

SANTAYANA'S PLURALISM OF CULTURES AS A MULTIPLE OF CULTURAL PERFECTIONS

Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński

Abstract: We live in a time of heated debates about culture wars, multiculturalism, cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, globalization, and cosmopolitanism in its many versions. My claim is that studying Santayana's works may help us contribute to such debates. In this text, I reconstruct and update Santayana's suggestions about the multitude, or plurality of cultural perfections, in order to see if they can apply to some of our contemporary contexts. Namely, one of the ways to approach culture pluralism is by appreciating a given culture via its achievements and sterling attributes. Most cultures, in all probability, apart from material masterpieces (e.g., architecture) and intellectual (e.g., arts, philosophy), have also developed their own models of a good life according to their own norms, worldviews, habits, customs, and interpretations of the roles of specific groups within their cultures. Wisdom lies, as we learn from the very last sentence of Santayana's *Domination and Powers*, in understanding the good that they summon and the joy they may evoke.

Keywords: Santayana, Multiculturalism, Cosmopolitanism, Cultural pluralism, Perfection.

* * *

1. Introduction: Multiculturalism, Cosmopolitanism, Diversity, and Cultural Pluralism in the Contemporary West

On many levels, contemporary Western states and institutions implement multicultural solutions, and public discourse is full of multicultural themes. Probably the most politicized one is the recently debated *diversity, equity, and inclusion* (DEI), promoted especially by universities and large corporations, but there have been many others: multiculturalist state policies of some countries that started in the 1970s in Canada, Sweden, and Australia; even earlier, the melting pot phenomenon especially in the US; the American pragmatist idea of cultural pluralism¹, discussed mainly in intellectual circles; and moral and political cosmopolitanism, an old Cynic and Stoic idea that was updated by Kant during the Enlightenment Era², and updated more recently again in the age of globalization³.

The cultural and the political emergence of these phenomena makes it hardly possible for us to distinguish these two. For example, the European Union, mainly a political body, appropriated the slogan «united in diversity» as its motto (in use since 2000), and the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (announced in 2001)⁴, that seems to have primarily a cultural character, recommends its implementation by state institutions in various countries. Just to illustrate this: UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural*

¹ Cfr. H. Kallen, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea. An Essay in Social Philosophy*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956; H. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, New Brunswick and London, Transactions Publishers, 1998 [1924].

² Cfr. M. Nussbaum, *Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism*, in «The Journal of Political Philosophy», V (1997), 1, pp. 1-25.

³ P. Kleingeld and E. Brown, *Cosmopolitanism*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019; URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/>

⁴ UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2001), URL: <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/legal-affairs/unesco-universal-declaration-cultural-diversity>.

Diversity provides descriptive and normative claims with a global political perspective (as well as legal, ethical, and cultural ones): «The defence of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity» (Article 4). The justification for this claim is the following: «As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for the nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations» (Article 1). The *Declaration* assumes somehow, uncritically it seems to me, that cultural diversity is a factor of development, and that it «widens the range of options open to everyone» (Article 3). I say «uncritically» because it appears to ignore that some states, cultures, and traditions have homogenous identities which entails that any form of cultural diversity would be exceptionally difficult for them to take on. By «exceptionally», I mean, to those who harbor more pronounced traditions of intercultural exchanges, as colonizing powers in the past, or countries with long traditions of international trade. I cannot imagine, for example, traditional religious communities (e.g., the Amish, Jewish, the Orthodox Christians, or Muslim) or nation-oriented groups (as, for example, Ukrainians fighting for their national identity these days) would want to take on a multiculturalist approach in the hope to «widen the range of options»; instead, I would expect a justified fear in them that should diversity be forced upon them, it could chip away at their own specific traditions, eventually destroying their sense of identity. Perhaps for this reason, the *Declaration* admits (in Article 9) that particular states are free to define and implement cultural policies in their own ways. The declaration differentiates between cultural diversity and cultural pluralism (Article 2). The former is a descriptive claim that humanity signifies, among other things, a collection of diverse cultural traditions that can and should serve as rich and extensive sources for thriving and progress; the latter is a normative claim according to which some elements of cultural diversity should be implemented into the practice of life so as to enrich it.

2. Santayana's Cultural Pluralism

Santayana scholarship has already devoted much attention to cultural and multi-cultural issues, starting with the cosmopolitan background of his family and his own life⁵ and the famous William James's declaration that Santayana's philosophy shows a «perfection of rottenness» and represents «moribund Latinity»⁶. Since then, we have had texts about and references to Santayana's idea of cosmopolitanism⁷, cultural criticism⁸, multicultural aspects of his life and philosophy⁹, including his «Mediterranean aesthetics»¹⁰. Also, many authors

⁵ Cfr. J. McCormick, *George Santayana. A Biography*, New York, Knopf, 1987.

⁶ W. James, *The Letters of William James*, ed. by H. James, Boston, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920, vol. II, p. 123.

⁷ Cfr. G. Gray, *Plato the Greek and Santayana the Cosmopolitan*, in «The American Scholar», XII (1943), 2, pp. 186-204; H. Saatkamp, *Santayana: Cosmopolitanism and the Spiritual Life*, in *George Santayana at 150. International Interpretations*, ed. by M.C. Flamm, G. Patella, and J.A. Rea, Lanham, Lexington, 2014, pp. 93-110; K.P. Skowroński, *El cosmopolitismo de Santayana*, in «Archipiélago. Cuadernos de crítica de la cultura», vol. 70, 2006, pp. 81-85.

