

Santayana's theory of truth: Moving from logic to realism

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Abstract: What is “truth”? This is the main philosophical question that many of the contemporary philosophical theories (e.g., consistency theory, correspondence theory, semiotics, and pragmatism) tried to investigate over the past decades. However, these theories mostly approached “truth” from logical and epistemological perspectives. On the other hand, Santayana’s theory of truth embarks in a different direction. His perspective was laid out in his book “The Realm of Truth”, which is considered one of the parts of his seminal work “The Realms of Being”. Santayana's theory of truth founded on the “critical realism” to which he belongs, and thus his approach was “realistic” or “ontological”. The novelty of Santayana's theory of truth is that it brings the “theory of truth” out of the fields of logic, epistemology, and philosophies of language, and into the field of being, ontology, or the realm of lived experience. In this paper we introduce an analytical and critical account of Santayana's theory of truth, and its moving from logic to realism.

Keywords: truth and time; realism; logical truth; G. Santayana; critical realism

1. Introduction

Truth is one of those ideas that’s been redefined quite a bit over time, especially in modern and contemporary philosophy. Back in the day, truth was mostly tied up with logic, knowledge, and eventually language. Then comes George Santayana (1863–1952), the American philosopher, and he just flips the script a bit. He wasn’t content to see truth as just some abstract, know-it-all concept; instead, he presented what he called a “realistic theory of truth”. It wasn’t just about knowing or stating things correctly, it was about being part of the fabric of existence itself. So, unlike the usual logical or subjective perspectives, Santayana’s approach was firmly rooted in critical realism, blending that with his naturalistic leanings.

The big question we’re digging into here is: How does Santayana’s idea of truth break away from the more traditional, subjective takes on it? And what does his naturalistic spin really mean? To get to the bottom of it, we’re going to analyze his writings and try to pull out all those subtle details that make his take on truth unique—all within the larger framework of ontology¹.

2. Santayana’s realism of truth

The term “truth” has two Arabic equivalents: “truth” and “reality”. It is obvious that the two words are intertwined, so sometimes it is permissible to allow freedom to compare between them and use what the translator prefers. However, in logic and what is related to it in the theory of knowledge, the word “truth” must be used as a true translation of the word “truth” because the subject of the discussion is the truth of the issue, report, or statement, especially since truth here is the opposite of lying. In

philosophy and metaphysics, we must use the word “reality” as a translation of the word “truth”. Thus, the English word “truth” has two meanings, one used in the field of logic and epistemology, and the other used in the scope of philosophical and metaphysical thought in the sense of truth. What concerns us here is the concept of truth through the framework presented in the theories related to the field of logic and the philosophies of science, language and mind, in order to be an introduction to the study of realistic truth in Santayana’s philosophy to know the method and approach followed by our philosopher in breaking out of tradition, I mean the theory of knowledge and logic—in order to formulate his theory within the framework of contemporary critical realism, I mean the framework of existence or ontology.

First, I must point out that Santayana’s theory of truth did not arise from an intellectual vacuum. His theory was tainted by his general trend in his philosophy, namely the naturalistic trend, which was later developed by Santayana and a group of contemporary philosophers and became known as critical realism. On this realistic basis, Santayana’s theory of truth was described as a realistic theory, as he was influenced by the critical realist trend that he recently joined. This does not negate the fact that Santayana’s theory of truth was tainted by a strong transcendental idealism, as he was able to combine realism and idealism, and therefore he is described as a critical realist philosopher (Badwi, 1983).

But what is the truth that Santayana means in his philosophy? And do all the ideas in the human mind correspond to real existence in the external world?

Santayana presents a conception of truth based on ontological understanding, meaning that truth, in his view, is an independent and stable entity, not linked to the processes of investigation or justification carried out by humans. According to this understanding, the “world of truth” is a purely objective entity, self-contained, and unaffected by the subjective variables related to human beliefs or opinions. This means that truth does not change with changing points of view or practices of investigation, but rather remains an objective and stable entity that is not subject to the influence of human experience or its interpretations (Tiller, 2009).

