

Santayana and the Task Ahead

Arthur Danto

*I do not follow in the footsteps of
the Masters.
I seek what they sought.*

Matsuo Basho

A man might be a good, and even a great physicist or chemist without ever having read a page of Newton or Lavoisier; for the discoveries of scientists are taken up into the body of science itself, while the writings in which they first appeared are relegated to the archives and retain an interest chiefly for the historian of science. By contrast, it is unlikely that someone could be a good, much less a great, philosopher without having read in Aristotle and Hume. Creative philosophers, even in the present era when philosophy has become a technical and highly professionalized discipline, are typically informed deeply in the history of their subject.

This information is not academic ornament, nor is it acquired in the spirit of discipleship or of scholarly curiosity. There exists an intimate, internal relationship between the practice of philosophical investigation and the understanding of the great philosophical writings of the past which has few if any parallels in other domains of inquiry. As fresh techniques of analysis are evolved, they are applied, almost as a matter of course, to the theses and arguments of the past, to see if perhaps a fantastic conclusion might be evaded, or a paradox dissolved. Descartes' proof of his own existence, Aristotle's rebuttal of logical fatalism, Anselm's ontological arguments, the paradoxes of Zeno, Hume's demonstration that induction cannot be justified, Socrates' contention that men cannot knowingly do evil — these and many other amazing proofs and conjectures touch upon the fundamental elements of our conceptual schemes. And since it remains the task of philosophy to examine systematically our basic concepts, one cannot do responsible philosophical work

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without making one's way through the dialectical thickets which the great thinkers planted, and which are their main intellectual legacy. Hence we find, side by side with the meticulous conceptual analyses and the logical explorations which make up today's professional journals of philosophy, equally meticulous and logically sophisticated reconstructions of the arguments of the masters, very much as though they were our contemporaries from whom replies might be expected in forthcoming issues of the *Philosophical Review* or *Mind*.

If we judge the vitality of a past philosopher by the measure of explicit interest in him on the part of our best philosophers today, one is obliged to conclude that Santayana, in his centennial year, is all but dead and forgotten. To be sure, there is Santayana

scholarship, and here and there a Santayana specialist. Books and articles devoted to him continue to appear, and reference to him occasionally is found, typically as a matter of piety or as evidence of a kind of exotic scholarship. Because of his remarkable style, with its stunning images and poetical tone, his own books go on being read by a literary audience. And perhaps because of his detached, ironic voice, speaking forth on high matters of life and love and art, he enjoys a certain status as a philosopher for non-philosophers, who expect such utterances, instead of mad puzzles and displayed formulas, to be the essential substance of philosophical books. Some of his writings are classics of a kind, and are read in connection with philosophy courses, thus touching the minds of the young, and he has an unquestioned place in the history of at least American philosophical thought. But for a philosopher, even one who wrote beautifully and claimed only the allegiance of the common man, the sort of immortality

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We know the winter earth upon the body of the young
President, and the early dark falling;
we know the veins grown quiet in his temples and
wrists, and his hands and eyes grown quiet;
we know his name written in the black capitals
of his death, and the mourners standing in the
rain, and the leaves falling;
we know his death's horses and drums; the roses, bells,
candles, crosses; the faces hidden in veils;
we know the children who begin the youth of loss
greater than they can dream now;
we know the nightlong coming of faces into the candle-
light before his coffin, and their passing;
we know the mouth of the grave waiting; the bugle and
rifles, the mourners turning away;
we know the young dead body carried in the earth into
the first deep night of its absence;
we know our streets and days slowly opening into the
time he is not alive, filling with our footsteps and
voices;
we know ourselves, the bearers of the light of the earth
he is given to, and of the light of all his lost
days;
we know the long approach of summers toward the
healed ground where he will be waiting, no longer the
keeper of what he was.

Wendell Berry

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