⁸ Cfr. J. Seaton, *George Santayana: The Philosopher as a Cultural Critic*, in G. Santayana, *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy and Character and Opinion in the United States*, ed. by J. Seaton, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009, pp. xi-xxxviii; R. Rorty, *Genteel Synthesis, Professional Analyses, Transcendentalist Culture*, in «American Philosophical Quarterly», 1980, pp. 228-239.

⁹ Cfr. H. Saatkamp, *A Life of Scholarship with Santayana. Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Ch. Padrón and K.P. Skowroński, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2021, pp. 93-98, 105-125, 321-332.

¹⁰ Cfr. G. Patella, *Belleza, Arte y Vida. La estética mediterránea de George Santayana*, Valencia, PUV, 2010.

have focused on Santayana's philosophy of travel as an inspirational example of his cosmopolitan and multicultural approach in theory and also in life¹¹. Additionally, apart from the voices arguing that Santayana should not be given any ethnic descriptive reference since he is «the philosopher» who deserves our attention independently of specific, designated cultural contexts¹², there is an abundant literature discussing the question of whether Santayana is, philosophically and culturally speaking, American at all¹³, or rather Spanish¹⁴ both¹⁵ or «southern European 'Continental'»¹⁶ or more universal¹⁷, and, indeed, unquestionably cosmopolitan as he has «produced a text for all ages and cultures by realizing an essential possibility of thought»¹⁸. There are even scholars who claim that Santayana's entire philosophy culminates in «a philosophy of civilization»¹⁹.

Even more so, Santayana, in numerous places within his written output, dedicated his attention to specific cultures: American, Spanish (Castilian), ancient Greek, Roman, Latin, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, the academic, and others. It is these cultures or forms of cultures that Santayana most frequently referred to with admiration or with criticism. For example, he wrote extensively about egotism in German philosophy, about the British character, German freedom, English liberty, and the American character. Some of their expressions – artistic, moral, poetic, and literary, for example – he saw equally natural and equally beautiful, as he admits in many places. All these activities and views embody a strong motivation to study even more his thought from the perspective of cultural pluralism and other, similar themes.

I employ the term “cultural pluralism”, one that was coined (in 1920s) by Santayana's former student and graduate assistant, Horace Kallen²⁰, as more suitable in the Santayanan context, more up-to-date for our contemporary debates and, more importantly, as less

¹¹ Cfr. J. Beltrán Llavador, *Celebrar el mundo. Introducción al pensar nómada de George Santayana*, Valencia, PUV, 2008; G. Fantini, *Shattered Picture of Places and Cities in George Santayana's Autobiography*, Valencia, PUV, 2009.

¹² Cfr. A. Lastra, *Hacia una lectura definitiva de George Santayana*, in A. Lastra, *Emerson como educador*, Madrid, Verbum, 2007, pp. 131-143; A. Lastra (ed.), *George Santayana. Una antología del espíritu*, Madrid, Fundación Santander, 2023.

¹³ Cfr. M. Fisch, ed., *Classic American Philosophers. Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, Whitehead*, New York, Appleton, 1951; J. Stuhr, ed., *Classical American Philosophy. Essential Readings and Interpretative Essays*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987; R. Dawidoff, *The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage. High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992; H.S. Levinson, *Santayana, Pragmatism, and the Spiritual Life*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992; K.P. Skowroński, *Santayana and America: Values, Liberties, Responsibility*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007; M. Coleman, *Is George Santayana an American Philosopher?*, in «Cognitio. Revista de filosofía», X (2009), 1, pp. 29-41.

¹⁴ Cfr. J.M. Alonso Gamo, *Un español en el mundo: Santayana. Poesía y Poética*, Madrid, Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1966; Martín, *El sustrato abulense de Jorge Santayana*, Ávila, Gran Duque de Alba, 1989.

¹⁵ Cfr. H. Saatkamp, *Santayana: Hispanic-American Philosopher*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society. A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy», XXXIV (1988), 1, pp. 51-68; K.P. Skowroński, *Santayana as a Hispanic-American Philosopher. The National, International, and Transnational Perspectives*, in «Inter-American Journal of Philosophy», II (2011), 2, pp. 37-49.

¹⁶ Cfr. D. Dilworth, *The Place of Santayana in Modern Philosophy*, in «Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society», 1997, 15, pp. 1-10.

¹⁷ Cfr. J. Beltrán, M. Garrido, S. Sevilla, (eds.), *Santayana. Un pensador universal*, Valencia, PUV, 2011; Ch. Padrón and K.P. Skowroński, (eds.), *The Life of Reason in an Age of Terrorism*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2018.

¹⁸ D. Dilworth, *Philosophy in the World Perspective. A Comparative Hermeneutic of the Major Theories*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 139.

¹⁹ B. Singer, *The Rational Society. A Critical Study of Santayana's Social Thought*, Cleveland, London, The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970, p. 3.

²⁰ H. Kallen, *Cultural Pluralism and the American Idea*, cit.; H. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, cit., p. 3.

politically tinted (at least I hope so) as “diversity” or “multiculturalism”. I cannot discuss here the divergent intellectual predilections of both these men, although we know that they, for many years, held interesting discussions about culture, religion, politics, nationalism, and similar themes in their correspondence²¹; and also Kallen’s text on Santayana is an important part of the exchange of views between them²².

