



Eric Craig Sapp

ORCID: 0000-0002-6875-3717

e-mail: dadasign@yahoo.com

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## Dialectics after Santayana

*Th[e] power of facts is an oppressive power; it is the power of man over man, appearing as objective and rational condition. Against this appearance, thought continues to protest in the name of truth.*

Herbert Marcuse<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Political Theology and Poetry as Ur-Philosophy

Hegel's philosophy of political history was explicitly theological in its modelling.<sup>2</sup> That Santayana's more naturalistic philosophy is *too* may require some excavation. The comparison of these thinker's positions on this and other matters – the common genealogy from Socrates' practice of dialectic, the tragic accent placed on history, the waywardness of the world expressed in language – reveals a Santayana who is more Hegelian than one might assume. I do so by looking closely at the main criticisms Santayana lodges directly against Hegel.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate purpose however is to extend a *philosophical invitation* to the reader to risk anach-

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Preface: A Note on Dialectic," in: *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> See Section 4 *infra*.

<sup>3</sup> My approach is selective since a thorough treatment of Santayana's disagreements with – and borrowings from – Hegel would require a book-length

ronism by finding a more Santayanan Hegel than one might initially think viable. Some of the work of the Frankfurt School, by combining dialectical and nature-oriented thinking, suggests a way forward.

Santayana begins *Dominations and Powers* by explaining his use of the terms comprising the title of that wildly sprawling treatise of political philosophy – a work which, though appearing during the Korean War, makes no direct reference to it. Not only is the concept *dominations* more specific than that of *powers*; for all dominations are powers but powers need not be dominations; but to call something a “domination” is to recognize it as an instance of an oppressive or repressive or onerous burden, from the perspective of some interested agent, which burden the agent cannot – at least without difficulty – escape.<sup>4</sup> Gravity as such, though an inescapable and ubiquitous power, is not perceived in ordinary circumstances as a domination. Forces of the sea, when a passenger has fallen overboard, exert a pressure on him that is akin to the “tyranny” of domination.<sup>5</sup> If a person be a sailor or shipbuilder, however, she can harness the power of the wind and sea for her purposes, and to the extent of her success, she will have overcome their dominations and, for limited processes within a segment of time and space, she will have succeeded in controlling natural forces, that is, using them by situating herself in attunement with their possibilities and objective constraints. Should someone use those ships to dominate other beings, for example by a naval attack on a city or the transport of enslaved persons, a relation of domination will in turn be instantiated; its being an instance of domination is such from the perspective of the victims or of a sympathetic observer, though for the dominator, it is an exercise of Will.

The grammar of Santayana’s word “dominations” must be carefully noted. It is *not*, as our usual modern use of the term “domination” is, an uncountable or abstract noun. By contrast, the German word *Herrschaft* as it occurs in Hegelian or Weberian usage – and the Frankfurt School theorists follow both – is typically rendered in English as “domination.” Although Santayana explains that his use of “dominations” comes from a hierarchical angelology, according to which both *Dominations and Powers* refer to specific “orders of spirits” in the celestial cosmology,<sup>6</sup> yet

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study; and, if it included the implicit as well as the explicit, would entail nothing less than a near-complete analysis of Santayana’s thought as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers: Reflections on Liberty, Society, and Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 1.

when he (or his editors) cite the “Letter to the Colossians” as authority, the translation given in the footnote reads “dominions” – a more familiar count noun. This noun has a range of uses in politics and law, generally referring to territorial possession or relations of ownership or control, and it seems that Paul (or whoever may have written the letter traditionally attributed to Paul) may have simply had something mundane like that in mind in the passage in question. That is, the thrones and dominions – *dominationes* in the Latin Vulgate, which is ultimately Santayana’s source – and principalities and powers referred to by Paul are examples of “all things” in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, created by, in, and for God. The sense of the passage does not require that the listed orders refer to heavenly things; they might just be examples of earthly powers assumed to be of great mundane import. The Greek term for dominations is *kyriotetes* however, and *kyrios* means Lord: dominations are therefore the dominion or domain over which a lord exerts authority, command and control.

A more proximate source for Santayana’s use is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and it is this work that can shed light on the invocation of Virtues that Santayana’s opening section raises only to set aside. *Colossians* does not speak of virtues; Milton does. Milton, who was Santayana’s begrudgingly-recognized role model for the latter’s own verse play from the fin de siècle, *Lucifer*, established a remarkable parallelism between the divine dynasty of God the Father and his Son on the one hand, and Satan/Lucifer as leader of revolting spirits on the other. In Book 5, as related by Raphael, God the Father announces to assembled angels the reign of Christ his Son:

Hear all ye angels, progeny of Light,  
*Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,*  
 Hear My decree, which unrevoked shall stand!  
 [...] [T]o Him [the Son] shall bow  
 All knees in Heav’n and shall confess Him Lord.  
 Under His great vicegerent reign abide  
 United as one individual soul  
 For ever happy. Him who disobeys  
 Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day  
 Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls  
 [...] (lines 5: 600–602, 607–613)<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: Norton, 2005), 123 (italics added, quotation marks omitted).

