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Towards a Cure for Lunacy

Review: Katarzyna Kremplewska,
Life as Insinuation: George Santayana's Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self
(Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 269 pages.

George Santayana was a man *in-between*. He worked in-between philosophy, literature, and cultural criticism. He lived in-between American and European cultures. While he has always held a unique place in the history of American thought and philosophy he spent the last portion of his life in Europe seeking to "cultivate imagination, love it, give it endless forms."[1] He was concerned with how to live and to teach others how to live a life of sincere contemplation and enjoyment that elevates and celebrates the best of what it means to be a human being. He also worked to bridge the gap between the animal and the sublime in order to cure the brutalism and lunacy he witnessed settling into American and European cultures. Katarzyna Kremplewska's deep, deft, and welcome addition to Santayana scholarship, *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana's Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self* (from here on referred to as LI), draws upon this in-betweenness of his life and work to explore the conception of the *self* and to bring Santayana into conversation with some of the twentieth century's most important philosophers. As Kremplewska summarizes her own work, "I am tracing the connections in-between different areas of Santayana's philosophical engagement – from his ontology through literary criticism to his critique of culture – while striving to bring to light its hermeneutic coherence, corresponding to the idea of a hermeneutic of life" (LI, xi).

1) George Santayana, *Persons and Places: The Background of My Life* (New York: Scribner's; London: Constable, 1944), 427.

This review highlights some of the most important topics of the book's seven chapters and introduction paying special attention to the first three chapters where Kremplewska lays out the core of her hermeneutic understanding of the *self* and places it in the framework of Santayana's philosophy of life. The hope is to convey the joy one has when reading this book and to encourage others to work through the careful argumentation and analysis that makes this manuscript such an important piece of scholarship.

Kremplewska's book is ambitious. Not only does it pull together a conception of the *self* from various threads of Santayana's work, it also brings Santayana into serious conversation with many important twentieth century continental thinkers. With erudite patience, the book succeeds on both accounts. While Santayana has been compared to a number of philosophers, especially in the American tradition, there is less scholarship that puts him into dialogue with his European contemporaries. By demonstrating the important connections between Santayana and continental philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Martin Heidegger, Kremplewska has done an invaluable service to Santayana scholarship and philosophy in general.

In addition to the main interweaving goals of explicating Santayana's theory of *self* and demonstrating connections between Santayana and continental philosophy, Kremplewska introduces two smaller, but important, themes. First, the exploration of the concept of the *self* turns towards the role of Santayana's understanding of the tragic in his philosophies of culture and politics. This analysis of the tragic, especially the idea of necessity, progresses to a discussion of social and political philosophy. This move to the tragic and political adds weight to Kremplewska's hermeneutic exploration of the *self* by demonstrating how Santayana's understanding of selfhood works within the framework of his philosophy of life.

The introduction of the book presents important concepts for understanding Kremplewska's project. The first is *contemplative vitalism*, by which Kremplewska characterizes Santayana's philosophy of life (LI, xvii). Kremplewska recognizes three freedoms as key to *contemplative vitalism*, "(1) freedom of intelligent action, (2) freedom to become oneself – the so-called 'vital liberty,' and (3) the free life of the mind" (LI, 68–69). By emphasizing the importance of both the salvatory prospects of the creative imagination and the internalized intellectual life, the term *contemplative vitalism* perfectly captures the tension that characterizes the richness of Santayana's philosophy. *Contemplative vitalism* provides a holistic framework by which Kremplewska understands Santayana's hermeneutic approach to both life and the *self*. Second, Kremplewska finds in Santayana's work various *aporias*, such as *zoe-bios* and *process-activity*, that lead her to conceive of the *self* as *aporetic*. Kremplewska's version of Santayana's *aporetic self* is "a multidimensional (triadic), non-egological conception of the *self*, which combines a naturalistic anchoring with an idealistic/transcendental bent" (LI, xvii). This is a vision of the *self* that dynamically lives through struggling with its own finitude. Finally, Kremplewska introduces the metaphor of insinuation that beautifully permeates the entirety of the book's arguments and analysis. Borrowing the concept from Henri Bergson, Kremplewska chooses the metaphor of insinuation "to emphasize the dramatic, theatrical style of the hermenia in question" (LI, xi). Kremplewska does not return to the metaphor of insinuation until later in the book, but it is worth turning to her definition here: "*By 'insinuation' I mean – in reference to the ancient roots of the term – presenting what is false as true or what is absent as present, in order to achieve a hidden aim*" (LI, 73–74). Kremplewska only explicitly mentions the metaphor occasionally (with the notable exception of the fourth chapter), yet the application of the metaphor of insinuation is found throughout her analyses and arguments. The book itself insinuates.