Hence, to clarify, what I call a “multiple of cultural perfections” in Santayana could be a smaller set of issues within Santayana’s cultural pluralism. It would be a wider concept or a more extensive framework (although these two terms or phrases Santayana never used in his work). The latter cannot be reduced to the former; after all, Santayana recommended that «the full grown human soul should respect all traditions and understand all passions»²³, not just the perfect or most excellent achievements. By the way, respecting all traditions and understanding all passions could constitute the meaning of the term cultural pluralism in its normative aspect here, even though Santayana does not seem to claim that all cultures deserve the same degree of respect and understanding (I write about barbarian cultures below). Nevertheless, my main focus in this paper is the former (*a multiple or plurality or pluralism of cultural perfections*) rather than the latter (*cultural pluralism*).

Accordingly, I tackle such Santayanan claims as what follows below, and I attempt to determine if we can detect an interesting approach towards something that one could name a “multiple of cultural perfections”, as a possible contribution to our contemporary debates about multicultural issues:

But human virtues and human forms of society had various natural models, according to differences of nature or of circumstances. Virtue, like health, has different shades according to race, sex, age, and personal endowment. In each phase of life and art a different perfection may be approached²⁴.

I take notice of the anti-dogmatic and anti-absolutist on the one hand and, on the other hand, the non-subjectivist character of this view. It does not limit itself to “presentism” or “presentness” or thinking only about our present (Western) world, its cultures and its norms, as the only valid point of reference in our assessment of the past (and future), ignoring other historical circumstances, as if to disregard the cultures of past epochs and the conditions that shaped those cultures. This seems to be a substantial part of contemporary progressivist and revolutionary positions in their (critical) moral assessment of past cultures, in many institutional policies of Western countries. Instead, Santayana refers to the perennial wisdom of humankind in many of its versions and evokes the respect for a deep wisdom of the past that should not be limited exclusively to *our* wisdom that *we* have in *our* time, whatever “we” and “our” could mean. To be sure, for an unprejudiced person «there is no more reason for swearing by the letter of the Gospels than that of Homer or the Upanishads or the Koran. We may prefer the spirit in one or another, but the moral beauty in them all is equally natural, equally human»²⁵. Santayana seems to think that the very fact that some cultures (or forms of cultural life) have evolved into more moral and humane versions and,

²¹ Cfr. G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Two, 1910-1920*, ed. W.G. Holzberger, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2002, pp. 224-225, 322-323; Id., *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Four, 1928-1932*, ed. W.G. Holzberger, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2003, pp. 296-297.

²² Cfr. H. Kallen, *America and the Life of Reason*, in «The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods», XVIII (1921), 20, pp. 533-551.

²³ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places. Fragments of Autobiography*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1986, p. 464.

²⁴ G. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers. Reflections on Liberty, Society, and Government*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 1995, p. 337.

²⁵ G. Santayana, *The Idea of Christ in the Gospels or God in Man*, New York, Scribner’s, 1946, p. 5.

as such, passed the test of time – hundreds of years – already testifies to their “achievement”. This implies social functionality both in times of war and of peace, in prosperity and in crisis, in the young generations and in the elderly ones.

Rejection of “presentism” is one precondition to the idea of multiple cultural perfections and the rejection of looking at others (other cultures), and by means of our own cultural or individual lenses is another. Let me explain.

There may exist precious little understanding of other cultures, other than our own, for a variety of reasons. One of the most recurring seems to be the following: when we study or have contact with other cultures, other ways of thinking and living, or other worldviews, we do so by means of our own terms and experience (our culture), our own interests, and we employ ideas prevalent in our own culture to help us understand. As a result, other cultures are perceived through the lenses of our own culture, factually external to the culture being studied or experienced, which, in turn, deprives this other culture of “talking to us” by means of its own language and its own set of ideas from the very start. For example, if an adherent to a secular culture assesses religious cultures as a pipedream of myths, prejudices, and fables, he or she imposes a secular pattern of thinking from the get-go. This prejudiced approach is utterly alien to religious cultures (and vice-versa). Proportionately, the misunderstanding and misrecognitions burgeon. Paradoxically, even if contact between different cultures is more frequent now due to the growing communication networking of our age, understanding is not easily established. Santayana himself, at certain moments, warns us against a possible illusion which would lie in imposing upon alien places and cultures our own criteria of excellence. Exactly this imposition happened to himself as he admits in his autobiography: «I could never abandon *my* England, because that was a part of myself, just as *my* America and *my* Spain are part of myself: but these are not to be confused with the real, public, ever-changing England, Spain or America of geography and politics. My England was only the illusion with which the real England had inspired me»²⁶.

Santayana's reflections about various cultures – although personal and subjective in many places – often transcend the subjective view that projects individual interpretations on various cultures. In this way, this philosophy may be inspirational for our debates about cultural issues in our contemporary contexts also.

