

The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare: Dewey and Santayana on Shakespeare and Religion

My starting point is Dewey's remarks on an early essay by Santayana. My purpose is to examine this dispute over Shakespeare, show how this dispute exemplifies the opposition between Dewey and Santayana on the subject of religion, and suggest how this opposition indicates their profound disagreements on moral, social, and political issues.¹

Shakespeare

A discussion of the role of philosophy in literature in the chapter of *Art as Experience* called "The Challenge to Philosophy" provided an occasion for Dewey to comment on Santayana as a literary critic. Having dismissed the idea that poetry is to be judged by the correctness of its philosophy, Dewey turned to the notion that it is important for a poetic work to express some philosophic vision. As his foil, he used Santayana's *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (IPR). In particular, Dewey was concerned with the chapter called "The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare." There Santayana argued that the references to religious beliefs and ideas in Shakespeare's work are largely conventional, drawn from the society around him. There are scarcely any expressions of genuine spiritual passion and where they do appear they are not accompanied by any religious images, as one might expect in an ostensibly Christian milieu.

Santayana took this lack of religious imagery and emotion as a symptom of a deeper problem — Shakespeare, unlike Dante and Homer, had no vision of the place of human life in the

¹ This paper was presented to the Santayana Society at its annual meeting in Philadelphia on December 29, 2002.

universe. It was this objection that Dewey had particular trouble with. In a passage partially quoted by Dewey, Santayana said:

Shakespeare's world ... is only the world of human society. The cosmos eludes him; he does not seem to feel the need of framing that idea. He depicts life in all its richness and variety, but leaves that life without a setting and consequently without a meaning.²

This neglect of the cosmos is exactly the criticism Santayana laid against Dewey twenty-five years later in "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," his review of *Experience and Nature*. There, Santayana depicted Dewey as being the philosophic spokesman for the world of practice — of social affairs — to such an extent that Santayana accused Dewey of having a system from which "cosmology is absent."³

This accusation took on definite form in another passage quoted by Dewey:

There is no *fixed* conception of any forces, natural or moral, *dominating and transcending* our mortal energies.⁴ (Emphasis added by Dewey.)

Dewey then pulled together a few separate passages and summarized them as follows:

The complaint is of lack of "totality"; fullness is not wholeness. "What is required for *theoretic wholeness* is not this or that *system but some system*."⁵ (Emphasis added by Dewey.)

Santayana had entertained the notion that the absence of religion might be a virtue, a sign of Shakespeare's "good sense" (IPR 161), for unlike religious poets "he rendered human experience no longer through symbols, but by direct imaginative representation (IPR 162). In the end Santayana rejected this idea, not only because he counted himself among those "who think that human reason and imagination require a certain totality" — the totality

² (IPR 154-5). Dewey quoted all but the first sentence in *Art as Experience*, p.320.

³ "Dewey's Naturalistic Metaphysics," p. 678.

⁴ (IPR 163). Quoted in *Art as Experience*, p. 320.

⁵ *Art as Experience* (AE), pp. 320-321. Quotes or refers to passages found in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, pp. 163,164.

Dewey referred to — but because “the most important thing in life is the lesson of it, and its relations to its own ideal” (IPR 163). Dewey adopted the rejected position and defended Shakespeare with the following:

There are philosophies and philosophies as well as criticisms and criticisms. There are points of view from which Shakespeare had a philosophy, and had a philosophy that is more pertinent to the work of an artist than one which conceives the ideal of philosophy to be the enclosure of experience within and domination of its varied fullness by a transcendent ideal that only reason beyond experience can conceive. There is a philosophy which holds that nature and life offer in their plenitude many meanings and are capable through imagination of many renderings. In spite of the scope and dignity of the great historic philosophic systems, an artist may be instinctively repelled by the constraint imposed by acceptance of any system. If the important thing is “not this or that system but some system,” why not accept, with Shakespeare, the free and varied system of nature itself as that works and moves in experience in many and diverse organizations of value? (AE 321)

Boiled down to bare propositional logic, Santayana had asserted a conjunction: great poetry requires a system and Shakespeare had none. As DeMorgan’s theorem tells us, the denial of a conjunction asserts that at least one of the conjoined statements is false. Dewey’s reply makes that denial by saying, in effect, that either great poetry doesn’t require a system or else Shakespeare did have one.