By Book 10, Satan's rebellion already a fait accompli, the latter announces to his followers their claim to domination of the Earth upon the downfall of Adam and Eve. Milton describes Lucifer's return to Hell:

[...] He through the midst unmarked,  
 In show plebeian angel militant  
 Of lowest order passed and from the door  
 Of that Plutonian hall invisible  
 Ascended his high throne, which under state  
 Of richest texture spread at th' upper end  
 Was placed in regal luster. Down a while  
 He sat and round about him saw unseen.  
 At last as from a cloud his fulgent head  
 And shape star-bright appeared, or brighter, clad  
 With what permissive glory since his fall  
 Was left him, or false glitter. All amazed  
 At that so sudden blaze the Stygian throng  
 Bent their aspect and whom they wished beheld:  
 Their mighty chief returned. Loud was th' acclaim. (lines 10: 441–455)<sup>8</sup>

Satan addresses his followers – for our purposes, this is key – exactly echoing God:

Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers!  
 For in possession such, not only of right,  
 I call ye and declare ye now, returned  
 Successful beyond hope to lead ye forth  
 Triumphant out of this infernal Pit  
 Abominable, accurst, the house of woe,  
 And dungeon of our Tyrant: Now possess  
 As lords a spacious world to our native Heaven  
 Little inferior, by my adventure hard  
 With peril great achieved. Long were to tell  
 What I have done, what suffered, with what pain  
 Voyaged th' unreal, vast, unbounded deep  
 Of horrible confusion, over which  
 By Sin and Death a broad way now is pav'd  
 To expedite your glorious march. [...] (lines 10: 460–474)<sup>9</sup>

The possessions over which domination is asserted, not merely as a claim of “right” but to be conquered, first of all by the deceptive art of original sin, the “thrones, dominations, princedoms, virtues, powers”

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, 241.

<sup>9</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 242 (italics added). See also Book 5, lines 5: 772–802, ibidem, 128–129.

are those of the earthly domain; and it is on account of the reference to those earthly properties that Satan dubs his followers with official titles. He does so as if in mockery of God the Father – a transvaluation of virtue and a repurposing of power. From the relativistic standpoint of Santayana's reflections, as a spirit detaching itself from political struggles, there can be no morally absolute difference between the respective pronouncements of God and of Satan. Satan is a criminal in the eyes of God; God is an oppressor from the perspective of Satan. In Santayana's sense of the terms, God's power is, as felt by Lucifer, domination, and the latter's response is to try to dominate the earth; from his perspective – again, translated into Santayana's terms – this is merely to wield power, but if Adam and Eve or their progeny find their lot cumbersome, it becomes a domination.

Santayana's political philosophy is naturalistic in many respects, but its implicit points of departure, like much of modern thought (however unwillingly admitted or disavowed this may be), are drawn from theology and poetry. The purpose, however, is to ground a secular history.

## 2. Irony of Government

Setting aside the technical usage of "dominations" as a countable noun, the broader notion of domination (in its uncountable use) also has its role in Santayana's written works, from *The Life of Reason* on. It is precisely the fact that they share a theoretical outlook that ascribes a close connection between the themes of domination and reason that Santayana and the Frankfurt School can be profitably read together. Further, both Santayana, for whom Hegel is something of a nemesis, and the early Frankfurt School critical theorists, for whom Hegel (as much as Marx) was a basic inspiration whose legacy they sought to defend, take Hegelian dialectical logic as a reference point for re-conceptualizing the meaning of Reason. I will explain the convergence between these seemingly disparate philosophies around the question of reason and domination; then I will trace Santayana's critique of Hegel across several books and consider to what extent the Frankfurt School can help provide resources for a reply to Santayana's criticisms of Hegelian thought. The aim is not to exhaust these matters but rather to suggest a way of creating an outlook combining Hegel's and Santayana's insights about the structure of political history; to the effect that, notwithstanding the critiques that Santayana makes of Hegel's thought, some of which are fair and some of which are extremely misleading, their philosophies are in basic agreement about

the tragicomic character of human events. Put otherwise, Santayana is more Hegelian than he realizes or lets on – and his expressed antipathy toward Hegel can be thought of as a case of what Harold Bloom called the “anxiety of influence”<sup>10</sup> – for instance (and I will not develop this here), the whole notion of a “realm of spirit” can be read off of the conclusion to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where Hegel, appropriating Schiller, talks of a “Geisterreich.”<sup>11</sup> To the extent that Hegelian philosophy has enduring pertinence in the twenty-first century (and the ever-burgeoning output of Hegel scholarship is premised on the thesis that it does), it must re-center the philosophy of nature, which in Hegel’s system, is a sort of vanishing mediator between Logic and Spirit, a distant third in terms of his degree of theoretical interest by comparison with those two regions. For that project to be possible, Hegelian thought must reckon with the sort of naturalistic critique posed by Santayana, whose critique, because it rejects the Hegelian conception of dialectic, is more radically challenging to the Hegelian method than the nineteenth century’s naturalistic and materialist critiques of Feuerbach and Marx, respectively.