3. A Multiple of Cultural Perfections: Santayana's Possible Contribution to the Contemporary Debates on Multicultural Matters

I would like to evoke Santayana's idea about the role of cultural achievements (alternatively: perfections, excellences, and similar) as indicative of a given culture's uniqueness and importance. I would like to do it because of my conviction that one of the ways to approach culture pluralism is by appreciating a given culture via its excellences and sterling attributes. It is also my conviction, as it was Santayana's, that most cultures, in all probability, have developed their own models of excellence, according to their own standards. I suspect that there are many traditional cultures that have worked out, throughout the centuries, models and outlines for a good life according to their own norms, worldviews, habits, and interpretations of the roles of specific groups of people within their cultures (this also refers to contemporary cultures although an adequate recognition of what

²⁶ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places*, cit., p. 508.

tends to be considered perfect or aiming at perfection may be debatable, and I will come back to it below).

This view corresponds to his position that is even more applicable to cultures of given social groups when that culture is understood as an established way of living and thinking. I cannot refer to Santayana's original definition of *culture* (or *civilization*). Santayana does not define these terms though he seems to use them interchangeably in some places, e.g., «English and American civilisation»²⁷, «Anglosaxon civilisation»²⁸, yet sometimes *civilization* does seem to have a more normative meaning (about which I write below). Thus, let me define, briefly, the term *culture* that I have proposed elsewhere²⁹ and will employ here in the conviction that it corresponds to Santayana's understanding of this term in similar contexts. I understand *culture* in this sense as a more or less established way of living and thinking of a given group of people in a given geographical territory (Western, American, European, etc.) in a given historical time (ancient, medieval, contemporary, etc.). I find this definition compatible with Santayana's understanding of the term in reference to a geographical region or historical era as he expresses in claims like the following: «I see no reason to deny that different races, epochs, and climates might develop different regimes with equal success and without mutual recrimination»³⁰. My definition is more extensive, yet its substance does not differ that much from the definition used by one of Santayana's most eminent scholars and interpreters, John Lachs, who defines *culture* as «a collection of the tendencies and behaviors of actual people»³¹. I do not use Kallen's understanding of culture because its essential component seems to be a *cultural pluralism*-oriented one, rather than explaining the precise term *culture* as such. For example, we read that *culture* implies a positive and «sympathetic recognition and understanding of differences»³², something that Santayana totally lacks in his approach to barbarism, of which I write below.

For our purposes, however, such a general definition will be misleading unless we do not forget that we speak about *perfections* or *achievements* that given cultures have generated. We need to remember that when we speak, say, about Hindu culture in Santayana's texts, we need to refer, for example, to the *Upanishads* as an eminent articulation or achievement of Hindu culture rather than Hindu culture as a whole, as he once referred to Greek philosophy or the ideal of *kalokagathia* – «perhaps the finest flower of human nature»³³ – rather than to ancient Greek culture as such, and, similarly, he referred to *English liberty in the US* rather than American culture in a descriptive or sociological manner.

An important part of the philosophical justification for this idea is the following. Cultural perfections, apart from such intrinsic features as beauty (Santayana also uses the term *dignity* in similar contexts), express the ways in which a given culture has successfully coped with the conditions and circumstances of its age. They are the symptoms of the genius – individual (author) and collective (author's culture) – that can show us facet of a given culture's worldview, a vision about the role of humans in the world, moral strife, the

²⁷ Ivi, p. 200.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 201.

²⁹ K.P. Skowroński, *A Meaningful Life Amidst a Pluralism of Cultures and Values. John Lachs's Stoic Pragmatism as a Philosophical and Cultural Project*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2023, p. 34.

³⁰ Santayana in H.J. Dawson, *America and the West at Mid-Century. An Unpublished Santayana Essay on the Philosophy of Enrico Castelli*, in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 1979, 17, p. 454.

³¹ K.P. Skowroński, ed., *John Lachs's Practical Philosophy. Critical Essays on His Thought with Replies and Bibliography*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2018, p. 250.

³² H. Kallen, *Culture and Democracy in the United States*, cit., p. 56.

³³ G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*, New York, Scribner's, 1896, p. 23.

dealing with suffering and fear, expressing hopes, and admirations for a more or less defined noble goal and attempts to realize it. These are good reasons for us to recognize them adequately and appreciate them accordingly. They share with religions and religious masterpieces – according to Santayana, the atheist – some important traits, first of all in being «the intellectual and ritual expression of a particular ethos, nationality, or civilization»³⁴. Our interest (whatever “our” means) in cultures that have coped with the predicament of life in their historical contexts, should be interesting for us since we share with others a common, human existential condition. Independently of cultural differences, we need to know how to deal with suffering, with death, with the problem of meaningful life, with an efficient arrangement of our societies, and how the world functions in general. Such questions do not stop with the unprecedented technological progress and the unmatched advancement of the sciences in our own day.

Santayana seems to appreciate some traditions not because he is a conservative thinker willing to defend conservative ideas, but rather because he views traditions as achievements, as forms of societal behaviour that have passed the test of time. At least in expressing the predicament and hopes against natural challenges of a given historical time. And such achievements should be appreciated not in the form of a cult of idolatries, but rather as an appreciation of the efforts of many generations and the results of those efforts that have been undertaken to organize social, political, and cultural manifestations. Many specific forms of cultural life, for example, Gothic cathedrals or American skyscrapers or democratic procedures, express the spiritual, cognitive, and intellectual aspirations of the time. And then there are those, like Dante's literary and philosophical masterpiece in which we are led to entertain a thought like the following: «Having become Socratic, the thinking part of mankind devoted all its energies henceforward to defining good and evil in all their grades, and in their ultimate essence; a task which Dante brings to a perfect conclusion»³⁵.