Santayana believes that there is no doubt that the cases in which ideas have no external counterpart exist, but there is no one among us who does not differentiate between these two cases: the case of the idea that has something externally corresponding to it, and the case of the idea that has nothing corresponding to it. If it were not for animal faith² man would not be able to differentiate between these two cases when both ideas are inside the head equally. Thanks to this “animal faith,” we see ourselves distinguishing between two existences: an objective existence corresponding to ideas with external names, and a mental existence for the meanings of other ideas that we know do not have external names (Mahmoud, 1979). Based on this, the analysis ends with the existence of two worlds: the world of possibilities (which Santayana called the world of essences or essences) and the world of matter that enables some of those possibilities to appear. However, this same transition from the world of possibility to the world of reality in material nature creates for us a third realm, which is what Santayana calls the Realm of Truth. It is that part of the realm of essences—the “realm of possibilities”—that has transitioned into the realm of actual reality. Therefore, the “realm of truth” is a contingent realm, just like existence itself.

Santayana asserts that the careful reader will have no difficulty in understanding the meaning used in his writings to define the word truth, since it is the meaning that the word carries in ordinary conversation. These phrases that he proposes cannot, in his opinion, be described as describing the plain meaning of this word but are used only to clarify and confirm the truth in this subject, since his use of the word truth here, as he says, differs from those who consider themselves experts in logic. The possible meaning of truth according to Santayana is a set of true propositions, or knowledge of things that are capable of being confirmed, and it is also the perfect and complete system of qualities and relations that the man of science proves or attempts to prove in the future, because the word truth means all things that can be seen under the name of eternity or perpetuity, so every thinking man always assumes the truth of actual truth or real truth, or assumes the truth that has not been discovered to a large extent, which is the case in which the thinker claims to transmit part of it (Santayana, 1925). On the basis of this dialectic, truth cannot be an opinion, even if it is imaginary, because opinion has nothing to do with the substances that achieve material embodiment. Santayana's description of truth cannot be compatible with Platonic realism, because truth is simply that set of substances embodied in nature and not a set of hypothetical things that refer to the world (Stroh, 1968). Santayana affirmed that truth is Dateless and eternal, but it is not timeless, as it is subject to change because it deals with a changing existence. Truth is eternal, it is eternally true that the universe is more or less good (Tiller, 2000).

Truth in Santayana's worlds is the practical part of the world of essence, from which these essences are composed. While Bertrand Russell saw that Santayana's world of truth includes the worlds of matter and essence, and it also includes the essences contained in the actual world (Blau, 1955). Therefore, Santayana aims to avoid what he pejoratively calls "metaphysics" and to achieve intellectual clarity by grounding his ontology in our thoughts and actions before reflection. Therefore, he is one of the philosophers who belong to the field of "descriptive metaphysics" (Faerna, 2014).

Santayana believed that the truth is not merely an opinion, even if that opinion is correct. This is because, alongside the limitations within the realm of human opinions, one cannot escape these limitations, at least not even when most opinions are accurate and complete. Some boundaries might be prioritized, possessing a descriptive orientation. This descriptive orientation may change or shift without falling into error. Therefore, truth is the field through which we bring forth valid opinions from various perspectives, rather than just focusing on opinion itself. This is because an opinion cannot easily reach its objectives, regardless of whether it expresses a fact, is merely a hypothesis, or affirms the subject at hand. Such an opinion cannot be considered wrong simply because it cannot be an opinion about nothing (Santayana, 1905). Furthermore, opinions can be either right or wrong if they are repeated or when they stand in opposition to truth, which reflects the facts they contain. In this sense, truth consists of facts that provide a clear, normative description of those opinions (Santayana, 1925).

Truth, as Santayana sees it, is, of course, the idea that can be either true or false. This occurs when the idea does not merely provide a definition of the accuracy of information, but rather expresses an opinion, as well as the abstract relationship

between the idea and the element of truth in any opinion that can be correct. On this basis, such an opinion can be considered true and can be easily identified. Thus, it can be said that an opinion is true if what it refers to is one of the components of that opinion. In other words, truth is not a matter of resemblance or difference between a negative truth and an unknown subject, but rather a form of identity or subjectivity between an effective reality and the truth that exists in actual existence (Santayana, 1925).

