

PHILOSOPHY AND ANIMAL FAITH, MATTER AND ESSENCE

BY VICTOR S. YARROS

OF all contemporary metaphysicians and philosophers, Mr. George Santayana, formerly of the Harvard University and the United States, but always an urbane and candid internationalist, is perhaps the most original and independent. He has few formal followers, but all schools of philosophy treat him with affectionate regard. He is romantic, skeptical, subtle, cultivated, severely logical, yet never dogmatic or pedantic. He writes uncommonly well—is, in fact, a poet as well as an exquisite prose writer. He loves distinctions, shades and nuances, but he never mistakes hypothesis for demonstrated theory, assumption for fact, and he never ventures beyond proof without warning his readers or auditors of that excursion.

Mr. Santayana is a gifted and happy phrase-maker. He does not, however, take his intriguing and thought-provoking phrases too seriously. "Animal faith" was his invention, and he remains loyal to the doctrine expressed or implied in that phrase.

He has just published the third and concluding volume of his philosophic trilogy, and he entitles it "The Realm of Matter." In previous volumes, that deserve to be better known than they are to the younger students, he discussed the realm of essence, skepticism and the sort of instinctive, unescapable faith he called "animal."

His leading ideas are now quite clear, and it is possible to analyze them and examine the arguments advanced in their support in the three attractive, erudite, graceful and profound books.

Mr. Santayana calls himself a materialist, but his materialism is his own and is different from the cruder and more naive material-

ism of older schools of thought. He is evidently satisfied that the new physics, new metaphysics, new mathematics, new logic and new psychology have not rehabilitated either idealism, spiritualism or dogmatic religion. He has been reproached by some critics for ignoring the remarkable contributions of Whitehead, Eddington, Jeans and other eminent contemporary philosophers who build on scientific foundations, but the criticism is hardly fair. It is clear that he is conversant with the best work of the thinkers named. Their quintessential contributions have not escaped his notice, but he believes, and rightly, that those conclusions do not seriously affect his position or his main line of argument.

After all, whether one is a materialist depends on his definition of the term materialism. Santayana calls himself a materialist, because his definition of that term is not the traditional or ordinary one. Here is his explanation of the prejudice felt against the term.

The objection to materialism, he holds, is due to two cardinal misconceptions—first, that matter is inert, or dead, or gross and vulgar, and, second, that in a material universe there would be no place for what moralists, philosophers and artists call values. But nothing could be more arbitrary or absurd than these conceptions, he affirms.

Special manifestations of matter are distinguishable from its essence. The human body is material, but so is wind or sunshine. "Weight and figure are not more characteristic of matter than are explosiveness, swiftness, fertility and radiation." As to values, they are defined by Santayana as expressions of human preference, and certainly preferences are in one sense objective facts. Human aims and aspirations are not determined by this or that description or even interpretation of the universe.

What, then, is the relation between our material constitution and our spiritual and moral values? Santayana answers:

"Reason is not a force contrary to the passions, but a harmony possible among them. Except in their interests, it could have no point of application, nothing to beautify, nothing to dominate. It is, therefore, by a complete illusion, though an excusable one, that the spirit denies its material basis and calls its body a prison or a tomb."

But philosophy should not fall into the same blunder, excusable

as it may be to the moralist. Philosophy should not deny the material basis of life or of human value.

What is the most important implication of Santayana's materialism? This—that the external world is real and substantial. The human mind cannot indeed question the reality of the world. It may do so in words, but the words are without meaning. They express no idea. "The postulate of substance—the assumption that there are things and events prior to the discovery of them and independent of this discovery—underlies all natural knowledge," while the denial of the postulate "rescinds that animal faith or that common sense which is the beginning of art and science."

Yet the postulate must always remain an *assumption*. We cannot prove it. But the proof is not necessary to any human activity. Animal faith suffices. We cannot think or act without the faith, the assumption. With it, we can do that which as human beings we wish to do in our own moral world. The obstacles are within us, and so are the means of overcoming the obstacles.

Nothing is to be gained by adopting a strictly idealistic attitude, for idealism has to be abandoned the moment we undertake to act, or to apply our thoughts to actual problems. That is, the idealist cannot dispense with animal faith or common sense. He denies the postulate even while using it. Such futility discredits philosophy and metaphysics.

At the same time, the assumption in question does not exclude a certain kind of Skepticism. Santayana claims to be a thorough skeptic. For he holds that skepticism, if kept in the right place, safeguards and even increases the freedom of the spirit. "Ultimate skepticism," he says, "is a sanctuary from grosser illusions."

In the realm of matter animal faith of necessity counts as knowledge, but there are vast realms beyond matter, and these realms are the possession of the spirit.

Man lives on several levels, Santayana maintains with the other humanists. But the lowest level is the substructure of the highest. Spirituality adds consciousness in man, but does not abolish instinct. The ideal world of man emerges from the real world, and the latter is the less important though of course essential.

How skepticism leads to pure enjoyment is thus explained by Santayana:

"When by a difficult suspension of judgment I have deprived a

given image of all adventitious significance; when it is taken neither for the manifestation of a substance, nor for an idea in the mind, nor for an event in the world, but, simply, if a color for that color, and if music for that music, and if a face for that face, then an immense cognitive certitude compensates me for so much cognitive abtention. My skepticism at last has touched bottom, and my doubt has found honorable rest in the absolutely indubitable."

The skeptic and the materialist is also a neo-Platonist. Animal faith is not in his philosophy incompatible with contemplation of the realm of Essence. Essences are more than ideas; ideas are born of matter and are instruments of science on the plane of existence. But essences, he says, are not exhausted by their utilitarian character. They remain and give the highest value to human life. To live spiritually is to live in the realm of essences. Beauty is an essence, and the spirit revels in it. It cannot be isolated or imprisoned within any given idea, and it is certainly not a property of the low level of substance or existence. But beauty is absolutely indubitable, as are other essences. By contemplation of essences man at last transcends animal faith and becomes spiritual and human.

Santayana's philosophy has been described as "the æsthetic way of life." That does not seem to be particularly apt. Life without art and æsthetics would be animal indeed, but Santayana is not blind to moral beauty—beauty in conduct and in social relations. He demands the full, abundant life for all, and the only question is, What is the road to that goal?

To Santayana, the answer is—Through animal faith, in the first place, or candid and courageous facing of Reality; then through the practice of a gentle skepticism in the vast realm of Matter, which realm is yet to be treated as real and substantial, and, finally, through the right steps in the realm of Essence.

There are modern, scientific thinkers who assert that science and philosophy are reverting to Berkleyan Idealism, to the view that nothing exists save pure thought, either in human minds or, in the last analysis, in the mind of the Creator. To Santayana this conception is utterly unscientific and even empty of any meaning. Nothing we say disposes of the distinction between matter and idea, or essence. Why not accept the distinction and see what we can build on it? Santayana has built upon it, and his system, called

romantic, is in truth very substantial. His terms may appear arbitrary, but we cannot argue away the facts and realities which they denote.

Time and philosophic tide may work out a reconciliation between the old idealism and the new and critical realism. But meantime there is no virtue or guidance in the postulate of a Creator who is unknowable and inscrutable, and whose designs are unfathomable. In the realm of essence there is no need or room for God, unless God is merely another name for nature in its totality and infinite complexity and diversity.