The first chapter, "Guises of the *Self*," opens with a prayer from Augustine: "Oh God, ever the same. May I know myself, may I know Thee, that is my prayer" (LI, 1). For Augustine, to know God we must know ourselves, and through knowing ourselves we come to knowledge of the Divine. We seem to have a spontaneous certainty of our own conscious subjective experience, but, like Augustine, when we attempt to give an account for the grounding of this certain self-knowledge we come up short (LI, 1). An important strain in the history of Western

thought can be understood as an attempt by philosophers to appreciate, understand, and explain the experience of subjective unity. Drawing on Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, Kremplewska presents a brief history of this search for the *self* in the Western tradition stretching from Plato to Santayana (and even a little beyond). Kremplewska summarizes this search, "One may look at it via the lens of the dilemma *inside-beyond*, which was resolved differently for each of its guises. This is nothing other than … an unceasing attempt to accommodate theoretically the ever-changing phenomenon of *transcendence*, which is essential to human *self*" (LI, 2). Throughout its five sections the intent of the first chapter is clearly executed: to provide a sketch for the problem of selfhood that gives cultural and historical context to Santayana's "anti-subjectivists declarations" (LI, 27). To this end, the chapter works admirably by establishing the historical difficulty and importance of this problem in the Western philosophical tradition and demonstrating Santayana's conception of the *self* as coming from his interests in classical thought but with an eye towards contemporary understandings of selfhood.

The second and third chapters of the book, "The Conception of the *Self* and Some Basic Concepts of Santayana's Philosophy" and "The Hermeneutics of the *Self*" respectively, form the core of Kremplewska's analysis of the *self* in Santayana's extensive works. The stellar scholarship in these chapters follows the development of core concepts of Santayana's thought as they develop from a "naturalistic and quasi-pragmatic philosophy of action" (LI, 29) to a more mature ontology. In his early work, it is clear that the term "consciousness" appears as a problem for actually existing beings – embodied minds living in a uniform field of action. Yet, the very idea of *self* is an essence, experienced as eternal and atemporal. Kremplewska demonstrates that this dualism between *existence* and *essence* grounds consciousness in Santayana's naturalism while also allowing Santayana to avoid reductionist explanations of consciousness. For Santayana, this gulf between the *self* as *essence* and the *self* as *existing* can really only be bridged with a Pascalian wager of sorts: "It is fueled by what Santayana calls *intent* and experientially verified *animal faith* – a condition *sine qua non* of sanity, a realistic belief that I encounter, register and recognize autonomous things in the world.…Conscious existence, then, reminds a fishing escapade into dark, dangerous waters" (LI, 31). Santayana's idea of animal faith plays an important function in this conception of consciousness by grounding the explanation for the experience of consciousness in observable action. Santayana is, on this account, presenting a kind of dualism, but it is not to be confused with a version of Cartesian mind-body dualism. The wager is necessary for our being and acting in the world. Kremplewska quotes Santayana to drive home her point, "Our mode of being exhibits 'a fideistic basis on which all our transactions with the world are conducted'" (LI, 33). We can only really have certainty about ourselves through this wager. Self-consciousness becomes a truth about the world through the very risk of believing that it is true.[2]

While many scholars have worked on Santayana's philosophy of mind, Kremplewska's special contribution in this part of the work is "a new hermeneutically oriented take on Santayana's general strategy with respect to its bearings on his conception of selfhood and philosophy of life" (LI, 60). The hermeneutic turn in Kremplewska's analysis leads to a reading of Santayana's theory of essences that "in themselves do not 'mean' anything, being pure realm of definiteness or difference, their share in reality represents a *cathartic, emancipatory and deconstructive potential, which may serve to 'blast all… superstitions' and 'ideolatry* [sic]'" (LI, 41). This hermeneutic interpretation of Santayana's ontology and philosophy of life leads directly to Kremplewska's *aporetic self*. The author notes at least two primary *aporias* in this version of selfhood. First, an *aporia* is found in the phenomenological experience of time. We live and act in the dynamic movement of time, yet when we reflect on our own consciousness we seem divorced from the very dynamism of which we are a part – an experience Santayana refers to as the *solipsism of the present moment*. The second *aporia* is found in the wager necessary for self-consciousness. It is "the Cartesian illusion of spiritual independence reinforced by the ontological

