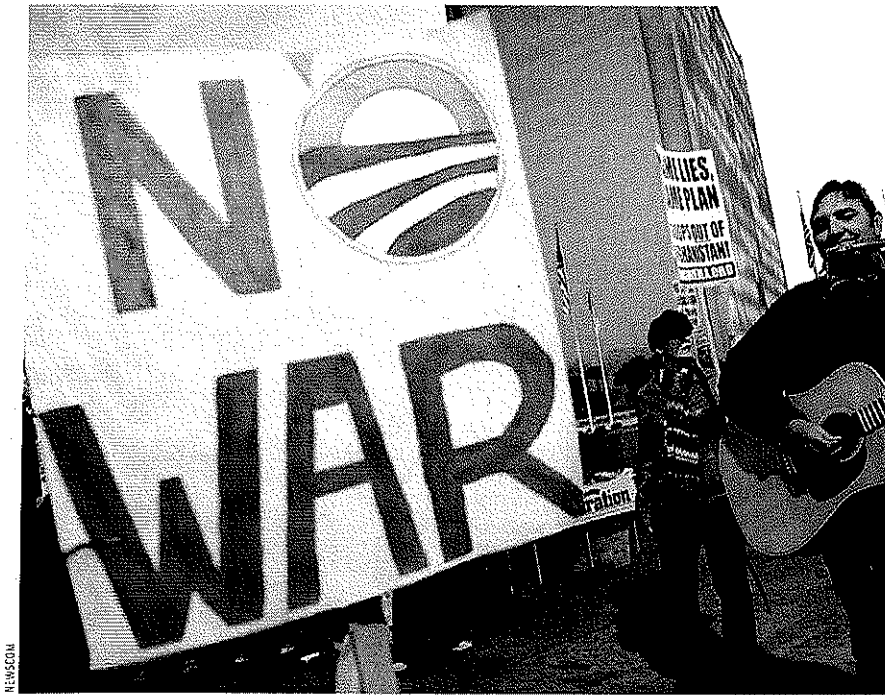


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[*The Essential Santayana: Selected Writings*, Martin A. Coleman, ed., Indiana University Press, 704 pages]

## Understanding Santayana

By James Matthew Wilson

WHEN RUSSELL KIRK published the first edition of *The Conservative Mind* in 1953, he traced an intellectual genealogy beginning with Edmund Burke and concluding not, as would subsequent editions, with Robert Nisbet, Robert Frost, and T.S. Eliot, but with the New Humanists Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More and the skeptical “aesthetic Catholic” George Santayana. As Santayana himself observed in *The Genteel Tradition at Bay* (1931), Babbitt and More represented an imperfect synthesis of decayed New England Calvinism and absolutist Christian Platonism.

In contrast, Santayana was a philosophical materialist and a skeptic who eschewed as anthropomorphic any suggestion that the order of the cosmos might assign a special role to the human person. “After the theistic humanism of Babbitt and More,” Kirk wrote, “the materialism of Santayana may seem a weakening of the conservative fibre.” But he concluded that “surely the civilization which possessed a Santayana retains some chance of regeneration.” Why Kirk should have played Santayana as the final conservative note, rather than the Platonist and Anglo-Catholic More, is a question worth answering. We might also ask why Santayana—whose aphorisms once tripped from the lips of the well-studied no matter their political convictions, but whose reputation in recent decades has fallen into an abyss—should merit a resurrection now.

Santayana was born in Madrid in 1863, the only child of his mother Josephina’s second marriage. To honor

the wishes of her late American husband, Josephina relocated with the children to Boston soon after, and George was educated at the Boston Latin School and Harvard University, whose philosophy faculty he eventually joined. Santayana never identified himself entirely with America or Spain and wrote his myriad books of ontology, aesthetic theory, cultural and literary criticism, poetry, and memoir from a perspective at once incisive and detached. An itinerant cosmopolitan intellectually and in fact, he thought of the English language as a mere “medium” of convenience, in which he sought “to say plausibly ... as many un-English things as possible.” Well ensconced in the Puritan society of Boston—he coined the term “genteel tradition”—he scrutinized American society from a perspective imbued with Catholic sympathies but without Catholic convictions. His sensibility and unbelief were alike an inheritance from his parents. He recalled that although

I learned my prayers and catechism by rote, as was then inevitable in Spain, I knew that my parents regarded all religion as a work of human imagination: and I agreed, and still agree, with them there. But this carried an implication in their minds against which every instinct in me rebelled, namely that the works of human imagination are bad. No, said I to myself even as a boy: they are good, they alone are good; and the rest—the whole real world—is ashes in the mouth.

Santayana refused ashes in the mouth, a symbol of the utilitarian spirit of “Big Business,” just as he would famously close his mouth to the Eucharist on his deathbed in Rome in 1952. Neither wholly of one nation nor wholly outside the spirit of Catholicism, he attained an intimate knowledge of society in the increasingly Americanized world and a clear imagi-

native position from which to judge it. This explains what Kirk most admired: the consummate anti-liberal critique of modernity tied to a firm defense of the interior life of self-discipline, reason, and imagination that Kirk believed to be the hallmark of conservatism. Blessed with perhaps the finest prose style of his generation—in comparison with which the writings of Babbitt and More seem the braying of serviceable pack mules—Santayana became the inevitable, latest incarnation of the conservative mind, in part despite, in part because of, his philosophical materialism.