Beyond the logic, we need to look for the source of the dispute. Dewey’s assertion that “the free and varied system of nature itself” is not only an adequate system, but perhaps better than a system that dominates experience by “a transcendent ideal,” goes to the heart of the matter. In reviewing *The Life of Reason*, Dewey praised Santayana for recognizing that human life had both a “natural origin and ideal end.” In thirty years Dewey’s treatment of the term ‘ideal’ had become more refined. It was useful insofar as it indicated ends-in-view or the great variety of human aspirations, but if it directed attention away from ordinary experience, the word ‘ideal’ became a distraction. His quarrel, in *Art as Experience*, was with Santayana’s notion

that “the most important thing in life is ... its relations to its own ideal.” His critique concluded with the following:

The value of experience is not only in the ideals it reveals, but in its power to disclose many ideals, a power more germinal and more significant than any revealed ideal, since it includes them in its stride, shatters and remakes them. *One may even reverse the statement and say the value of ideals lies in the experiences to which they lead.* (AE 321) (Emphasis added.)

In writing this, Dewey stood Santayana’s position on its head: the most important thing in life was not the relationship to some ideal, but rather life itself. Ideals are valuable not as final goals, but as instruments for making experience more rich and varied.

Although I just pointed out an instance in which Dewey appeared to contradict Santayana directly, the dispute is more a matter of emphasis than direct contradiction. For example, Dewey appealed to the “system of nature” as being more adequate than any philosophic system. Doesn’t that sound like Santayana’s insistence in “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics” that naturalism is a “primary system”? In the “Absence of Religion in Shakespeare” Santayana had written of the importance of having a conception of “forces, natural or moral, dominating and transcending our mortal energies.” Such a conception can have innumerable forms: the God of the Old Testament, the Greek pantheon, or the Hindu godhead, for example. As Santayana’s later philosophy made clear, the only actual force he acknowledged was nature — the realm of matter. He thus read religious imagery as standing for the forces of nature, represented in ways that have a sweeping effect on the imagination. Dewey objected to the phrase “dominating and transcending” as if it meant under the spell of some supernatural incorporeal realm. Santayana meant that there are things we have to deal with that we have no control over and cannot fully understand. Dewey believed in the value of experience itself, as if Santayana dismissed experience as something second rate that he preferred to “enclose” or “transcend.” But Santayana’s realm of spirit is nothing more than the realm of experience. And when he wrote that the “the function of mind is ... to increase the wealth of the universe in the spiritual dimension ... by creating

... those emotions of wonder, adventure, curiosity, and laughter which omniscience would exclude,” he was describing the “free and varied” world of experience that Dewey so prized. Where, then, was the difference?

Religion

Dewey’s differences with Santayana over art and aesthetics become clearer if we look at how each approached religion. In 1934, the same year that Dewey published *Art as Experience*, he also published a short tract on religion entitled *A Common Faith*. The purpose of the book was to separate the idea of religious experience from belief in supernatural forces. Because religion could no longer be regarded as a source of scientific knowledge, the question remained as to whether there remained anything of value in it. Dewey found several things, among them: a harmonizing element which through imagination provided unity to the soul, an imaginative expression of collective ideals, and a means of gathering and focusing emotional energy for social action.

Dewey quoted favorably the following well-known passage from the preface to Santayana’s *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*:

Religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.⁶

Santayana explained that both religion and poetry have undeveloped forms: religion “when it is confused with natural facts or laws,” and poetry when “it remains an unmeaning play of fancy without relevance to the ideals and purposes of life” (IPR vi).

From this common starting point — an agreement that religion is “necessarily false, if treated as science” and that “poetry has a universal and moral function” (IPR vi) — Dewey and Santayana took two different directions. For Dewey the effort was to sift

⁶ (IPR v). Quoted in *A Common Faith*, p. 17.

from the various traditional religions, a common element, which could continue to play a valuable role in social life. For Santayana, the concern was to regard the works of the human imagination as expressions of deeply felt ideals. Santayana's was not interested in synthesizing a common element for practical purposes. Instead he preferred to let the imagery of each religion stand on its own, both for its immediate effect and as an expression of some overriding human passion.