2) There are echoes in this idea from William James' *Will to Believe*.

prerogatives of the spirit" (LI, 41). The illusory dualism between the "mind" and the body it controls is, as we have seen, a necessary belief that is sustained by animal faith. Demonstrating his commitment to naturalism, Santayana shows that while we may have this phenomenal experience of dualism, the grounding of this experience can and should be naturally explained. The remainder of the second chapter is devoted to fleshing out the implications of this *aporetic self*.[3] Kremplewska ends with a vision of the *self* that is dynamically acting in time. One that is free in the voluntary creation and acceptance of its own finitude, "selfhood emerges out of these dialectical transactions of the psyche and the world and finds fruition in the actual" (LI, 53).

In the third chapter, Kremplewska develops her hermeneutic approach to Santayana's ontology of the *self* by giving an explanation for individuation. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, Kremplewska notes that any hermeneutic account of Santayana must grapple with a twofold individuation in which, "I am the co-author of myself, constantly in the making, interacting with others and striving to coin my *body* into a *flesh*, to diminish my *sphere of helplessness*" (LI, 59). This chapter is a tremendous success, especially considering the disparate works Kremplewska had to draw from for her analysis. The clarity and importance of this hermeneutic approach is quite evident in a passage worth repeating here in its entirety. During a discussion of the hermeneutic significance of transcendence Kremplewska writes:

> Hermeneutic requirement in Santayana's vision is multi-leveled and concerns (1) the discreet process of the actualization of essence in intuition, followed by (2) the inscription of intuitions into the symbolic, phenomenal world, and (3) the ongoing activity of composing and re-composing the narrative or the dramatic structure of life. Metaphorically speaking, *the necessity to interpret is the homage paid by the psychic self for the privilege of its own actuality and interpretation – in relation to existence – seems to be a kind of "insinuation."* (LI, 73)

The *self* is the dynamic unity found in the constant process of self-interpretation. In this self-authoring, the individual is searching for and finding freedom by defining the finite in the experience of the infinite.

Two particular highlights in this rich chapter further emphasize the importance of dynamic self-creativity in Santayana's conception of the *self*. First is the importance of the metaphor or "masks" that Santayana uses to explain character. The image of masks drives home the dramatic imagery Santayana uses to express his theory of selfhood. "'Fair *masks*,'" writes Santayana, "'like flowers, like sunsets, like melodies wrung out of troubled brains and strung wire, cover for us appropriately the anatomical face of nature; and words and dogmas are other *masks*, behind which we too, can venture upon the stage; for it is life to give expression to life, transmuting diffused movements into clear images'" (LI, 76).[4] Masks are revelatory, crystalizing and clarifying our experience of the world, and at the same time they cover over or hide the confusing and inexplicable experiences of the world. Ultimately, they are the "*expression* of a given *life*" (LI, 76) defining how we interact with our communities and ourselves. Emphasizing the tripartite version of selfhood, the mask determines the role we take up as we bear witness to the world. Through these masks we are the actor, the action of acting out the role (person), and spectator (LI, 78). Of course, the very metaphor of "mask" also implies a concealment. The mask masks a void within the *self*, a "blind spot" in our being.

Kremplewska draws the third chapter to a close with a discussion of Santayana's use of the Holy Trinity to explain his conception of *self*. The Father corresponds to the material or existential axis, the Son to essence,

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3) Fully fleshing out the nuances of the *aporetic self* in the second chapter is unfortunately beyond the scope of this review, but readers will find that following out the intricacies of Kremplewska's analysis is a worthwhile and rewarding effort.

4) Kremplewska quoting Santayana from *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies*.

and the Holy Spirit to the dimension of actuality (LI, 91–92). Thus, the *self* is embodied (Father), has a vital imaginative psychic life (Son), and through the dynamic interplay between the two, actualizes itself in each moment. Each *self* is an image or reflection of God, an individuated manifestation of the whole. Through this analogy we see, along with Kremplewska, a clear example of Santayana drawing upon classical philosophy in order to present a pluralistic individualism that addresses contemporary concerns.

