

# Introduction

In this book I am undertaking the challenge of reconstructing George Santayana's conception of human *self* as embedded in a larger project of philosophy of life. Meanwhile, I am tracing the connections in-between different areas of Santayana's philosophical engagement—from his ontology through literary criticism to his critique of culture—while striving to bring to light its hermeneutic coherence, corresponding to the idea of hermeneutic unity of life, which I find constitutive of an overarching project inherent in Santayana's philosophical endeavor. I choose the metaphor of life as insinuation—borrowing it from Henri Bergson—to emphasize the dramatic, theatrical style of the hermeneia in question. By setting the thinker from Avila in dialogue with selected twentieth-century representatives of the so-called continental philosophy, I hope to enrich the interpretive potential developed in the course of Santayana studies so far and stimulate further discussion of his legacy.<sup>1</sup>

The delayed reception of Santayana's work and his status of a philosophical outcast in early twentieth-century America was related to the fact that both his idea of philosophy and his philosophical method were at odds with the trends reigning at the American intellectual scene, where actors oscillated in-between Darwinism, radical empiricism of William James, social constructivism of John Dewey, Charles S. Peirce's commitment to panpsychism, and the idealism of Josiah Royce. When his contemporaries started to reduce the role of philosophy to the philosophy of science or “a procedure of linguistic sanitation,” Santayana was devoted to creating a “synoptic vision” of *conditio humana*<sup>2</sup> and a corresponding *philosophy of self-procured salvation*, as I call it in reference to the ancient, therapeutic meaning of philosophy. In other words, a few different but convergent and intertwining streams in Santayana's eclectic thought—from his idiosyncratic, nonreductive naturalism through a sort of *ancient* and to an extent *sapiential* style of philosophical engagement to astute criticism of

culture—stood in stark contrast to the increasing professionalization of philosophy at that time.

Among the alienating factors there were also Santayana's intellectual sympathies and cultural identifications like the advocacy of a cosmopolitan, Epicurean individualism, which was viewed by his contemporaries as verging on a decadent nihilism. "To subordinate the soul fundamentally to society or the individual to the state is sheer barbarism,"<sup>3</sup> Santayana would declare in the age when this sort of personal autonomy was rather unpopular in America. Particularly harsh critique came from the side of pragmatists on account of the alleged "uselessness" of Santayana's "anti-social" doctrine for any constructivist project.<sup>4</sup> This misreading of the idea of *disinterestedness* implicit in Santayana's vision of spiritual life is an example of some common misunderstandings of his thought.<sup>5</sup> "I care very little whether, at any moment, academic tendencies favour one unnecessary opinion or another"<sup>6</sup> wrote the thinker many years after he moved to Europe, giving an explicit expression of his detachment from the mainstream academic culture, which in time became deliberate and cultivated.

A serious overlooking in the early reception of his *oeuvre*, as noted one of the scholars in the 1980s, rested in the underestimation of "the special signature of his genius"—a synthesis of materialism with a peculiar kind of transcendentalism.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Santayana's engagement in developing the ontology of realms within the frame of his idiosyncratic naturalism, viewed by some early critics as an attempt to revive scholastic metaphysics, had a counterpart in the so-called ontological turn in continental philosophy, as represented by thinkers like Henri Bergson or Martin Heidegger. Interpreting and understanding a philosopher's work involves, among others, placing it in a broader comparative context of other thinkers. Even though the two final decades of the twentieth century brought a remarkable revival of interest in Santayana's heritage, little attention has been devoted to the possible relations between the thinker from Avila and contemporary continental philosophy. Bridging this gap, as I suggest, may enhance our interpretive potential in relation to Santayana's thought even to the point of rethinking his entire *oeuvre*.