Based on the aforementioned, Santayana believes that when truth is used as a meaning of the correct abstract sense or as a manner that contains completely correct judgments, the other word that means fact or reality can be used for this standard description of that subject to which these correct judgments apply, but reality is not a description of itself for the word reality if its meaning is understood as expressing existence, it also cannot be referred to as a description of existence, but only an essence of it, facts are always transient, i.e., short-term, and when these facts disappear, what remains of them is the essence. Accordingly, there is a clear difference between truth and any other event, since the event is in itself an event with a history, not the history of the occurrence of the subject even if this subject is a being or actually exists, or even because it is contemporary, or related to human beings who are largely informed about the events that occurred in the past (Santayana, 1905). On the other hand, it can be said that truth has no history. Truth here is identical to what happens, whether these opinions presented about truth appear before or after the occurrence of the event that is described through truth.

The eternity of truth in Santayana's philosophy lies in its encompassing all realities, but these realities are not the same as timelessness. People who engage their minds in thinking typically define truth based on their own beliefs. That is, eternal truths are tents that were supposedly held by the ancient ancestors of humankind, which those ancestors refused to adopt (Santayana, 1905). Of course, as Santayana argues, there are no eternal truths, nor can we attribute the attribute of eternity to existing human viewpoints, as eternity is a quality that belongs only to essence. Even if all souls in heaven and on earth share common and collective traits in any element of a doctrine.

Truth certainly exists, if it is not a means or a quality of this eternal world which is full of ideals, but truth is hateful and detestable to physical and mental existence, and moreover truth may be identified with the apparently ineffective mind, without this mind having any power of action except that it possesses all the truth that exists in the phenomenon (it has a point of view in it or any animal warmth or any transitional process, reason and truth are expressions that have different metaphorical backgrounds and connotations, but if reason does not exist, truth borrows some correspondences or similarities, since both reason and truth call forth that ideal standard which the human mind attributes to it, and this function is their effective essence, which confirms their eternal stability, and this property certainly gives them true and apparent reality (Russell, 1951).

Santayana's realm of truth is absolute in the sense which today is called metaphysical; but to him, it is merely physical truth. No doubt he would find in the use of 'metaphysical' for this commonplace physical truth a signal that naturalism had given way to empiricism or transcendentalism. Prominent in recent philosophy,

especially in Britain, is the recognition that strong realism about the world carries with it a scepticism about the properties of that world (Santayana, 1942).

Santayana asserts that tradition provides us with many truths and necessary judgments, making these truths constant that do not change, like the mathematical truth $2 + 2 = 4$ and the fact that time and space are infinitely divisible. This means that everything has a cause, and that God is the existential truth of all beings, existing by necessity. Additionally, many of these propositions may be necessary, and we can confirm their truth through the definitions they provide for these boundaries. What further affirms their truth is the facts of nature, or its realities. Moreover, some of these propositions must possess both material truth and logical necessity. Thus, necessity means that the truth of each proposition arises from another proposition. Therefore, this conclusion may be clear to anyone who understands that the eternal nature of existence, or what Santayana refers to as the realm of essence, is a concept that is simple, and indeed inevitable if we focus our attention on it (Santayana, 1925). Truth, on the other hand, is a descriptive image of existence. If existence is contingent, then truth is also contingent. The world in which I find myself is an irrational one, but it cannot be described as madness, as it maintains movement in fundamentally fixed and continuous ways. For this reason, experience accumulates and operates within its influential scope. In comparison, though madness may be a possibility for me, for instance, if a person insists on finding a reason for this existence, and this existence appears to be unchanging, I would be thrown into a mental whirlwind. This is due to the presence of an internal, rooted life working within me, in addition to my familiar organic connection to material things (Santayana, 1925).

The explanation for this is that the starting point of Santayana's philosophy is materialism; he enjoys the succinct formulation of ancient naturalism given by Lucretius, which says that man did not come down into this world on a rope. He refuses to believe that the ideals and the human soul arise from something other than our material nature, so he insists that the origins are material; that the aspirations of the soul may be divine (Santayana, 1942).