The Frankfurt School, by thematizing the relation of domination – over inhuman nature and over human nature – exercised by civilization in the name of reason, was often, if not always, pointing in this same direction. Here’s Herbert Marcuse: “Reason, as the developing and applied knowledge of man – as “free thought” [scare quotes in original] – was instrumental in creating the world we live in. It was also instrumental in sustaining injustice, toil, and suffering.” We can add: domination. “But,” Marcuse continues in a mode of Enlightenment-friendly assurance: “Reason, and Reason alone, contains its own corrective.”<sup>12</sup>

Santayana, in the first volume of *The Life of Reason*, describes the birth of agriculture, crafts, and commerce as enabling man both to recognize and “dominate” the world of nature.<sup>13</sup> He states baldly, “The function of reason is to dominate experience,” though not without adding immediately that openness to new information is as important as the retention of principles for interpreting experience.<sup>14</sup> The concluding volume speaks of historiography’s aim to “dominate” the past in order

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, “Phänomenologie des Geistes”, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister, Bd. 2 (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1949), 564 (§808).

<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, “Preface: A Note on Dialectic,” xiii.

<sup>13</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Book 1, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck, Martin A. Coleman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 124.

to dominate the present; and the learning of history from books can serve the statesmen or the tragic poet.<sup>15</sup> The theme of domination arises again in the chapter on dialectic, where Santayana writes that mathematics is the idealized form of dialectic: "The great glory of mathematics, like that of virtue, is to be useful while remaining free. Number and measure furnish an inexhaustible subject-matter which the mind can dominate and develop dialectically as it is the mind's inherent office to develop ideas."<sup>16</sup> To be sure, the accent in Santayana's ultimate conception of the "life of reason" – as a balanced quasi-equilibrium between the inner irrational urges of the organism as they are expressed in ideals and its external, natural, and social environment – is not on the aspect of domination. However, that aspect is always there; the tensions, threats, and potentialities that the theme of domination expresses form the core of the rational being's relation to existence, that is, to the realm of matter, speaking ontologically, or for Santayana's still *somewhat* Aristotelian political philosophy, the generative order of nature at the base of social existence.

Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, at the end of WWII, however, do intend to emphasize this dimension of conflict which domination presupposes. "Discursive logic" they write, is "domination in the conceptual sphere."<sup>17</sup> In an enlightened world, that pretends it has overcome myth, "It is not merely that domination is paid for by the alienation of men from the objects dominated: with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men – even those of the individual to himself – were bewitched... Animism spiritualized the object, whereas industrialism objectifies the spirits of men."<sup>18</sup> Sketching a philosophy of history, they argue that the "rational domination of nature," integrating all aspects of nonhuman and human nature, unleashes a "destructive capacity" that could wipe out all animal life on earth.<sup>19</sup> They postulate what we might say amounts to a theory of the cerebrocene: "The brain or human intelligence is strong enough to form a[n] epoch in the history of the world."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Book 5, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck, Martin A. Coleman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 2001), 14.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, 224.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 222.

In this way, Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as Santayana, give a naturalist twist to the concept of mind or *nous*, whose inventor in Greek philosophical tradition was Anaxagoras. Indeed, in Diels's translation of a key definition (attested by Aristotle who cites Anaxagoras in *Peri Psyches*) of the role of the immaterial *nous* in its relation to objects composed of material elements, the word *Herrschaft* was chosen for *kratein*, to rule or dominate others (the root of "democracy" or "autocracy").<sup>21</sup> *Nous* also has been dubbed the "ruler element."<sup>22</sup> Both Santayana and Adorno and Horkheimer reject the hypostatization of the mind as a substance, but they retain Anaxagoras' aspect of domination as a quality of intelligence or of the phenomenon of reason in action.

Adorno and Horkheimer have their "dialectic of enlightenment" while Santayana has his own version of the dramatic reversal of the pretensions of reason, the potential counter-purposiveness of the pursuit of reason. He calls it the "irony of government" and illustrates it with a fable. The playfulness of Santayana's presentation should not mislead us into overlooking the seriousness of the point he is making. Indeed, I would venture to say that if there is a general, arch-concept for *Dominations and Powers*, it would be the irony of government. What exactly is the irony of government?

The fable itself is simple enough, but unlike, say, Jean de La Fontaine, who wrote in an age of absolutism in politics and of moralism in letters, Santayana does not draw a clear moral. Here is an attempt at deciphering Santayana's point. Santayana asks his reader to

imagine a model game-keeper guarding the partridges in a park. The barbed wire round their special preserve will always be in good order; live wires and traps will intercept all poachers, stray dogs, and foxes in their wicked incursions, nor will there be any overcrowding or too numerous bereavements in the partridge family itself.<sup>23</sup>

For a while, that is. "Yet all these undoubted benefits begin to seem ambiguous when the shooting season approaches."<sup>24</sup> Among the partridges, three political tendencies form parties: Conservatives explaining how the situation under the game-keeper's watch and its corre-

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<sup>21</sup> Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Bd. 1 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912), 404.

<sup>22</sup> Felix M. Cleve, *The Philosophy of Anaxagoras: An Attempt at Reconstruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), 19–21.