Today a variety of interpretations is available. Some focus on his materialism and nonreductive naturalism as rendering his thought valid and inspiring for the contemporary continuation of these traditions. Scholars like Timothy Sprigge, John Lachs, and Angus Kerr Lawson undertook the task of an in-depth analysis of Santayana's ontology as well as discussed his writings from the perspective of philosophy of mind and action. Others read Santayana as a critic of American culture or looked at his work

via the lens of literary interpretative categories.<sup>8</sup> The scope of comparative contexts in Santayana scholarship ranges from Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, through Spinoza and Schopenhauer to his contemporaries, the pragmatists.<sup>9</sup> Santayana also came to be viewed “as anticipating a major theme in existentialism.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Hodges and John Lachs uncovered the (post-)modern face of Santayana’s “ironic ontology” by juxtaposing it with the late Wittgenstein’s thought. Thus, they confirmed Whitehead’s and Putnam’s opinions about Santayana being ahead of his time and misunderstood in some respects.<sup>11</sup> Santayana has also been viewed as a philosopher of religion and a phenomenologist.<sup>12</sup> Most recently, Daniel Moreno proposed a reinterpretation of Santayana’s thought focusing on the ontology of realms of being and the idea of philosophy as a form of life that Santayana himself is said to embody.<sup>13</sup> While Santayana scholarship is becoming international, an increased interest in his philosophy of culture and politics may be noted.

Still, as already mentioned, surprisingly little has been written with respect to Santayana and European thinkers of the twentieth century, even though it is occasionally mentioned that during the last thirty years of his life, which he spent in Rome, the thinker, removed from the philosophical currents of the day, “struggled” with his reading of the seminal works in phenomenology and existentialism.<sup>14</sup> The “late” Santayana for a long time has been viewed as a thinker engaged in a glass house of his own philosophical idiosyncrasies, radicalized by a growing mystical bent.

Meanwhile, Santayana’s correspondence and the recently published marginalia seem to disavow this stereotype. In the 1930s and 1940s the thinker, while completing his opus magnum *Realms of Being*, followed by his last book *Dominations and Powers*, was engaged in an intense dialogue with existentialist and phenomenological texts of the day. Perhaps no other thinker of the era was the recipient of such a long-lasting appreciation on the part of Santayana as Heidegger was. “I think my separate army corps are all alive and advancing slowly towards the appointed positions. Heidegger, whose book has splendid broad margins, which I cover with notes, is a great stimulus” Santayana wrote to his secretary, Daniel Cory, in February 1936.<sup>15</sup> It is also certain that Santayana read Husserl and Bergson, the latter being perhaps his last major intellectual fascination.<sup>16</sup>

One of the aims of this book is to set the thinker from Avila in a broader dialogical context with a number of contemporary (in a broad sense of this term) philosophers—from Nietzsche, through Bergson and Heidegger, to Paul Ricoeur. As for Heidegger, I am discussing possible similarities between his thought and that of Santayana with the support of

Santayana's marginal notes in his copy of *Sein und Zeit*, which have never been subject to research thus far. Establishing this kind of hermeneutic dynamics between both thinkers contributes to the task of reconstructing Santayana's philosophy of life as a modern philosophical project which I propose to call *contemplative vitalism*.

As mentioned at the beginning, the thematic axis around which a large part of this dialogic and comparative book oscillates is the issue of human *self*. What made Santayana's perspective to an extent exceptional was his reliance on the classical pairs of concepts, like matter-spirit, existence-essence, or *vita activa-vita contemplativa*. This, in the eyes of his colleagues the pragmatists, revived some old, unwelcome dualisms. There seems to appear a problem of connection, or rather, a danger of disconnection, between psyche and spirit, followed by a disquieting suggestion of a double *self*: a psychic agent and a spiritual, *oneiric self*. Moreover, Santayana, by means of the recognition of the ideal realms of essences and spirit, declares consciousness irreducible to material processes and at the same time deprives it of causal efficacy by announcing spirit *impotent*. As I argue in this book, this sort of nonreductive ontology, this trace of idealism in Santayana's architecture of being is of incomparable benefit from the point of view of philosophy of life and culture. While inquiring into the intricacies of Santayana's enigmatic and *aporetic* conception of human *self*, I explore the potential of his ontology as making the reality of human life irreducible to the relations of power.