Let me mention here that this idea (a multiple of cultural perfections) may be seen as cultural cosmopolitanism in its perfectionist version. Aside from the idea that political cosmopolitanism, initiated by the Cynics and the Stoics, for example found in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*³⁶, contemporary moral cosmopolitanism³⁷ is not directed against boundaries that divide people living in different states, and does not need to be directed against patriotism or a loyalty to one's state, region, or native culture. Rather, it evokes a moral sympathy for our fellow human beings who happen to live elsewhere and to our fellow human beings' traditions and cultures, beginning, interestingly enough, with our own. Santayana writes about «a psychological sense in which an individual may transcend himself. His thoughts will embrace all his familiar surroundings; and his habits being necessarily social, his passions will be social too. The scope of his affections may eventually extend over the whole world»³⁸. The strength of our sympathies towards our fellow human beings may have various degrees – after all, it is impossible to love everybody with a similar intensity or empathy, as it is equally hard to appreciate the excellences of all cultures. In instances like these, Santayana resembles an old Stoic

³⁴ G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Four*, cit., p. 296.

³⁵ G. Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, and Goethe*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1910, p. 77.

³⁶ M. Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. by G. Hays, New York, The Modern Library, 2002, IV, 4.

³⁷ Cfr. P. Kleingeld and E. Brown, *Cosmopolitanism*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019, URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/>

³⁸ G. Santayana, *Physical Order and Moral Liberty. Previously Unpublished Essays of George Santayana*, ed. by J. and S. Lachs, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 1969, p. 196.

cosmopolitan embodiment entertaining the idea of *oikeiosis*, or circles of concern, most pronouncedly expressed by Hierocles, according to which our sympathy towards others should go outwards, starting with ourselves, then our family, then our community, then our country, ending with the entire world. A cosmopolitan view may be impotent and verbal, or perhaps tragic, if there is no center out of which a given person, a member of such and such a culture, take his own or her own point of view. Such a person «must be somebody and come from somewhere, so that his definite character and moral traditions may supply an organ and a point of comparison for his observations. [...] Everywhere he should remain a stranger no matter how benevolent, and a critic no matter how appreciative»³⁹.

I move on now to a possible development of the debate over the difference between cosmopolitanism and other similar terms (cultural pluralism, multiculturalism, diversity, etc.), and turn now to the question that seems much more important for understanding Santayana's ideal of a multiple of cultural perfections. I mean the appreciation of excellences in the case when given dominant cultures stifle weaker cultures (and degrade their achievements) and, which is a similar problem, a newer and a more expansive stage of the same culture that obliterates and annihilates its own earlier stages along with its old achievements. It happens now, for example, when the secular West depreciates its religious heritage as patriarchal, unfair, unjust, and oppressive. Do we have any objective or unbiased platform to see if a given achievement is really an achievement?

A short answer to this question is the following: If we talk about the practical, real, down-to-earth, and political dimension of inter-cultural relations, we cannot escape from the natural growth and expansion of those that are stronger, hegemonic, and willing to dominate other cultures that have a lesser potential to resist domination. For example, during the 1898 Spanish-American War, while at Harvard, he seemed to complain about Spain being tragically weak, rather than accusing the US of being imperialist as did his colleague William James⁴⁰. Here, in actual real-life reality, cultural conflict, physical clashes, and domination are inescapable, and this is the politicians' domain, not the philosophers', to deal with the practical arrangements of sociopolitical life. If we, however, talk about a non-political (if this is possible at all), impartial (if possible), humanistic approach towards human thriving within the educational, ethical, and the liberal arts domains, as I am trying to do now, we would probably be able to appreciate prominent figures and prominent works of the present day, in the same way as those past ages.

A longer answer to the question might be: How do we know if something deserves the name "cultural perfection"? Could it be related to Santayana's understanding of relativism? Santayana, although a proponent of relativism in culture and ethics, does not follow the trajectory of radical relativism. If he did, he would have to excuse himself from our common understanding of such categories as «perfectionism», «achievement», and others that tell us the same story about various cultures' best moments and best things. Yet some form of relativism remains. For «progress is relative to an ideal which reflection creates»⁴¹. Here we have a suggestion that perfection, or an aiming at perfection must be relativized to the ideal this perfection articulates.

This brings us to the anthropological question of human development, personal self-fulfillment, life goals, and the best way a given individual can thrive in society, and

³⁹ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places*, cit., p. 449.

⁴⁰ Cfr. *ivi*, pp. 403-404.

⁴¹ G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason. Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2011, p. 1.

subsequently the best way a given society can develop and prosper. The question refers to the development of social groups, not only individuals, since an individual cannot thrive independently of social arrangements and public institutions. The recognition and celebration of these communal perfections, along with the standards and norms that make them perfections rather than something ordinary, is the principal argument for this idea (multiple of cultural perfections) that Santayana evokes throughout his writings. One of the best ways we can do it is by means of arts and institutions that cultures have produced as an articulation of the good life in practice, and in the conditions, circumstances, and levels of knowledge at their disposal.

This, in turn, takes us to the question of the progress, melioration, development, and the criteria according to which we may claim that something is progressing and going in a good direction or not. Here, Santayana's pluralism shows its profound character: «Progress could not, then, be universal or endless, but only episodic, divergent, and multifarious. Each development was good in its own eyes; but if they became rivals for the same matter, they became evils for one another»⁴².