Santayana believes that the mathematical equation $2 + 2 = 4$, like any other mathematical operation, is simply an equation that works to establish certain apparent relationships between specific terms. All these mathematical relationships are significant when they rely on definitions or intuitions that distinguish between the terms, and these, in turn, are neither necessary nor even possible for the process of discovery or for revealing the necessary relationships between the selected terms in human contexts (Santayana, 1925). and although truth in itself is the only domain of essence, since it arises from an inevitable and certain truth, it is determined as essence is determined by it, since truth in itself works to establish certain harmonies that control the world of thought that emerged essentially through events (Santayana, 1925). Therefore, the possibility of discovering truth, or a part of it, is often tainted by truth itself, as if truth were like error. The moral quality of an idea or judgment, when it succeeds or fails to determine reality, is given attention at that moment in question, but an idea or judgment is correct if the determinations are true and false if the determinations are contradictory.

For Santayana, truth is a clear and explicit idea. It is also composed of verified and inevitable hypotheses, as well as definitive conclusions. If the idealist philosopher

fears and rejects any theory of his own origin and function, then he only does so out of a self-preservation instinct, knowing full well that his past cannot withstand scrutiny. Thus, he becomes the inheritor of all superstitions (Santayana, 1925). If idealism is deeply rooted in every structure that the human mind has produced, then empiricism represents all those energies and the external universe. As Spinoza says, empiricism must infinitely surpass the capacities of man. While meditation nourishes science, wisdom comes from disillusionment, even in relation to science itself. It is the docility toward facts that creates the rationality of science. Life is a dream, and all of the impressions of experience are illusions (Laursen and Alcalá, 2015).

Based on the above, Santayana believes that his teacher, Josiah Royce, and other idealists were mistaken when they stated that there are kinds of truth that are logically necessary. Logic provides us only with information about the content of our statements and the symbols of our thoughts, but not about the truth value of our ideas. There is no truth that has logical necessity, as necessity is merely a function of language or the way we define symbols to refer to these ideas. Moreover, no proposition can be true solely by definition, as the freedom to define terms is up to us. Truth refers to what happens at a specific time (Sprigge, 1999). Thus, for Santayana, the nature of truth is simply the correspondence with what exists. Pragmatism, on the other hand, means testing truth more than it means correspondence with reality. In short, the nature of truth is correspondence, while the testing of truth is pragmatism.

The greatest contrast between Santayana and most of his generation in America, and with William James, with whom he has much in common, and is the reason for his antagonism to pragmatism which, to Santayana, lays too dreary an emphasis upon consequences, results, and activity, and does not leave the mind free for contemplation and enjoyment (Ratner, 2015). Santayana did not hesitate to attack the philosophy of his times. He made the point that humans always move within perspective: we glimpse the world of truth, we think we know what it is in itself, but we cannot really capture it, we can only make approximations. Thus, he despaired at the dogmatists, the vainglorious, and the petulant who thought they had found the truth for all times and places (Laursen and Alcalá, 2015).

3. Logical and ontological truth

Santayana believes that logic is simply logic, and the systems of relations that are discovered between elements of essence do not constitute truth but rather other types of essences that contain within them interconnected essences. These systems, which include logical boundaries, become a means of expressing truth when they are discovered and brought face-to-face with our deductive reasoning. At that point, truth will take our logic in the world (Santayana, 1942). But if logic refuses to make this initial sacrifice of itself to throw itself into motive and truth or truth, then it quickly becomes irrational and loses its own justifications, because it exists through the virtue of human motives (Santayana, 1905).

If the world, as George Santayana says, lives in a state of chaos, then truth in this case may abandon the existence of reason or reduce it to its lowest levels. Yet, even with all of this, there exists a partial rationality or a rational commitment in the things that helped reason clarify its ideas and develop its logic (Santayana, 1942). For

Santayana, logic is the child of reality, just as the spirit is the child born from the soul. Logic is the stubborn child that denies being nourished and raised on the sweet milk of infancy. It does not remain only in the past but fundamentally determines the testing of essences that are related in some way to logic. However, it remains contemporary in this case, as the ideas of logicians are controlled by physical events and social pressures (Santayana, 1942).

From the above, it becomes clear that logic, according to Santayana, is closely tied to truth. However, the truth that Santayana refers to is the correspondence with actual reality. Thus, logic becomes realistic logic that relies on reason, and truth is the alignment with this reality. He states that when logic is connected to the element of reality, it succeeds in playing an important ethical role in two ways: First, logic imparts human qualities to the world—qualities in which we think and use reason—by revitalizing the most distant contemplations and unifying them with real life. Second, logic traces and follows the rays of truth. By this, he means that when one of the known boundaries in the field of logic describes reality, the entire logical system connects to this boundary, and thus becomes part of the truth.