<sup>23</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 331.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.



sponding constricted shooting season is preferable to a year-round open hunt which would otherwise be the case; radical Republicans, who plan to peck the keeper's eyes out and flee the enclosure; and a Liberal party who argue that it is best to bide their time, wait for the keeper to overthrow the landlord for whom he works, who is the true tyrant, and that afterwards partridges and "good men" could coexist in friendship. The landlord, hearing of the discontent, one morning goes out to the birds, holding a heavy stick in one hand. He instructs the birds about all the efforts he has made to provide the life that they enjoy and to protect them from harm and chastises them for ingratitude: "If having considered all these things, you still call me tyrant, I must say, I am *sorry for you!* Before long you will be caught blaspheming against your Creator."<sup>25</sup>

The invocation of God here may be compared with Fontaine. In book X of the *Fabliaux*, one of the shorter fables is the Partridge and the Cocks. A partridge, having been abused by roosters, consoles herself and avoids blaming Jupiter as well as her immediate tormentors for the suffering she had to endure, by blaming instead: the master of the farm. It is in accord with the nature of roosters to behave as they do and the Creator does not follow a single model in assigning nature to his creatures. "Le maître de ces lieux en ordonne autrement. [...] C'est de l'homme qu'il faut se plaindre seulement."<sup>26</sup> (The master of these parts ordered it otherwise than the partridge would prefer. [...] It is solely man about whom one must complain.) Santayana's fable varies from this seventeenth century Aesopian fable in three keys respects. An additional layer of governing bureaucracy, as it were, is placed between the being vulnerable to suffering and the divine. Secondly, the violence at issue is not horizontal, between the governed subjects, but vertical, top down. Thirdly, Fontaine's partridge's complex attitude of resignation is split into the three factions of partridges in Santayana's telling: like the Conservatives, Fontaine's *perdrix* ultimately accepts the state of the world, and the story Santayana's conservateur birds tell mirrors the official story promulgated by the landlord; however, like the radical Republicans, and the Liberals, the *perdrix* dissents from the status quo, but like the Liberals, she draws a distinction that effectively absolves one authority by blaming another. The theological problem of evil, of theodicy, is not so much solved as deferred and deflected; in Fontaine's version, the god Jupiter is

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<sup>25</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 332.

<sup>26</sup> Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables de La Fontaine* (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils, 1875), 370.

acquitted and man is condemned; in Santayana, the State receives, let us say, a deferred prosecution agreement.

This is not the first fable to appear in Santayana's writings. In *The Life of Reason*, vol. II, *Reason in Society*, he offers a pastoral fable in a section the marginal indentation of which reads: "How rationality accrues."<sup>27</sup> This is a philosopher's state of nature narrative – functionally akin to Hobbes's or Locke's or Rousseau's origination myths that explain the logic of social forms arising from a hypothesized pre-civilized condition. It is also a fable in the traditional sense as not only the "savage" shepherd but also the sheep is a protagonist. Santayana imagines the evolution of hunting into shepherding a flock as one whereby the shepherd gains a more stable supply of animal products and, with proper management, the animals receive a degree of protection against other would-be hunters, wolves, disease, and a guaranty of avoiding extinction. Santayana then imagines that a "philosophical wether" – a castrated ram – analyzes the shepherd's governance, after assessing the pro and cons:

And he might even have conceived an admiration for the remarkable wisdom and beauty of that great shepherd, dressed in such a wealth of wool; and he might remember pleasantly some occasional caress received from him and the daily trough filled with water by his providential hand. And he might not be far from maintaining not only the rational origin, but the divine right of shepherds.<sup>28</sup>

Santayana draws an explicit analogy, adding an unnecessary disclaimer about disanalogies: "Such a savage enemy, incidentally turned into a useful master, is called a conqueror or king. Only in human experience the case is not so simple and harmony is seldom established so quickly."<sup>29</sup>

We may say therefore that the irony of government has the following features. It is a counter-concept to the social contract tradition. Government, as rule by an organized power, is beneficial to the governed, if at all, by accident, contingently. If it is deeply felt as a domination, it will tend to lead to resistance, revolt, or escape – this may be what Santayana in that same chapter of *Dominations and Powers* calls "vital heroism." If it is not felt as domination, and even if it is experienced as a good, it will not last forever anyway; what is more, the powers enabled to expand through the perfection of rational means of obtaining ends, can have ir-

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<sup>27</sup> Santayana, *Life of Reason*, Book 2, 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

rational results. Either way, government will not function as originally intended. Santayana explains this as follows in a manner that seems homologous to the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental rationality or modern, subjective reason:

[...] man has outdone the sagacity of the othe[r] [animals] in finding rational means to irrational ends. But this eager use of reason in incidental tasks sharpens and strengthens reason in its own methods and insights, until some day it comes aware that, by thus rationalising and complicating the irrational, reason increases distraction for the spirit, and swells the intermittent burdens of life into a petrifying tyranny.<sup>30</sup>

It should be noted that, at bottom, all ends are rooted in irrational drives for Santayana. The mere fact that there is irrationality mixed in with rationality is nothing out of the ordinary; but the passage makes clear that he means – at least when he gets to speaking about “petrifying tyranny” – an outcome of the use of reason that is counterpurposive to reason, perhaps to life itself.