The first three chapters of the book are rife with comparisons between Santayana and other thinkers. In the fourth chapter, "Life as Insinuation," Kremplewska turns a sharper eye towards the second explicit task of the book – to bring Santayana into dialogue with contemporary continental philosophers. In this chapter, Kremplewska's patient work in the early parts of the book truly pays off. By bringing Santayana and Henri Bergson into conversation, Kremplewska is able to further demonstrate the power of her hermeneutic approach to the concept of the *self*. It is the strongest chapter of her book and rightly bears the same title as the book itself.

By drawing on the metaphor of insinuation to describe both Bergson and Santayana's philosophy of life, Kremplewska follows out a few "semantic threads" to explore the theme of freedom which she holds to be the most important interest to both thinkers (LI, 97). The idea of insinuation developed in this chapter is "the idea of introducing something alien into something else, of grafting something upon something else" (LI, 97). Through the chapter's four sections, Kremplewska discovers several points of relation between the two thinkers without reducing either's philosophical position to the other. Both Santayana and Bergson are concerned with exploring a humanistic individualism, strive to develop ontologies that allow some freedom from society for the individual, and find this autonomy in theories of continuity. Kremplewska closes this chapter with a quote from Daniel Moreno that perfectly captures the spirit of Santayana's philosophy as she is presenting it, "In a sense, they are both engaged in the project of designing a philosophy meant to *prevent humans from turning into lunatics*" (LI, 111). It is hard to imagine a more important or radical goal for any philosophy.

Throughout the book, Kremplewska references Heidegger's work to help her explain her hermeneutic ontology of the *self* that she is reading in Santayana's philosophy. In the fifth chapter, "Coping with Finitude: Santayana Reading Heidegger," Kremplewska turns her attention to a full comparison between the two thinkers. She is aided in this endeavor by Santayana himself whose marginalia on some of Heidegger's works provides helpful insights into Santayana's opinion of Heidegger's thought. The connection between Santayana and Heidegger is not nearly as smooth as the connection between Santayana and Bergson. Still, Kremplewska is able to tease out some important points of relation that could prove fertile ground for further exploration. In particular, Kremplewska finds that while Santayana and Heidegger may approach their philosophies from quite different angles, both thinkers are driven by similar concerns and find inspiration for their answers in the work of Aristotle. The attempt to grapple with the finitude of existence leads both to Heidegger's *Dasein* and Santayana's *aporetic self*. It is clear that Santayana found a good deal of insight and excitement from reading Heidegger and drew connections between his own work and Heidegger's. Kremplewska presents a quote from one of Santayana's letters that clearly demonstrates Heidegger's influence on his work:

> With the insight on the one hand [that of death as a "totality of life"], and the insight that life is movement, on the other hand, I think a rather new and profound analysis might be made of the notion of immortality … souls in heaven are mythical impersonations of the truth or totality of the person's earthly life. At the same time, life, and anything truly living is something dramatic, groping, planning, exciting (LI, 145).[5]

5) Kremplewska quoting Santayana from "Letter to Corliss Lamont of March 5, 1935, in Holzberger, ed., *The Letters of George Santayana: Book Five 1933–1936,* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 178. Brackets added by Kremplewska.

This passage nicely illustrates both Santayana's use of Heidegger as well as the psycho-spiritual and existence-essence *aporias* that characterize Santayana's version of the *self*.

While Kremplewska is at pains to show the similarities between the two thinkers in the fifth chapter, she does not shy away from highlighting their differences. This is all for the better. Given both the framework of *contemplative vitalism* that Kremplewska has methodically developed throughout the book for understanding Santayana's philosophy of life, and recent scholarship connecting Heidegger's anti-Semitism to his support for the Nazi regime, it will not be surprising if many readers find Santayana's approach to philosophy more rich, compelling, and insightful than Heidegger's.[6] Emphasizing Santayana's philosophy over Heidegger's does not seem to be Kremplewska's intention, but will likely go a long way towards increasing interest and respect among philosophers for "the thinker from Avila."[7]

Kremplewska turns to the last two key themes of the book by applying the *aporetic self* and *contemplative vitalism* to Santayana's work as a cultural critic. After all, it would be quite disappointing if Santayana's philosophical work had no influence on his cultural critiques and vice versa. By looking at Santayana's work on tragedy and his social and political philosophy Kremplewska further elucidates the power found in characterizing the *self* as *aporetic*.