Immediate effect and overriding passion — for Santayana “religion is noble if treated as poetry” (IPR vi) and fully developed poetry is both pleasurable (i.e., immediate) and beautiful (i.e., overriding). He wrote:

As its elementary pleasantness comes from its response to the demands of the ear, so its deepest beauty comes from its response to the ultimate demands of the soul. (IPR vi)

The two goals — synthesizing a common element and appreciating each religion for the way in which it responds to the ultimate demands of the soul — may be complementary, not opposed, but the difference between them had a major effect upon the meanings Dewey and Santayana gave to some fundamental terms and concepts. Consider, for example, the idea of God. Look first at this often-quoted passage from *The Realm of Spirit*:

When people ask, Does God exist? the question is really verbal. They are asking whether the reality signified by the notion of God, if we understood that reality better, could still bear the name of God, or had better be designated by some other word.⁷

Santayana meant that God, thought of as an omnipotent (or omnificent; i.e., does everything) force, was identical to the realm of matter, even though Santayana did not prefer to use the word ‘God’ to refer to it. Or as Santayana put it himself:

... in thinking of god the dominant consideration is a power at work in the world So God in Spinoza becomes identical with Nature, speculatively magnified; and if I retained the word God, as I do not in this connection, my result would even be more scandalous, since God, conceived of merely as power, would

⁷ *Realms of Being (The Realm of Spirit)*, p. 838.

become identical with matter, the omnificent substance and force in everything.⁸

Dewey's interpretation of the word 'God' is quite different. In discussing the meaning of the term, Dewey rejects the sense in which it designates a particular being that exists independently of human life, in favor of a sense in which 'God' means

the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far these ends, through imagination, take on unity.⁹

These clearly contrasting notions of what the concept of a deity means — the “unification of ideals,” on one hand, and the inescapable, unfathomable forces of nature, on the other, spill over into different notions of what ideals are. For Santayana an ideal is a model — a paradigm of existence perfected — even if this perfection could never be physically realized. This is why he wrote in *Reason in Art* that the arts have met with “more success than science or morals”:¹⁰ they are able to achieve perfection, if only in the products of the imagination. To illustrate the extent to which Santayana could carry this idea, let us leap forward twelve years from Dewey's *Art as Experience* and forty-six years from *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (forty years from *Reason in Art*) to Santayana's *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels* (published in 1946). There Santayana concluded that the idea of Christ represents a kind of human perfection, which reveals to us the meaning of spiritual life:

In its essence, the vocation of spirit is that of Christ: to be incarnate, to suffer and do what is appointed, and to return, at every recollected moment, to perfect union with God. In its instances, however, the vocation of spirit is different in each soul. In the poet, the artist, or the wit, intelligence and love are disinterested: in so far as they deserve those names, that which lives in them is the liberated spirit. At moments they may touch perfect self-forgetfulness; and no fulfilment can come to the spirit

⁸ *Realms of Being (The Realm of Spirit)*, pp. 837-838.

⁹ *A Common Faith* (ACF), p. 42.

¹⁰ *Reason in Art*, pp. 171-172.

more genuine than that. Moreover, the whole evolution of nature and history is centrifugal, polyglot, reaching incommensurable achievements. Life radiates in every way it finds open, and in each species, in each art, flowers into a different glory. To impose one form, one method, one type of virtue upon every creature would be sheer blindness to the essence of the good. *Spirit, then, I reply, has its essence in a single vocation, to reflect the glory of God; but this vocation can be realised only in special and diverse forms. Christ, being God, reflects God's whole glory.*¹¹(Emphasis added.)

In Christ, Santayana found the perfection of human life without loss of its humanity. Santayana, of course, did not believe that the historical Jesus was the Word incarnate. Nor did he believe that this Christian ideal is the only or the best way to represent or characterize human ideals. But nevertheless, it represented one rather dramatic form of those ideals, even if this form — God incarnate — was not in fact achievable, except metaphorically in isolated moments by poets, artists, or wits.¹²

Dewey's notion of the ideal was far more earthbound. He asked rhetorically: "Are our ideals genuinely ideal or only ideal in contrast to our present state?" (ACF 42). The implication is that Santayana's notion of an imaginative model against which to compare our present state is not a genuine ideal. Ideals for

¹¹ *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels*, p. 251.

¹² In this passage, it may appear that Santayana abandoned his notion of God as the summation of forces (the efficient cause model of God) in favor of in Dewey's sense of God as unification of ideals (the final cause model). If God in this passage is a final cause, it is only because Santayana was explicating the New Testament. Santayana often adapted the vocabulary of another frame of reference in order to summarize it. Santayana's notion that God is fundamentally a force or a "reality confronted in action" does not preclude recognition that God has different meanings in different contexts. His interpretation of religious ideas always took into consideration both natural origins and spiritual goals. On a strictly technical level, there is nothing in the passage that is incompatible with the efficient cause model — God as nature. It is Christ that is the ideal, not God. Christ is a final cause, as he represents the ideal of unification with God. But that unification is with whatever God is, even if God is the Realm of Matter