A striking line in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, from the mid-1960s, is comparable: “Law [*Recht*] is the Ur-phenomenon of irrational rationality.”<sup>31</sup> The formal equality of the juridical sphere actually enables inequalities – a point echoing Rousseau. The conceptual system of law is implemented through real violence in its sanctions, which reveals an abiding antagonism of interests within the social order. Adorno's irrational rationality of the legal system is perhaps the inverse formula of Santayana's *life of reason* as a rational ordering of irrational impulses. It is also a special case of the irony of government.

Furthermore, Walter Benjamin's concept of history could be seen as a grander scale tableau of the logic of irony, akin to the irony of government. The storm called “progress” both blows the Angel of History, facing backwards, through time and piles the ever-mounting debris of catastrophes before the Angel's feet.<sup>32</sup> “Progress” is, for Benjaminian irony, the same as disaster. Such was the Frankfurt School's vision at the end of the 1930s. In contrast, Santayana in 1905–1906 could still speak of “human progress” – in the subtitle to *The Life of Reason* – without irony.

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<sup>30</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 333.

<sup>31</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 302.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in: *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257–258 (thesis IX).

I have not said what makes the irony of government a case of “irony,” however. It could be dramatic irony; something of this sort Kaufmann probably had in mind in describing Hegel’s view of history as highlighting ironic reversals ensuing from conflicts and passions, and the unintended consequences that accompany or comprise the development of the human condition.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, it may be closer to the meaning of verbal irony. Elsewhere in *Dominations and Powers*, Santayana, discussing warfare, describes the “formal contradiction or irony” embodied in the fact that war involves an intense order – an organized army, say – seeking to produce disorder in the enemy forces, only to reestablish order – such as a new order of political relations created by subjugating or rehabilitating a vanquished nation.<sup>34</sup> By “formal contradiction or irony” I understand him to mean: merely contradictory when described using certain forms – say, overly simplified categories of order vs. disorder, seen as mutually exclusive and not imbricated concepts. It is not a “real” contradiction in the contents of the formal description. If we are not careful, however, we may find ourselves treading into a Hegelian dialectical swamp.

As it happens, Santayana’s irony of government *is* a special case of the broader Hegelian thesis of the *allgemeine Ironie der Welt*, the universal irony of the world, one of many formulations that arise in connection with defining dialectics. There is another, politicized layer of irony in all this, too, because elsewhere, in his study of German philosophy, Santayana accuses Hegel – who proclaimed freedom as the Idea working itself out in history – of being a proponent of the Absolute State.

### 3. *List der Natur oder Fehlleistung der Vernunft*<sup>35</sup>

Earlier I alluded to the impression that Santayana’s attitude toward Hegel was not an ordinary case of philosophical disagreement but displayed an overtone of hostility that requires explanation. His readings of Hegel are not critiques so much as symptoms. A case in point: in *Dominations and Powers* he misquotes Hegel’s famous ruse or cunning of reason as *List der Natur* rather than *List der Vernunft* – harmless enough, inso-

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<sup>33</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 161.

<sup>34</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 439.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase could be translated, sacrificing the paronomasia, as: cunning of nature or Freudian slip of reason.

far as the structure of this “guile” or “wiles of nature” as Santayana puts it,<sup>36</sup> was proposed by Kant in his brief essay on universal history and attributed to Nature, which probably influenced Hegel. Neither was Santayana the first nor last to implicitly draw that connection in the form of a conflation.

However, this slip – we might call it the *Fehlleistung der Vernunft!* – if we dwell on it for a moment, calls attention to the difference and proximity of Hegel and Santayana. For Hegel’s concept of the ruse of reason posits that the violent and untamed pursuit of passions yields a result that looks *as if* it were governed by reason; reason as it were stays out of the fray and lets the passions deploy themselves, but at the end of the day, reason emerges from this conflict as the idea of freedom realized in the world. Santayana’s own view could almost be phrased as the cunning of nature: on the basis of a “vital impulse,” prompting imagination, the Will embarks upon action and calls it rational.<sup>37</sup> When such a driving impulse reaches the height of passion, and there being a multiplicity of passions, without the ability of “reducing them to harmony,” human life is rendered “*de jure* rational and *de facto* tragic.”<sup>38</sup> This is, apparently, the exact opposite of the Hegelian account of history.

Chance harmonies do occur in nature and maintain themselves – or do not – through the process of selection in natural evolution. Santayana gives the example of a bee, pursuing its own passion for nectar, inadvertently depositing pollen from flower to flower. This is the cunning of nature. But is there, in Hegel’s sense, a cunning of reason?

In fact there are two distinct accounts of the ruse of reason in Hegel’s system, although clearly Hegel thought of the historical one as a realization of the logical one. The logical version can be found in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, and the historical one is found both as an “Addition” to that section and, most famously, in the theoretical introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.<sup>39</sup> The logical account: the structure of teleological

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<sup>36</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 374–375.

<sup>37</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, 375.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 374.