The Western capitalist general formula measures the progress of human development, both in individual and communal dimensions, with a commercial increase of products and the accumulation of material goods. Commonly, the measure is rendered by GDP. A high GDP automatically means access by an individual to a plurality of goods and a high possibility of having a satisfactory life. But there are costs, and one of the most outstanding American Santayana scholars, Herman Saatkamp, betrays this. Thinking about his own native country, one with one of the highest GDPs in the world, through a Santayanan lens, he writes: «Lacking the time to live in the mind, Americans use quantity as a justification for lack of quality in their achievements»⁴³, and adds pessimistically: «To rush through life and die without the joy of living, that is the tragedy of American life»⁴⁴.

For the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism “meliorism”, or a belief in progress, is one of its basic traits (even though, it must be admitted, American pragmatists have always had reservations about a hyper-consumption lifestyle). It states that, in Peirce's formulation (*Century Dictionary*), that «the world is neither the worst nor the best possible, but that it is capable of improvement»⁴⁵. The same idea, in John Dewey's formulation (*Reconstruction in Philosophy*) claims: «The specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered»⁴⁶. As regards to this, Santayana's own incorporation of pragmatism was very limited especially when, according to his own assessment, pragmatism and the American philosophical tradition were «too derivative and too tied to the advancement of business and capitalism»⁴⁷.

Santayana's understanding of progress was quite different. He suggests «perfections to be achieved»⁴⁸, the process of «improvement or approach to perfection in some specific direction»⁴⁹, and that «a progress must be directed to attaining some definite type of life»⁵⁰.

⁴² G. Santayana, *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. by P.A. Schilpp, New York, Tudor, 1951, p. 559.

⁴³ H. Saatkamp, *George Santayana*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2018. URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/santayana>

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ M. Bergman, *Improving Our Habits. Peirce and Meliorism*, in C. de Waal, K.P. Skowroński (eds.), *The Normative Thought of Charles S. Peirce*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012, p. 127.

⁴⁶ J. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. XII, ed. by J.A. Boydston, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991 [1920], pp. 181-182.

⁴⁷ H. Saatkamp, *George Santayana*, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, cit.

⁴⁸ G. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, cit., 1995, p. 337.

⁴⁹ G. Santayana, *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, ed. by P.A. Schilpp, cit., p. 499.

Each involves some more or less definite ideal to be approached. This is a clear reference to the old Greek (pre-Socratics), Old-Roman (Lucretius), and Hellenistic models of the good life as aiming at a fuller, more satisfying, meaningful life. Taking all into account, progress takes place when a given human being is able to navigate the circumstances, be they technological, economic, cultural, or political, in order to participate in a more substantive life. Economic progress does not equal progress in human self-realization, although it materially may help, often to a great degree. What is the difference between “living well” and having a successful life, according to Western conventional standards? Santayana’s suggested way of life can be a strong response since he lived, by choice, a very modest life by economic standards, yet a hyperacute life in making it his own creation according to his own nature and contributing to the humanistic and philosophical culture of the West.

The normative dimension of the cultural, or the civilized way of thinking, lies in having a clear vision of a conceivably perfect life, or at least a decent one, along with the recognition of the ultimate justification for the machinery of life, understanding it with all its ideals, wisdom, and beauty. In contrast to this, barbarian means simply «undisciplined, rebellious against the nature of things»⁵¹. In this way, a civilized person – which may mean also a well-educated person, according to Santayana’s criteria – is able to see, appreciate, and cultivate the richness of life in an amplified perspective, whereas a barbarian is content to recognize some fragments and ignore the many excellences of life that lie outside the scope of his or her outlook. Keeping ideas alive and treating them as if they were eternal standards for making life better (fuller, ampler, wiser, and wider) is civilized, or cultural in the manner of aiming at some ideal; having fragments of life in front of us and remaining dedicated to accidental, contingent, and artificial objects of desire makes us barbarian.

4. It is not so Aristocratic and un-Democratic as it may seem at First Sight

Santayana’s ideas in general have received some criticism too, for, among other things, having shown very little concern for promoting democratic ideas of citizenship and participation in institutionalized life⁵². However, if we discuss what democracy means or rather what it should mean, we often, without using old-fashioned vocabulary, could accompany Santayana in thinking that a given ideal (say, democracy) is to be implemented into public life, and that some societies (e.g., ancient Greece, modern America, contemporary Scandinavia) have realized this ideal more or less successfully by approaching, a vision of what democracy should be. Perfect is the vision but the factual realization could approach the ideal to some degree. This is what Santayana meant. He recognized «perfect democracy» merely on an ideal plane, «where everything that is or might be has a right of citizenship»⁵³. It is not militantly imposed: «Democracy is very well when it is natural, not forced. But the natural virtue of each age, place, and person is what a good democracy would secure – not uniformity»⁵⁴. Santayana was against «commercial

⁵⁰ G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason. Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, cit., p. 158.

⁵¹ G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Four*, cit., p. 45.

⁵² H.S. Levinson, *Santayana, Pragmatism, and the Spiritual Life*, cit., p. 264.

⁵³ G. Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith. Introduction to a System of Philosophy*, New York, Scribner’s, 1923, p. 80.