Santayana believes that the terms of logic themselves are connected to glimpses of facts or realities, where we deepen this human and moral perception when we ideally develop the forms that the real element inherently takes or when it establishes a relationship between human capacities and interests, much like the poet who delves into his sense of beauty. If one aesthetic experience is present in his mind, he recalls another, and he finds rhetorical images and musical words that express his stance (Santayana, 1942).

Santayana affirmed that logic inherently contains a natural truth in the theories it dealt with during its early development, particularly in the field of syllogism. The advancements in studies of material subjects helped form precise mental images in the human mind. Ideas are not true because they are clear; rather, they are clear because they are true. This encouraged truth to venture into dialectical subjects (Santayana, 1942). It must be said here that what is logically necessary is not necessarily true, as truth in this case is probable and becomes a necessary proposition. Through definition, facts create the validity of truth and all realities, and through definition, these facts become probable. However, there is no necessity in this test or in applying these classifications as a necessary element or making them truth or reality, and these classifications do not necessarily possess the validity of representing reality. Santayana views this as a realistic matter, where these classifications represent truth, or at least express truth to a sufficient degree. These types include human thought in an ordinary way, which makes reality appear entirely as a form of belief (Santayana, 1905).

The difference between logic and truth, according to Santayana, is a matter of probability. He states that he has no desire to engage in battles with humanity over their choice of words when talking about truth, or in situations where there is only harmony and consistency. There is much truth even in his sense of it, and it is a possible truth if the idea describing existing ideas in the human mind is not only related to psychological or historical truth, which describes the ideas, but also to formal truth in describing the idea as accepted within limits different from those in which the idea was originally associated. By this, he means a change in the expression that offers an

analysis of the idea and helps extract its essential essences (Santayana, 1942). Mathematics, logic, and a certain type of psychology may create phenomenological science, meaning a faithful description of several realms of essence in which they have already been selected. We must allow this to happen at least, based on the linguistic foundation of the English language. Despite being a reliable and correct language, it still claims accuracy and truth (Santayana, 1942).

From the above, we can deduce an important fact, which is that Santayana emphasizes that truth is tied to the existence of the mind. Without the existence of the mind, there would be no right or wrong, nor would there be truth or falsehood, except in cases and judgments closely related to specific facts. Truth is often used in this abstract sense, which we refer to as correctness, and it is the attribute by which all correct judgments are generally described (Santayana, 1925).

Santayana points to an important fact in the realm of truth, which is that even though mathematical ideas may be less connected to the actual truth of the world, possessing these ideas may serve as indirect evidence, as they carry cognitive value and can sometimes be true. If we were to say that these ideas are false, we would need to present other ideas that are more realistic and more truthful. But what are the ideas that are more realistic than these mathematical natures, and how can we present them in the realm of action and the dynamics of the world (Santayana, 1942)?

If reality is coupled with spiritual being, then mathematics unfortunately becomes worthless, and its study becomes a thing of the past, perhaps even a sin. If a spiritual man like Pascal were to immerse himself in mathematical sciences, he would feel regret and inner torment, for faith that is based on logic is an uncomprehending faith and is often accompanied by madness (Santayana, 1925). Thus, truth or falsehood is tied to the actual matters of reality—premises or conclusions of an argument are said to be true if they correspond to actual reality, but false if they do not. Therefore, what happens is the criterion for judging truth or falsehood (Santayana, 1942). Truth does not need evidence, because it is a kind of report, and that “what will happen” will happen and that there is something, and this something is specific and must be true with regard to future issues, which necessitates the application of the law of excluded middle and that every issue, even if it concerns the future, has a specific truth value. This does not mean that the future must be fixed and unchanging (Hartshorne, 1951).

4. Truth and time in Santayana’s philosophy

Time is one of the main problems that philosophical thought tries to solve. Time has always been linked to existence, as we cannot think of one without thinking of the other. Since the dawn of philosophical thought, existence has been synonymous with presence. Presence occurs in the horizon of the present and speaks through its voice. The present, in common understanding, is considered one of the three dimensions that accompany our perception of time, which moves in an irreversible path from past to present to future. The past, in our common understanding, is what no longer exists, while the future is what has not yet come into existence (Al- Khouli, 1992).