The scarcity of research in respect to the issue of human *self* is not particularly surprising given that Santayana's anthropology and his treatment of the questions concerning the subject and *self* seem haphazard and fragmentary. What is more, the thinker quite explicitly claimed that "subjectivity is a normal madness in living animals. It should be discounted, not idolized, in the philosophy of the West."<sup>17</sup> He thus secured for himself an opinion of a staunch opponent of philosophy of subjectivity (as exemplified by German idealism in particular). Having said this, I find the above quoted words of Santayana—particularly in the light of his well-known critique of egotism in philosophy—*tellingly misleading* and forming an inspiring couple with those of Heidegger, selected as a motto for one of the chapters of this book, namely: "Philosophy must perhaps start from 'subject' and return to the 'subject' in its ultimate question, and yet for all that it *may not* pose its questions in a one-sidedly subjectivist manner."<sup>18</sup>

What I mean is that despite the fact that one may search in vain for an exhaustive treatment of the issue in question in Santayana's body of work, a reader of Santayana's philosophical and literary works may be under an

impression that, paradoxically, *this* question, more than any other, is the unuttered “wager,” the main but silent preoccupation of his philosophical effort—the *unsayable* of Derrida. This of course must remain only an arbitrary impression, but whether one agrees with it or rejects it, Santayana’s conception of selfhood calls for an inquiry. By way of digression, at least one thinker—Kenneth Burke—regarded the question of selfhood as central for Santayana’s thought. However, it is not Fichte’s idealistic, absolute and pure Ego that one finds there but rather the *self* who is both a conscious agent, the center of a dramatic world, and a subject of spiritual life, of *vita contemplativa*, where essences, as appearances, enjoy the dignity of becoming ends in themselves. In this latter case, claims Burke, we are dealing, in a sense, with a “contemplation of death,” which makes us realize that “the realm of essence is ultimately a *thanatopsis*” (!).<sup>19</sup> Whether such a treatment of consciousness does indeed make, as Burke suggests, for a “philosophy of retirement” and brings a prospect of a “long life of euthanasia”<sup>20</sup> will be left for the reader of this book to judge.

Furthermore, once we become sensitive to this issue and start asking ourselves what kind of the *self*, and possibly what conception of human being, is implied by the basic philosophical categories like *psyche*, *animal faith*, or *impotent spirit*, we are likely to have at once an intuition that the question abides no unequivocal answer, that the *self* emerging from this philosophy is problematic, or, as I propose to call it—*aporetic*. This is evident when comparing the available scholarly opinions. Daniel Moreno argues that a dissolution of the *self* occurs in the context of Santayana’s atheism, his critique of egotism, and his objectivist ontology of material flux set against the eternity of essences and truth.<sup>21</sup> One may think of it in the context of post-modern subject, which—after Nietzschean deconstruction of the *self*, backed up by the logical investigations of Russell and Wittgenstein—may at best be a logical or a useful construct, if not an epiphenomenon of larger, objective processes. The question is whether Santayana’s non-egological perspective is enough to speak of a dissolution of the *self*. Besides, there is in his philosophy a powerful idea of *psyche* linked to that of an individual life and its interests, which promises a stronger and more affirmative vision of selfhood rooted in the plane of action. This reading, confirmed by many passages in Santayana,<sup>22</sup> has been persuasively presented by John Lachs.<sup>23</sup> Yet another perspective comes from Irving Singer, who sees the different conceptions of the *self* held by Santayana and by pragmatists to be the key to “all their mutual distrust, mistaken criticism, and inability to appreciate one another.”<sup>24</sup> Santayana, claims Singer, opts rather for a “kernel” model, i.e., one assuming an

external or “separate,” presumably immutable center, surrounded by concentric circles of experience. Pragmatist thinkers, in turn, view the *self* in terms of an experiential circle or a spiral devoid of any “real” center. Signer’s brief discussion inspires a number of questions, for example, what kind of “kernel” is meant—a Cartesian, a transcendental one, or maybe a Lockean center of control? These concerns will be addressed later in this study. For now the juxtaposition of the three dissimilar interpretations of Santayana’s conception of the *self* illustrates the complexity and ambiguity of the issue, which resonates in the idea of “aporetic *self*.”