Dewey do not exist only in the imagination in the sense of being removed from life. Insofar they motivate us and stir us to action they have reality. He wrote:

The aims and ideals that move us are generated through the imagination, but they are not made of imaginary stuff. They are made of the hard stuff of physical and social experience. The locomotive did not exist before Stevenson, not the telegraph before the time of Morse, but the conditions for their existence were there in physical materials and energies and in human capacity. (ACF 49)

Or again:

The ends that result from our projection of experienced goods into objects of thought, desire and effort exist, only they exist *as* ends. Ends, purposes, exercise determining power in human conduct. The aims of philanthropists, of Florence Nightingale, of Howard, of Wilberforce, of Peabody, have not been idle dreams. They have modified institutions. Aims, ideals, do not exist simply in “mind”; they exist in character, in personality and action.¹³

For Dewey reality implies engagement. In *Art as Experience* he wrote: “the value of ideals lies in the experiences to which they lead.” Their value — their reality — depends on the interplay between ideals and ordinary experience. The notion that an ideal has reality if someone’s attention is focused on it brings to mind Santayana’s parody of Dewey’s way of thinking found in a footnote to “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics”:

I can imagine the spontaneous pragmatism of some President of a State University, if obliged to defend the study of Sanskrit before a committee of Senators. “You have been told,” he would say, “that Sanskrit is a dead language. Not at all: Sanskrit is Professor Smith’s Department, and growing. The cost is trifling, and several of our sister universities are making it a fresh requirement for the Ph.D. in classics. That, Gentlemen, is what Sanskrit *is*.”¹⁴

The parallel is obvious: “You say ideals are non-existent, that they are wholly imaginary. Not at all. Mr. Edison didn’t sleep at night in pursuit of his ideals. Miss Nightingale held them before

¹³ (ACF 48). The philanthropists and social reformers mentioned are most likely John Howard, William Wilberforce, and George Peabody.

¹⁴ “Dewey’s Naturalistic Metaphysics,” p. 679 footnote.

her like a lamp in the dark. That, Gentlemen, is what ideals *are*.” Santayana was accusing Dewey of a kind intellectual subterfuge. The accusation goes something like this: You don’t like an idea, but you realize it captures the imagination. So you interpret it to mean something else which you find agreeable. Santayana was content to let ideals reside non-existently in his realm of essence and to entertain them for what they are, bred in different forms in various cultures. Dewey wanted to coalesce various religious ideals into something that had practical value.

Santayana and Dewey had different ideas of democracy: the one exemplified by the word compromise, the other by the word co-operation. We can see a similar distinction in their approach to religion. Dewey sought co-operation among religions. His program was to draw from the superstitions of the past a common element — a common faith. Santayana would let every mythology tell its own tale — the only thing mitigating among them was that all had emerged under natural circumstances and their believers had to live in that natural world.

These parallel contrasts of religious and political ideas suggest that Dewey and Santayana’s different conceptions of religion, like their different conceptions of art, political democracy, and metaphysics, had moral and social preferences behind them. Dewey’s concern was to make religion part of an overall program for human advancement. This program included cultivating the habit of intelligence as a key part of the human personality. Santayana’s emphasis was hardly on intelligent action. His concern was to appreciate how the separate religions in their “errors and follies” express what it means to be human. To make the difference unmistakable, think of Santayana’s approving characterization of the vocation of spirit: “to return, at every recollected moment, to perfect union with God.” Religious feeling, then, is found in piety and a sense of holiness, and if Shakespeare had none of this, then he revealed an absence of religion. For Dewey, religious feeling came in pursuit of attainable goals in the face of obstacles. This meant self-sacrifice and engagement with the world. Shakespeare, as an eloquent exponent of engagement with life in the world of practical affairs,

is a harbinger of religion freed from the superstitious shackles of the past.

Turn then from Santayana's discovery of "deepest beauty" in "response to the ultimate demands of the soul" or his "return ... to perfect union with God," to Dewey's push for religion as a force for change. Dewey wrote:

One of the few experiments in the attachment of emotion to ends that mankind has not yet tried is that of devotion, so intense as to be religious, to intelligence as a force in social action. (ACF 79)

Dewey's trumpet call for religious fervor in intelligent social action had its loudest flourish in the concluding words of his book, words Santayana might well have read with either annoyance or bemusement:

Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains only to make it explicit and militant. (ACF 87)

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