He did not stint from explaining his beliefs or demonstrating how they depended upon one another. Even so, we owe a great debt of gratitude to Martin A. Coleman and his long-toiling compatriots in the Santayana Edition for organizing in this one outsized volume a nearly comprehensive anthology of Santayana’s writings. For the first time, one can survey the range and encounter the organic coherence of the philosopher’s thought—all of which unfolds, as Santayana insisted it should, like a work of art, an entirely personal but thoroughly argued intellectual self-portrait.

The foundation of his thought lies in materialism and “animal faith.” For Santayana, as the pre-Socratic philosophers had contended, the universe constitutes a single, continuous, and mechanical flux of matter. The human mind has no direct apprehension of this flux, for all life “is a dream” mediated by symbols or essences, but it cannot doubt the existential reality of the flux, either. We all have an “animal faith” in material reality—we could hardly act without it—and so Santayana’s materialism consists not in denying the reality of anything but matter, but in affirming matter as the only indubitable object of our belief. “Life itself,” he observes, “exists only by a modicum of organization, achieved and transmitted through a world of change,” as if the constant and chaotic tumbling of an infinite sea



progress gets to masquerade as the unvarnished truth.

Santayana avoids these pitfalls. He denies the idea of progress: whatever we see achieved is evanescent within the infinite flux of matter. Thus his account of civilization is more chaste and coherent than was, say, Darwin's. Understanding mind and spirit epiphenomena, according to Santayana, does not undermine their reality. It marks them off as the triumph of living matter. Further, Santayana sees modern positivism as merely confirming the insights of the pre-Socratic materialists. Classical perception, rather than supposedly earth-shaking modern science, disillusion him with the anthropomorphic metaphysics of Christian Platonism. Modernity may at last have caught up with the ancients.

Looking about him at the vibrant skyscrapers and industrious humming of American life, Santayana could not help but admire its powers. But in the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, and the sensual romanticism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, he saw this power errantly projected from the material world onto the interior life, blotting out the "classical" life of ideals in favor of a fetish for impulse and experience. This he judged "barbarism," and its propensity to praise the fleeting and novel at the expense of the realm of essence that was the sole aliment of reason became the object of his most memorable and biting criticisms—passage after passage in his autobiographical writings and in his bestselling 1935 novel *The Last Puritan*.

The force of such pages, no doubt, is what impressed Russell Kirk, but they are largely absent from Coleman's selection. Indeed, while Kirk paints Santayana as a severe critic of American moral materialism and aspirations to world domination through economic imperialism, Coleman includes only those passages from Santayana's political and critical writings that would hint at a sympathy for "America as Leader," as the one state that could exercise

global political authority and allow the regime of democratic liberty to flourish.

The reason for this selective emphasis is not far to find. Coleman attempts to justify the republication of Santayana as offering a world sundered by religious violence a voice of "idealism without superstition." Santayana becomes the magus of soft belief, of reason without absolutism, and of American power without a dogmatic nationalism. Our age has already witnessed the failure of more conventional forms of these doctrines—in the waning of mainline Protestantism and the graying of liberal Catholicism, not to mention the mendaciousness and destructiveness of the "Judeo-Christian" imperial agenda of neoconservatism. It is thus hard to credit such an apologia for Santayana as compelling.

Coleman seems to conceive Santayana as a halfway house for once pious Americans on the road to a greedy and listless materialism. Kirk, on the other hand, held the philosopher aloft as a different sort of halfway house: as one important stage of intellectual recovery from the progressivist liberalism of the previous two centuries, a turn toward the faith of Christendom, the right reasoning of the classical intellectual heritage, and the reverence for custom Edmund Burke identified as the foundation and vouchsafe of English liberty.

Kirk would eventually find the halfway house surpassed in the figure of T.S. Eliot, Santayana's student at Harvard and whose works are among the finest expressions of the life of art, reason, and faith in the last century. It is thus as a brilliant transitional figure that Santayana merits our attention. His searing but sympathetic critique of American culture from a modulated Catholic perspective, one that says man lives most fully through his reason, yearning after a spiritual happiness, still has much to teach us. ■

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[*Proud to Be Right: Voices of the Next Conservative Generation*, Jonah Goldberg, ed., Harper, 272 pages]

## Right Future

By Daniel J. Flynn

THE 22 INTELLIGENT young essayists from "the dumbest generation" who contributed to *Proud to Be Right* might require translation for the older reader, especially when one remembers previous conservative rallying cries such as "Who Promoted Peress?" and "Don't Immanentize the Eschaton." A time-travelling '50s-era right-winger would feel lost reading essays on gay conservatism and the cult of self-esteem. And could even the chain-smoking antistatist Ayn Rand have envisioned the need for a defense of smoking against governmental encroachment? The issues have evolved, and thus so has conservatism. We're not called "reactionaries" for nothing.

For anyone present at the creation of movement conservatism, James Poulos's broadside against "professional conservatives" would probably be the most startling entry in *Proud to Be Right*. Conservatism appears in the essay as an industry in which a Washington-New York coterie makes its living identifying the party line and then faithfully following it.

Deviation from the line doesn't result in a loss of life, as it did in Communist Party oligarchies, but in a fate fitting for a free-market society: the loss of livelihood, including direct-mail revenue, foundation bequests, page views, friendly reviews, and ratings. Fidelity to the line, more than talent, determines one's rewards within the movement. So caustic is the piece that the reasoning of Evan Coyne Maloney's neighboring contribution—about dissent from "socially transmitted opinions" on college campuses—could seamlessly change places with Poulos's arguments against careerist conservatism.