In "The Tragic Aspect of Existence," the book's sixth chapter, Kremplewska explores Santayana's work on tragedy within historical and cultural contexts. Drawing on a plethora of philosophers, this chapter explores the theme of tragedy in three movements. In the first movement Kremplewska turns to Aristotle, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Max Scheler, to develop a history of perspectives on the concept of tragedy. For his part, Santayana's addition to this long history is to claim that "the tragic emerges out of the projection of human, sentimental perspective onto the physical time" (LI, 152). In the second movement, Kremplewska pits Santayana against Friedrich Nietzsche over the issue of the tragic. While there may be positive connections between Santayana and many important continental philosophers, towards Nietzsche Santayana was mostly critical. It is evident that Santayana found Nietzsche's philosophy an overly self-confident failure. As Kremplewska succulently puts it, "Nietzsche, concludes Santayana, decapitated the Western man without offering a worthy alternative" (LI, 175). Nietzsche, in his concern to overcome the threat of nihilism, paradoxically rejected the idea of self-transcendence and spirituality that would have allowed him to overcome the very nihilism with which he was concerned. In the final movement in this chapter, Kremplewska puts Santayana in dialogue with Harold Bloom over the quintessential tragedy *Hamlet*. Kremplewska concludes this exciting comparison by stating that:

> The tragic for Santayana, then, involves a conflict or an inadequacy informing the relation between the world of facts and the human *self*, insofar as this *self* gives rise to some ideals and invests part of itself into future projections centered around these ideals. But to give up ideals in order to avoid the tragic class is to intensify the latter by giving up Life before it naturally comes to an end. (LI, 192)

The *aporetic self* is always in a tragic position. It is the very art of living – *contemplative vitalism* – that is concerned with navigating this delicate position though dramatic acting out.

In the final chapter, "Beyond the *Self* (into the Political Realm): The Essential Negativity of Human Being and Rational (Self-)Government," Kremplewska concludes her book with a brief foray into Santayana's political

6) See for example Peter Trawny's *Heidegger and the Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

7) As Kremplewska sometimes likes to call Santayana.

thought. While it is the shortest chapter in the book, it is an ideal way to end this adventure into thinking about the *self*. As we have seen, for Santayana an important axis of selfhood is the material dimension – the natural existence in which we find our finitude, factuality, and limitations. There is perhaps nothing more challenging, natural, and "given" than other *selves*, all working out their own creative lives. In the terms Kremplewska has established throughout this work, "We may imagine political reality as a theatrical stage where an ongoing, multi-leveled drama of competing interests, insinuations, wagers, hopes, ideals, and disillusions is performed" (LI, 203). Santayana's political thought might best be described as melioristic. He is far from positive about the political future, seeing many threats and weaknesses to democracy, but he is also hopeful that we may "redeem human life from vanity and barbarism" (LI, 210). Kremplewska wraps up her overall analysis by demonstrating the power of her hermeneutic reading of Santayana and leaves open the possibility for significant further reflection.

Like George Santayana's own writing, Kremplewska's work is rich, vital, and imaginative. And, like Santayana's life and interests, her book bridges gaps between ideas, histories, and cultures. It is clear that for Santayana the question of selfhood held vital importance. With the Cartesian version of *self* crumbling under its own subjectivity, Santayana turned back to ancient sources as he attempted to develop a theory of *self* that aims to keep ourselves and our politics from falling into insanity. Through a more classically grounded approach he, like Heidegger, found ways of understanding the *self* that were spiritually empowering without being reductive. Throughout this book Kremplewska carefully elucidates these important insights in Santayana's writings and places him in conversation with important continental philosophers. This later move is not arbitrary; instead it is essential for the development of one of the most important insights in this whole work. Throughout the book Kremplewska establishes the astute thesis "that certain philosophical strategies of weakening the 'ego' may be viewed as serving the strengthening of the *self* rather than its dissolution" (LI, xix). This hermeneutic reading of the *self* sheds light on a critical philosophical problem and pushes the important work in this book beyond the borders of Santayana scholarship alone. In our striving to better know ourselves; to live vital, creative, imaginative lives; and to avoid "becoming lunatics," what can be more important than grappling with the question: can we save ourselves without losing ourselves? For Kremplewska and Santayana the answer is a resounding: yes! For this reason, and all the others explicated here, Katarzyna Kremplewska's book is a welcome and rousing success.