Thus, the main theories of time conclude that it is the ever-flowing, fleeting being the past no longer exists, the future has not yet arrived, and the present never truly is, always slipping through our fingers. Simply grasping the current moment means its

escape and the arrival of the next moment, which in turn escapes in an unending sequence. Did we not begin with the moment, and the moment is an “instant”, while “time” is composed of instants, each of which negates the other? It is continuous change, existing as non-existent, and non-existent as existing. In this sense, Jean Piaget was right when he said, “Time is a moving space, and space is stationary time” (Al-Khouli, 1992).

Santayana points out that the relationship between truth and time may initially seem simple if understood through common terms. If one were to conduct a comprehensive report of all the events that occur in time, one would, in this case, obtain truth. However, as Santayana says, the complete report, although a theoretical hypothesis in the pursuit of truth, remains an ideal—what he calls a “philosophical utopia”—that will never come to light. It remains an unattainable wish. The total truth we seek can never be fully obtained, as it would take an extraordinarily long time, perhaps even longer than the events themselves as they unfold, since the means of observation and expression are limited by all standards. Moreover, a comprehensive survey of these events is an impossibility, making the total truth of this universe impossible to know. Therefore, the vast human survey of history must be thorough and complete, and future events expected to occur must be brought to light. However, the discovery or comprehensive survey of these events cannot happen by chance or in a sudden, accidental manner (Santayana, 1942).

Truth, as Santayana sees it, appears to reflect the world of existence in its abstract existential state. Therefore, everything in the panorama of history is linked to time, while the panorama itself has no fixed history, as it is constantly changing. The order and general pattern of events do not represent a part of these truths and cannot occur before or after anything else (Santayana, 1942). Moreover, the truth by which we describe existence differs in its ontological characteristics from existence itself. Life and motion have passed, and all measurements have become a single fact, equal in their truth. All eras have become the present equally, and power, reason, and action have become historical events. In this sense, truth resembles the beautiful moon, but it is a dead entity, for it is destined to become part of the past.

From the above, we can conclude that truth consists of past events, and the facts of life testify to their truth. What we call the past or future is only so from the moment it begins; there is no absolute past or future. Similarly, there is no absolute time unless it is an ideal mental concept, not a real one. Truths are essences, and these essences are eternal. The truth Santayana refers to here is a truth that transcends time and goes beyond it. It is an eternal truth, in contrast to the ever-changing nature of existence. All things pass, fade, and die through time, but the truth that emerges from these things remains in its internal being.

5. Conclusion

From the previous pages, we can derive the key conclusions regarding “The Realistic Theory of Truth in the Philosophy of the American Philosopher George Santayana” as follows:

First: Santayana developed his theory of truth by moving beyond the frameworks of logic and epistemology, formulating it within a new framework under the name of

being or ontology. This was done to align his theory of truth with his philosophical approach, which became known as critical realism.

Second: Santayana referred to several types of truth, such as historical truth, which describes historical events, formal truth, which describes generally accepted ideas, and mathematical truth, which is based on axioms and experience. He also emphasized the existence of many other types of truth, such as moral truth, logical truth, and psychological truth, presenting a new approach to understanding realistic truth.

Third: Santayana rejected the pragmatist theory of truth, as it reduces truth to a function of experience, which leads to confusion between experience and truth or between experience and the world of spirit.

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Notes

- ¹ Ontology is the study of being, or the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of existence. It is a philosophical inquiry that aims to provide a general theory of being, focusing on existence independently of its specific forms and types. The term “ontology” has its origins in Greek, derived from two words: “onto,” meaning being or existence, and “logos,” meaning study, discourse, or inquiry.
- ² Animal faith, for Santayana, is that innate and intuitive acceptance of the world around us without the attempt to seek proof or precise rational evidence. Santayana sees it as a necessary and essential part of human life and experience, which makes life possible even in the midst of profound philosophical doubt. It can be said to be a basic level of faith that precedes critical and philosophical thinking and is like the faith that animals exercise in their environment.

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