<sup>39</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree (New York: Wiley, 1944). It might be claimed that these two historical versions are also distinguishable; the *Encyclopedia Logic*’s sect. 209 Addition posits an “absolute cunning” of God in a theology of Providence in history; whereas Providence is only the model for the somewhat secular-rational theory of history in the *Philosophy of History*. But one could argue that these two versions are ultimately the same for Hegel as theology is just a symbolic expression of what is, in philosophy, developed fully into truth. G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences of*

action displays a cunning of reason because a subjective end is pursued by the means of objects, such that it is the interaction of objects alone that accomplishes the goal. Putting it in the form of Aristotelian terminology, we could say that efficient and material causes play the main role in the particular causal explanation of teleological processes. The final cause – or subjective end – is not itself explanatory but nonetheless remains the aim of the action, even as the realized end is not identical with it.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the Subjective End, which is the power ruling these processes, in which the objective things wear themselves out on one another, contrives to keep itself free from them, and to preserve itself in them. Doing so, it appears as the Cunning of reason.<sup>41</sup>

Although the logical account may be less than satisfying, it at least indicates the sense of what Hegel means by *List*. It is the philosophy of history's cunning of reason, however, that is genuinely interesting from a philosophical point of view.

The passage is famous, but its purport is usually missed. Most commentators, sympathetic or unsympathetic to Hegel's philosophy, take it as a *rationalist* theory of history and one that, like Leibniz, projects an optimistic view onto the world. It is, quite to the contrary, premised on a tragic view of the world. Hegel is, on my reading, affirming more or less the same idea as Santayana when the latter says that human life is *de jure* rational but *de facto* tragic. The contextual sense of Santayana's formulation is to posit the tragic aspect in an imaginary polemic against the assumption of the rational aspect. Hegel approaches in the opposite direction: the tragedy of history is the premise or starting point for an account that posits the affirmation of reason in history. Hegel assumes the *de facto* tragedy – indeed, he does not just assume it, he describes it vividly and often – and yet affirms the right of reason.

It is possible to take this interpretive stance too far in a cynical mode; Kaufmann suggests that the discussion in the "Lectures" is a mere frill of providential theology that, while it may have been authentically edifying for his students, was really motivated by the need to compete with Schleiermacher.<sup>42</sup> Whatever the motivation, we need to take the passage seriously on its own terms.

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1830, transl. William Wallace, § 209, accessed July 31, 2022, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slobject.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Hegel, *Encyclopedia*, § 210.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, § 209.

<sup>42</sup> Kaufmann, *Hegel*, 231–234, 261.

#### 4. The Slaughter-bench of History

Philosophy of history, if it is not romance,<sup>43</sup> is political theodicy. The traditional problem of evil arises for Hegel not as a received academic puzzle or abstraction but as a “sorrowful” “mental torture” experienced upon reflecting on the “panorama of sin and suffering” and the ruin of states, peoples, and individuals over the course of time.<sup>44</sup> The metaphor of History as a “slaughter-bench” appears in this context wherein the picture of suffering is imagined as sacrifice. The question, he says, is raised “involuntarily”: sacrifice to what ideal? Rejecting moral sentiment as prone to simply enjoying a depressive sorrow, a leap is made to affirm that the ideal is none other than the Idea of freedom. Such is, no doubt, a dramatic interpretation of history, as Santayana suggests.<sup>45</sup> Presented this way it is also subjective in a strong sense, but meta-characterizations of this sort are far from damning judgments on the philosophy.

Here is Hegel’s classic statement:

The special interest of passion is thus inseparable from the active development of a general principle: for it is from the special and determinate and from its negation, that the Universal results. Particularity contends with its like, and some loss is involved in the issue. *It is not the general idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background, untouched and uninjured. This may be called the cunning of reason* – that it sets the passions to work for itself, while that which develops its existence through such impulsion pays the penalty, and suffers loss.... The Idea pays the penalty of determinate existence and of corruptibility, not from itself, but from the passions of individuals.<sup>46</sup>

That there are precursors to Hegel’s notion of the cunning of reason has been observed and insightfully discussed by Hyppolite (regarding Adam Smith) and by Jacques D’Hondt (regarding Kant).<sup>47</sup> Also worth attending to are the differences that their notions have. For Hegel the “Idea” is “untouched” by the combat of particular interests and passions that it, somehow, nonetheless seems to set in motion toward its

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<sup>43</sup> Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Book 5, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 21–22.

<sup>45</sup> Santayana, *Egotism in German Philosophy* (New York: Scribners, 1916), 84–86.

<sup>46</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 33

<sup>47</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *Figures de la pensée philosophique*, tome 1 (Paris: PUF, 1971); Jacques D’Hondt, “La ruse de la raison historique kantienne,” *Revue Germanique Internationale* 6 (1996).

self-realization.<sup>48</sup> Smith's "invisible hand," by contrast, is itself bloody. If, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, Reason is Odysseus, the invisible hand is Macbeth. In either case, there are victims. It would be a bit too moralizing to focus on the callous tone in which Hegel's passage easily appears when ripped out of context.

