environment on the basis of such information.

While the work of artists, in which Santayana had a lifelong interest, is not evidence of animal faith, he believed that art was a higher-order demonstration of the human animal's implicit belief in nature: “Art is the true discoverer, the unimpeachable witness to the reality of nature. The master of any art sees nature from the inside, and works with her, or she in him” (Skepticism 213). Santayana is himself often

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praised for the beauty of his prose, and while his poetry has a good many critics, the poet and social theorist John Ransom Crowe wrote in 1937 that Santayana's account of the realm of matter (developed at length in The Realm of Matter [1930]) is “a great literary achievement, and should be recommended equally to soft-hearted sentimentalists and hardheaded positivists. The account is more exciting than Milton's picture of Chaos, because nothing should have been expected of Chaos except the chaotic, but in nature we hope to find perfect animal fulfillments and rational processes; for, though we may often have been cheated, we have animal faith” (Ransom 411). This is an artist's eloquent articulation of the conviction, consistent throughout Santayana's works, that nature is where we will see ourselves most truly, with our hopes for fulfillment and our sense of what in life is good.

Bibliography


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