⁵⁴ G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Eight, 1948-1952*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2008, p. 228.

imperialism»⁵⁵, and «industrial liberalism» that levels down «all civilisations to a single cheap and dreary pattern»⁵⁶, as he was also against German *Kultur* and against Americanization, hoping (in 1950) that despite a naturally American «zeal for converting people to your views», America would not «impose one political system over the whole world»⁵⁷. All such tendencies he viewed as militant and undemocratic.

Since this «militant» element in intercultural relationships is often discussed by Santayana, let me say a few words about it. Doing so, I would like to return to the quote from the first part that I have already introduced above and focus my attention on its important continuation. Namely, as Santayana writes: «I see no reason to deny that different races, epochs, and climates might develop different regimes with equal success and without mutual recrimination, if only they understood the place of their respected virtues in the universe, and did not attempt to legislate, on their particular principles, for all men and for all ages»⁵⁸. And here, in the second part of the quote, we encounter one of the major challenges that occurs when talking about multicultural issues in any form: uniformization caused by a cultural imperialism or forceful expansion or even an undemocratic hegemony that allows a more dominant culture to legislate and impose its own norms and criteria upon others.

Cherishing various cultures, past and present, as if independently of each other –which is Santayana's idea here – is one thing, but a very different matter is when they clash and/or need to coexist side-by-side in practice as, for example, the idea of multicultural policy. The consequences, even the price that is paid, for introducing selected norms and standards, even excellences into other cultures, requires an accompanying degree of serious reflection. In the quote that follows, attention is given to the moral and social costs of elevating a given form of culture, or a given model of a good life, to the level of perfection at the cost of degrading other perfections (and norms). The social cost seems to be one of the basic measures by which some cultures can be appreciated and others punished, and it refers to the effective functioning of a given culture: «If any community can become and wishes to become communistic or democratic or anarchical I wish it joy from the bottom of my heart. I have only two qualms in this case: whether such ideals are realisable, and whether those who pursue them fancy them to be exclusively and universally right: an illusion pregnant with injustice, oppression, and war»⁵⁹.

Cultural pluralism along with a multiple of cultural perfections in the interpretation proposed here are not ideas that necessarily must be religiously, ethnically, and ideologically diverse in the spaces where a given culture is traditionally monolithic, or majoritarian, in case of ethnicity and religion. For example, if an individual's cultural tradition is religious, Christian for example, this does not imply that one should renounce it, and expand one's worldview with Buddhist ingredients, or Islamic elements, or agnostic tenets. Rather, it suggests that the recognition that there are others for whom religions are important (and irreligious people too), and that peaceful, respectful coexistence is a challenge that needs to be explored. This coexistence is not an ousting of one religion by another (or by atheism) or in reducing the importance of one by elevating the influence of the other. What it does suggest is that we need to search for solutions, e.g., within education,

⁵⁵ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places*, cit., p. 508.

⁵⁶ G. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, cit., p. xxi.

⁵⁷ G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Eight*, cit., p. 311.

⁵⁸ H.J. Dawson, *America and the West at Mid-Century*, cit., p. 454.

⁵⁹ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places*, cit., p. 227.

that allow us all to involve ourselves in diverse forms of cultural activity as smoothly, and with as much mutual respect, as possible.

Most probably, Santayana would accuse such attempts as the militant imposition of one form of culture on another one, although such imperialistic tendencies seem to be natural for those cultures that have established themselves enough to expand and create institutional tools and the military technology to do so. Santayana's naturalistic philosophy recognizes the natural forces behind well-established cultures (and political bodies) that become «militant», as he so frequently writes in his *Dominations and Powers*, which translates, as he put it elsewhere, that «every organic being prizes its own type of perfection and strives to preserve it and to reproduce it»⁶⁰. He protests against such impositions in practice, although he understands them as inevitable, and claims that the richness of cultural life should go against uniformizations and standardizations, warning us that «the more equal and similar all nations and all individuals become, the more vehemently will each of them stick up for his atomic individuality»⁶¹.

5. Any Cultural Policy for a Multiple of Cultural Perfections? Debating Cultural Barbarism and the «Radical Disease» of Contemporary Western Culture

I employ Richard Rorty's famous term, «cultural policy»⁶² in order to ask if Santayana's idea is implementable into any segment of social reality by means of tools that cultural policy (or cultural politics) could use. Rorty's term links both the cultural and the political. I do so because Rorty's idea is not that removed from the way we, as commentators on Santayana's legacy and thought, could use his philosophical message in our contemporary contexts. To be sure, Santayana's output is *not* political in the sense of proposing specific social reforms, of promoting or criticizing a given political party, or of putting forward a designed series of measures to be implemented by governmental institutions. Yet, it is political in the cultural sense of showing us various relations of power, and this includes the limitations to our freedoms, which necessarily structure all cultures, present or past, all societies, religious or secular, and all polities, democratic or not. This carries him, to a humanistic openness for individual people and their self-fulfilment: «Happiness is hidden from a free and casual will; it belongs rather to one chastened by a long education and unfolded in an atmosphere of sacred and perfected institutions»⁶³. Opposed to this, we have an approach often promoted in a variety of quarters, according to which the barbarian is elevated to a role-forming function in society and culture. To stress all of this, the barbarian would be «the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal goal». The barbarian «merely feels and acts, valuing in his life its force and its filling, but being careless of its purpose and its form»⁶⁴.

Does Santayana prefer any one specific policy? And, if so, would it be a past-oriented policy? Rorty, commenting on Santayana, claims that one does not have reasons to think

⁶⁰ G. Santayana, *The Birth of Reason and Other Essays*, ed. by D. Cory, New York, Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 109.