If a bit reductive, Santayana is essentially right to say, as he did in *Egotism in German Philosophy* (1916), during WWI, that "Hegel's God was simply the world" and that God's judgment "was none other than the course of history."<sup>49</sup> But surely Santayana has gotten a bit caught up in the heat of wartime propaganda – he would, after all, later say (in *Dominations and Powers*) that most philosophers are militants – when he proceeds to accuse Hegel, not only of worshipping the state, but also of endorsing the "sacrifice of the natural man and of all men to an abstract obsession," declaring "war against human nature and on happiness," and establishing "in the heart and over the city" "an idol that feeds on blood, the Absolute State."<sup>50</sup>

But it is not Hegel that declares war on human happiness; rather he recognizes, and states, that the world *is not* the theatre of happiness.<sup>51</sup> It is a description, not a normative plan or prescription.<sup>52</sup> Thus Hegel *does* exactly what Santayana would describe, in the "Preface" to *Dominations and Powers*, as his own aim in that work: obtain "glimpses of tragedy and

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<sup>48</sup> And not just *seems* – for Hegel also says "This Good, this Reason, in its most concrete form, is God. God governs the world; the actual working of his government – the carrying out of his plan -- is the History of the world." Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Santayana, *Egotism*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 94, 97, 98. One can contrast the excessive polemic of these words levied against a thinker then already dead for over three-quarters of a century, with the tepid, at best, criticism that Santayana had of the fascist state in the 1930s when he was inhabiting Italy as a free foreigner, while the Italian communist philosopher Gramsci was literally decaying in prison a few miles away, as a political prisoner.

<sup>51</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> That right-wing Hegelians in the nineteenth century, and fascists like Gentile in the twentieth century, re-appropriated Hegelian ideas to their projects is a phenomenon requiring examination but not in the facile way that would claim that such uses are attributable to the *real* Hegel. Any theory worth its salt will be alterable or recontextualizable by others for different ends than originally intended; that is an implication of the *Ironie der Welt*. Whether Heisenberg himself became a Nazi – rather than a secret saboteur, as his defenders desperately hope – does not determine whether his contribution to quantum theory is itself fascistic, any more than the existence of egalitarian Santayanaists would mean that Santayana were an egalitarian.



comedy played unawares by governments.”<sup>53</sup> Santayana is in this way a Hegelian in spite of himself. (I am tempted to say this is the cunning of the cunning of reason).

A situation is tragic not merely on account of conflict, loss, and suffering, but because of a dramatic structure of action resulting in conflict, loss, suffering. The parties in conflict, like the fowl and farmers in Santayana’s fable about government, act (or fail to act) in accord with natural dispositions or competing ideals of justice. To take a real, contemporary instance, consider the war in Ukraine from 2014–2022 (ongoing). There exist on both sides some militant actors who, in good faith, genuinely believe they are fighting a war of liberation from oppression in the Donbas. That is true and tragic even if a complex array of additional interests of global economic and political strategy, on the part of both the US-led NATO alliance and the Russian Federation, and each of their armaments and energy sectors, are at play. The idea of freedom animates this theatre of unhappiness.

## 5. Dialectics as Negative

Santayana’s principal criticism of Hegel remains – from *Life of Reason*, through *Egotism in German Philosophy*, to the essays and sketches published posthumously in the *Birth of Reason and Other Essays* collection – that he projected a set of ideas or discursive forms onto the world and conflated these with the real processes. At the level of history, this yields an impatient impressionistic history that misses the “true nerve” of events, the “total dynamism” or “the complex vegetative life of nature” which is a “vast tangle” rather than a human scale, moral drama.<sup>54</sup> Now, if this critique of “idealistic historians” – Santayana does not name here Hegel, but it is surely the case that he would be numbered among them – if this critique is valid, it also holds against much or most of what is contained in *Dominations and Powers* as well as in *The Life of Reason* and other works. Insofar as Santayana wants to avoid a reductionistic ontology, and hence insofar as there is being to be found in realms other than matter as disclosed by natural and techno-sciences, the myth-developing, moral narratives of human life have a place. It is hard to see how, ex-

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<sup>53</sup> Santayana, *Dominations*, xxiii.

<sup>54</sup> Santayana, *Birth of Reason and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 136.

cept in an overly general, tautological or question-begging way, “romantic” illusions can be ascribed to idealistic historians *en masse*.

At the level of logic, Santayana claims that Hegel’s account of dialectic is a “satire” of logic: “[...] a psychological flux [...] is made systematically to obliterate intended meanings.”<sup>55</sup> What drives the dialectical process in Hegel’s system is not the logical necessity of its logical reasoning but rather that the meanings of terms are shifting, sometimes explicitly, sometimes surreptitiously. It is not so much that contradiction is the rule of truth – as the young Hegel had boldly asserted – as that equivocation is the misrule of *The Science of Logic*. Against such a procedure, Santayana writes, a “sincere dialectician” like a “genuine moralist” must stand upon firm Socratic ground.<sup>56</sup> The only way to practice dialectic in a properly logical manner is to fix meaning which, at least for early Santayana, is for *intent* to fix reference.

Now, it is far from obvious that and how the sort of fixity of meaning for discursive terms is possible even for the mathematical domain that Santayana takes as exemplary. When it comes to terms of philosophical debate, however, the claim that intent can fix the meaning of terms is nearly hopeless, for the meanings at issue are largely social. What is more, speakers often do not know what they mean; their words mean more or something other than they intend: “No intent can be self-contradictory, since it fixes its own object, but a man may easily contradict himself by wavering between one intent and another.”<sup>57</sup> The intent to construct a square circle, from this perspective, is a wavering between, so to speak, a rectilinear and a round intent. However we might individuate instances of intent, so as to distinguish away or separate self-contradictory meanings, the wavering itself is the way of the world.