I have drawn the reader’s attention to two research problems, namely, Santayana’s possible affinities with continental philosophy of the twentieth century and his conception of human *self* as part of his overall project of philosophy of life. I have also signaled that the main aim of this study is an inquiry into the latter in the context of the former. At this point let me introduce another issue to be tackled in this book, namely, the idea of the tragic.<sup>25</sup> As I will try to show, there is an interesting connection between Santayana’s conception of the *self* and his understanding of the tragic. Putting this relation into scrutiny allows for shifting the whole discussion into the context of Santayana’s critical philosophy of culture and politics. Finally, in reference to the analysis of the tragic, I am going to employ the idea of (tragic) necessity, *ananke*, as one of the interpretive keys—next to the ideas of governing the living and rationality—helpful in a preliminary and sketchy attempt at “unlocking” and rethinking Santayana’s philosophy of politics. This final part will allow us to go beyond the individual perspective into the common world and, thus, complete the task of unveiling Santayana’s philosophy of life.

The structure of the book, its division into sections, is thematic and problem-centered. Each section addresses a specific question, some provide an overview or merely a digression supporting a thesis or illuminating some additional aspects of the issue. The first and the sixth chapters stand out in that they are largely devoted to tracing the history of an idea and offer critical, selective overviews meant to articulate and develop key philosophical questions relevant for the discussion that follows. The method of my inquiry is predominantly hermeneutic, at some points enriched with phenomenological and speculative elements. In more technical parts of the book, I reconstruct and/or reinterpret parts of Santayana’s thought on the basis of the analysis of his texts with respect to the basic philosophical concepts in their mutual relations as well as in comparative contexts with other thinkers and in reference to the existing secondary literature. Hermeneutic approach seems especially helpful in comparative sections,

in particular whenever two non-analytical thinkers, coming from different cultural backgrounds and using a different set of philosophical concepts each, are compared. In line with the hermeneutic tradition, possible shifts, tensions, and ambiguities within meanings of particularly problematic concepts are treated—within reasonable boundaries—as an evidence of the vividness of philosophical language. When tracing Santayana’s conception of human *self*, so vaguely and fragmentarily treated by the thinker himself, I was initially inspired by Derrida’s method of inquiry into the *unsayable* and his investigations into the “missing” concepts in other philosophers’ work, as exemplified by his well-known book *Of Spirit*.<sup>26</sup>

For the sake of clarity and due to the large thematic scope of the book, let me summarize the above introductory remarks in points. After providing a brief, selective overview of the history of the idea of the *self* in the first chapter (1), in the second (2) and the third one (3) I analyze the basic concepts of Santayana’s philosophy and trace the passage from naturalistic philosophy of action toward mature ontology with particular attention given to the impact this ontological turn must have had on his conception of the *self*. I argue that the setting of Santayana’s ontology makes his conception of the *self* inescapably *aporetic*. Placing the categories of Santayana’s nonreductive materialism in a phenomenological and existential-hermeneutic context allows me to uncover and elucidate a number of *aporias*, which I later address with reference to, among others, the Aristotelian distinctions *zoe-bios* (as reinterpreted by some contemporary thinkers) and *process-activity*. This interpretive strategy promises a possible solution to the controversy around psyche-spirit connection and allows to see a creative potential resting in the *aporias*, particularly if set within the holistic framework of Santayana’s philosophy of life, which I call *contemplative vitalism*. What emerges out of this interpretive endeavor is a multidimensional (triadic), non-egological conception of the *self*, which combines a naturalistic anchoring with an idealistic/transcendental bent.