⁶¹ G. Santayana, *Dominations and Powers*, cit., p. 180.

⁶² Cfr. K.P. Skowroński, *Values, Valuations, and Axiological Norms in Richard Rorty's Neopragmatism. Studies, Polemics, Interpretations*, Lanham, Lexington, 2015.

⁶³ G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (One-volume edition), Amherst, Prometheus Books, 1998, p. 463.

⁶⁴ G. Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, New York, Harper, 1957, pp. 176-177.

that, for example, «American democracy will find its final fulfilment in America, any more than Roman law reached its fulfilment in the Roman Empire or literary culture its fulfilment in Alexandria. Nor is there much reason to think that the highbrow culture of whatever empire does achieve that fulfilment will resemble our own»⁶⁵. In other words, we cannot tell if this or that achievement will be the form that we assess now, since what happens now develops into forms that we are not able to anticipate.

In order to respond to this question, first let me return to the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. It does not discuss that there is a serious problem with an effective arrangement of different cultures, except by suggesting that many of them (or all of them) can equally enrich us or that we can enrich them, whatever “ours” and “theirs” actually mean. In other words, according to which criteria should we assess various cultures in order that they enrich us? Enrich in what sense? Mere coexistence, side-by-side, is well-nigh impossible, as the experience of multiculturalist policies in many countries show us. Should we assume that all of them are equally effective in, say, making life meaningful for most of its members? What if a given culture cultivates, for example, a caste system for centuries, or views the idea of the equality of men and women as pathological? What if secularization is viewed as blasphemous? Is it not an absolutistic claim that «all cultures are equal», and is it not in itself a form of Western cultural imperialism to impose such egalitarian and democratic claims («all cultures are equal») upon cultures that have been essentially nondemocratic and inegalitarian for centuries, if not millennia? I can only speculate that Santayana would be against these types of tendencies when they (these tendencies) lead to “militantly” imposing this or that cultural pattern, by means of legislation as it happens in some countries. In other words, the penalization or criminalization of some cultural norms that do not fit these new tendencies.

Apart from imperfections and mistakes that are present in all human efforts, there is something more systemic and radical that opposes Santayana's idea of cultural pluralism. Pluralism does not and cannot mean “unlimited diversity”. Anarchical aberration, difficult to define, is a natural by-product of any cultural development, and becomes suicidal if institutionally accepted and promoted. Any given culture becomes “vicious” or self-destructive «when it forms habits destructive of its health and of its ability to prosper in its environment»⁶⁶. Such an approach is not directed against enrichment understood as a recognition of perfective achievements. After all, he recommended that we attempt «to overcome moral and ideal provinciality, and to see that every form of life had its own perfection, which it was stupid and cruel to condemn for differing from some other form, by chance one's own»⁶⁷. Philosophy and the liberal arts play a huge role in this process, because a measure of a cultural life that has a perfective aspiration is secured by internalizing lessons from the past, something that the barbarian – if we follow Santayana's terminology mentioned above – does not need or want. More precisely, what the barbarian encounters in history is, first and foremost, superstition and the idols that prevent the barbarian mentality of attaining a more enlightened understanding of the world. A «radical disease» of Western culture⁶⁸ would be to allow, or even promote, such militant and perfection-less scenarios by using rhetoric that would justify such barbaric impositions on other cultures and destroying the idea both of pluralism and of perfectionism:

⁶⁵ R. Rorty, *Genteel Synthesis, Professional Analyses, Transcendentalist Culture*, cit., p. 238.

⁶⁶ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places*, cit., p. 541.

⁶⁷ Ivi, p. 170.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 540.

logical arts are fatal if they are used to construct, by way of a moral fable, an anthropomorphic picture of the universe given out for scientific truth and imposed on mankind by propaganda, by threats, and by persecution. And this militant method of reforming mankind by misrepresenting their capacities and their place in the universe is no merely ancient or mediaeval delusion. It is the official and intolerant method of our most zealous contemporary prophets and reformers. Barbarism has adopted the weapons of flattery and prophecy. Merciless irrational ambition has borrowed the language of brotherly love⁶⁹.

6. Conclusion

I think that Santayana would expect from us, his contemporary readers, the following. Since we, living today, have many past generations behind us, we (should) have also the advantage of having many more and better, not fewer and poorer inspirations, in order to live life in a better fashion, and to avoid the mistakes and pitfalls of those who have lived before us. The predominant role of past traditions is to show us good and bad things, and this is possible when we do not forget the past, but rather want to approach it creatively and lucidly. Here we can evoke Santayana's most famous quote: «Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it»⁷⁰ (even a plaque with this quote was put up after WWII in the former Germany Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz⁷¹). Such an insistence does not only preserve the material heritage, something that UNESCO and various museums want to do. Nor does it mean to come back, to regress, and imitate old-fashioned lifestyles. Instead, it must be something that enlivens us, makes our worldviews more open, and fortifies us morally, spiritually, and culturally in our future-oriented challenges. Philosophy, the liberal arts, and the humanities could be the tools to use in order to recognize and take on such ideas.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 546.

⁷⁰ G. Santayana, *The Life of Reason. Introduction and Reason in Common Sense*, cit., p. 172.

⁷¹ See Auschwitz.org, URL: <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/words-in-the-service-of-hatred,1022.html>