Santayana himself had come close to suggesting as much in the chapter of *Reason in Science* preceding the treatment of Hegel’s logical “satire.” Before defining “the truth” as the “hypostasised total of rational and just discourse,” Santayana describes the “essence or idea,” constituting the sense of a linguistic sign, as “a logical hypostasis corresponding in discourse to that material hypostasis of perceptions which is called an external thing.”<sup>58</sup> The “ideal tensions”<sup>59</sup> of the system of language render intelligible the various momentary expressions in experience, just as the

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<sup>55</sup> Santayana, *Life of Reason*, Book 5, 122.

<sup>56</sup> Santayana, *Life of Reason*, Book 5, 123.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 18 fn.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 107.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, 108.

sensible sign provides a more or less durable record in a changing material world. However, flux triumphs: “The flux is so pervasive, so subtle in its persistency, that even those miracles which suspend it must somehow share its destiny. Intent bridges many a chasm, but only by leaping across.”<sup>60</sup> The fable, with which Santayana closes that chapter,<sup>61</sup> of the Titan Matter seducing by turns the goddesses of Form, should be read as a distinctly non-Platonic dialectic that shares with Hegelian approaches a positing of the inevitability of otherness.

The waywardness or otherness of meaning was what Hegel was pointing to when, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he treated Socrates’ method of dialectic. In the section of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* about Socratic method, there is a parenthetical remark as follows: “(Alle Dialektik läßt das gelten, was gelten soll, als ob es gelte, läßt die innere Zerstörung selbst sich daran entwickeln, – allgemeine Ironie der Welt.)”<sup>62</sup> [All Dialectics allows that which is taken for valid to be taken as if valid, letting its inner, thoroughgoing disturbance of itself to develop – universal irony of the world” (my translation)]. Negative dialectics is a pleonasm; negation is the key to all dialectics proper, we may say in concurrence with Marcuse.<sup>63</sup> Mladen Dolar points out that for Hegel it is the world itself that is ironic, prior even to verbal irony.<sup>64</sup> We may slightly amend Dolar’s analysis by emphasizing that Hegel’s discussion in its context is not metaphysical or ontological but eminently social: the *Welt* is the world of men’s pre-philosophic opinions, which *Ironie* takes “as if” valid; similarly in the subsequent section on Socrates’ “midwifery,” Hegel speaks of the *allgemein Gesetz*, or what is generally posited. Hegel ascribes to Socrates the method of practical questioning, through ironically feigning ignorance in order to elicit expression of views from his interlocutors and to show them that they have not understood themselves; they do not know their own attitudes’ implications. The strategy for the Hegelian to respond to Santayana’s critique, I suggest in conclusion, is along these lines. If intent aims to fix objects, intent itself is without fixity; Santayana’s critique is illusory. This strategy is analogous to the one adopted by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* (and elsewhere) in as-

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 103.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, 109–110.

<sup>62</sup> Hegel, *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*. Part I, Ch 2., section B.

<sup>63</sup> Marcuse, “Preface,” vii–xiv. Adorno, by contrast, refuses to recognize this, such that for him negative dialectics is thought of as a special form of dialectics, rather than dialectics as such.

<sup>64</sup> Mladen Dolar, “Substance is Subject,” lecture at St. Petersburg, April 12, 2018, <https://youtu.be/UBIOABhRglo>.

serting, against those who claim that Hegel's system is too totalizing and abstractly conceptual, that it is rather the modern world that is, increasingly, totalizing and really abstract – abstractions have a real, concrete effect. What Santayana presents as the error of Hegel's dialectic, its errancy, is really its strength. Hegel's method, for all its flaws, can serve the effort of contemporary thinking to comprehend and perhaps transcend the social system of domination.<sup>65</sup> Put otherwise, the world needs satirizing.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Though I think Hegel's approach is illuminating of experience, most of my claims here about what Hegel says and about the relation of what Hegel says to what Santayana says (and to what Santayana says Hegel says) are true or not independent of the truth of the underlying statements. So, inveterate anti-Hegelians could reconstrue my assertions about the proximity and affinity of Santayana and Hegel not as defenses of Hegel but as indictments of Santayana; and detached nonpartisans in the Hegel wars could accept or reject those claims with nonchalance.

<sup>66</sup> The author is grateful to Niklas Damiris and David Seiple for discussion about early drafts of this article.

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## Summary

Despite apparently holding diametrically opposed attitudes toward dialectical logic, both Santayana and the early Frankfurt School critical theorists posit a close link between the concepts of reason and domination. It is argued that a broadly-speaking Hegelian philosophical project can survive Santayana's critiques, albeit by benefitting from the latter's, as well as from the Frankfurt School's, re-centering of nature in the history of domination. In the alternative, Santayanaists who would reject Hegel must reckon with the proximity and affinity, notwithstanding Santayana's suggestions to the contrary, of their perspectives on the ultimately tragic structure of history.

**Keywords:** Santayana, domination, Hegel, cunning of reason, dialectics, irony, government, Milton, Frankfurt School