In the third chapter I also address the problem of the integrity and freedom of human beings within the framework of hermeneutic unity of life. With references to Paul Ricoeur’s idea of *authorship of life*, as well as some conceptions coming from contemporary philosophy of mind, I hope to offer a novel perspective of looking at the controversial problem of freedom and free will in Santayana’s thought. The analysis of the recurrent motives of *masks* and *theatre* as well as the concept of *authenticity* helps to illuminate Santayana’s peculiar, dramatic hermeneia of life. Finally, in this section I suggest yet another interpretive venue for the idea of a hermeneutic *self*. Guided by hints provided by Santayana, I translate the

triadic structure of the *self* into the categories of the Holy Trinity, with reference to Paul Ricoeur's interpretation of the biblical concept of *kerygma*.

In the fourth chapter (4), entitled "Life as Insinuation," I analyze certain aspects of Henri Bergson's philosophy of life, with particular attention given to the metaphysical make up of his dramatist vision of human life and freedom. I point to interesting affinities within these two—Santayana's and Bergson's—apparently utterly dissimilar philosophies.

In chapter five (5), on the basis of archival materials, namely Santayana's marginalia in his private copy of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, with the support of other primary sources, including Santayana's letters, I raise the question of possible similarities between both thinkers. The discussion is centered around (although not limited to) the core matter of Santayana's "negotiations" with Heidegger's text and the guiding problem of this book—the issue of the *self* and the way it is embedded in a philosophy of life. My thesis is that one may speak here of a number of similarities, some of which stem from a common source of inspiration being Aristotle. The return to ancient sources and the choice of ontological language within a major endeavor *to reconcile finitude with freedom* emerge as the main strategic affinities between both thinkers. The wager of the very preoccupation with the *self* in the case of both thinkers is, as I suggest, a "worldly salvation," or—in other words—working out such a strategy of entering into the relation with one's own finitude, where this *finitude becomes voluntary*. It is possible to say that both thinkers' anti-subjectivist sympathies do not serve to dissolve the *self*, but rather to strengthen it by redefining and exorcising the demons of an isolated "ego." The redefinition of selfhood inescapably involves winning back time, the world, and finitude for the *self*—a task which arises as one of the main issues in the subsequent discussion of the tragic.

In the sixth chapter (6), I focus on the idea of the tragic, which, besides being a problem on its own, may serve as a heuristic tool which: a) allows to shed a different light on the *aporetic* nature of the *self* and b) allows for a meaningful passage from the technical analysis of concepts and the "structure" of the *self* into the context of Santayana's critique of culture, which—as I argue—is of high relevance for the whole discussion. An overview of a broad spectrum of other philosophical conceptions of the tragic—from Aristotle, through Hegel, to Nietzsche, provides a background for the articulation of the specificity of Santayana's approach. Next, I discuss Santayana's critique of Nietzsche, which I interpret in terms of a polemic on the possibility and the necessity of spirituality. Yet another comparative perspective—Harold Bloom's and Santayana's interpretations of Hamlet—

illuminates the fact that understanding Santayana's conception of the *self* is incomplete without regard to his critique of culture (in particular his critique of egotism and instrumentality in thinking). References are made to the well-known idea of instrumental reason developed by the members of Frankfurt School, which I connect to the temporal perspective called by me "immobilizing fallacy" and elucidate with the support of Northrop Frye's analysis of tragedy and his idea of fatalistic reduction.

The final, seventh chapter (7), being the shortest one, goes beyond the individual perspective to the common world, while keeping in mind and developing the findings and theses of the previous sections. It offers a preliminary, synthetic look at Santayana's philosophy of politics and a very brief reconstruction of its conceptual apparatus by employing the idea of *managing necessity* as the main interpretive key.

What follows is a highly selective overview of the evolution of the idea of selfhood and subjectivity. I largely rely on the work of those thinkers who have already accomplished this task—Charles Taylor and Dan Zahavi in particular. Martin Heidegger's critique of Cartesian and transcendental models is also of help. My aim is to select, articulate, and associate certain ideas so as to prepare a mental setting that will subsequently serve as a source of concepts, ideas, and criteria helpful in reconstructing Santayana's conception of the *self*. Throughout the review I also gradually formulate a side thesis, or a major digression, namely that certain philosophical strategies of weakening the "ego" may be viewed as serving the strengthening of the *self* rather than its dissolution.