

A BRIDGE BETWEEN TRADITIONS:
THE SENSE OF BEAUTY IN THE AESTHETIC THEORIES
OF FRANCIS HUTCHESON AND GEORGE SANTAYANA

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Abstract: Although a fair amount of secondary literature on George Santayana's aesthetics has been produced, almost none of these works – to the best of our knowledge – is concerned with linking his production to the context of the formation of American aesthetics. This is precisely the main purpose of this article. The hypothesis supported here is that by critically comparing the concepts of «sense of beauty» proposed by George Santayana and inspired by Francis Hutcheson's work, it is possible to highlight the influence of classical British aesthetic theory on the emerging aesthetic tradition in the United States at the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: Santayana, Hutcheson, Sense of Beauty, Aesthetics.

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1. Introduction: recovering the connections between British and American aesthetics

The historiography of the American aesthetic tradition is still under development. This phenomenon was briefly analyzed in a recently published book¹. In this work it was argued that the existence of such a legacy was debated until very recently in the academic domain, and that while on the one hand it was quickly admitted by historians that there exists a properly American criticism of art and even an American fine arts tradition, the same was not so clear regarding the field of philosophical aesthetics², particularly when we consider the beginnings of this tradition.

Seeking to expand the scope of this line of investigation to include the history of American aesthetics, Laura Haubert, Fabio Campeoto, and Claudio M. Viale³ argued that it was not that such an aesthetic tradition did not exist, but rather that it had been presented in a different way at the beginning⁴. It did not originate at universities. Its source was not academics, but literary societies and free meetings, and its authors were not experts, but artists, freethinkers, politicians, and a general literate public who were interested in the subjects of aesthetics and philosophy of art. Even at the beginning, when American aesthetics was still a fragmentary tradition being developed there was already something distinctive that could be considered a tradition of its own, and many of the debates about it took on a nationalistic character, with artists and freethinkers insisting on the need to build a theoretical aesthetic tradition of their own.

¹ W.B. Gulick, G. Slater (eds.), *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*, Albany, Suny Press, 2020.

² *Ivi*, p. 8.

³ L.E. Haubert, F. Campeoto, C.M. Viale, *La génesis de la estética estadounidense: pioneros, espíritu colonial y la resignificación de la experiencia estética en el siglo XIX*, en «Metafísica y persona», 28, 2022, pp. 11-39.

⁴ The major argument developed by Haubert, Campeoto, and Viale (*ibidem*) is based on previous work done by: M.I. Baym, *A History of Literary Aesthetic in America*, New York, Frederick Unger Publishing, 1988. M.J. Neil, *Toward a National Taste: America's Quest for Aesthetic Independence*, Honolulu, The University Press of Hawaii, 1975. M. Banta, *One True Theory & the Quest for an American Aesthetics*, New York and London, Yale University Press, 2007. E. Cahill, *Liberty of the Imagination: Aesthetic Theory, Literary Form, and Politics in the Early United States*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

However, this almost unknown legacy flourished and developed and became established. What can be accurately spotted is the moment when this tradition ceased to be fragmentary and entered the realm of universities, becoming a discipline that, though not very respectable at the time, at least began to gain ground. This key moment was epitomized by George Santayana's contribution/work. It is important to note that «George Santayana (1863-1952) inaugurated aesthetics as a major part of Academic philosophy in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century» and actually «remained the most prominent writer on aesthetics [...] until the appearance in 1934 of *Art as Experience* by his close contemporary John Dewey»⁵. A similar position is defended by Santayana's biographer, who claimed that *The Sense of Beauty* «was the first American treatise on [aesthetics], and among the first in Britain or on the continent»⁶.

This initial period of aesthetics inaugurated by Santayana's work is of particular interest here, since until now there have been no major studies on this transition from a non-academic to an academic American aesthetics and therefore the influence of foreign traditions such as the European ones has not been properly investigated yet. Existing research is either dedicated to a broader analysis not specifically focused on aesthetics purposely⁷, or, on the contrary, they focus on aesthetics, but from a single thinker's perspective, as in the case of studies on the reception of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Friedrich Schiller in John Dewey's aesthetics⁸ and of Friedrich Schiller in Charles Sanders Peirce's⁹.

Even though research dedicated to the beginning of the American aesthetic theory is still rare, it does exist and most of it is focused on the Germanic tradition, i.e. on the reception of Kant, the Romantics and even of Hegel. This may be explained by the fact that, there had been an intense flow of Germanic ideas into the educational sphere of the United States since at least 1830¹⁰. There were many forms of contact, such as receiving immigrants, sending students abroad to Germany, and even translating classical German works. It cannot be denied that this nexus existed and was important or that a more detailed work on this in the field of aesthetics has yet to be written.

However, the present investigation seeks to draw attention to the fact that there was also a British tradition which had a profound impact on the beginnings of American aesthetics before the Germanic influence during the 19th century. Unfortunately, practically nothing has been written yet about this common bridge between the two traditions, with rare exceptions such as Paul Guyer historical inquiry¹¹.

The British tradition of philosophy and aesthetics was the first theoretical source for American thinkers¹². This scenario began to change only after the Anglo-American War of 1812, when a process of searching for other intellectual references began. Until then, almost

⁵ P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics. Volume 3: The Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 238.

⁶ J. McCormick, *George Santayana: A Biography*, New York, Knopf, 1987, p. 127.

⁷ W. H. Goetzmann, *The American Hegelians. An Intellectual Episode in the History of Western America*, New York, Knopf, 1973.

⁸ D.J. Morse, *Faith in Life: John Dewey's Early Philosophy*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2011. R. Dreon, *Dewey after the End of Art. Evaluating the "Hegelian Permanent Deposit" in Dewey's Aesthetics*, in «Contemporary Pragmatism», 17, 2020, pp. 146-169.

⁹ J. Barnouw, *Aesthetic for Schiller and Peirce: A Neglected Origin of Pragmatism*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», XLIX (1988), 4, pp. 607-632.

¹⁰ B. Kuklic, *A History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001.

¹¹ P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, cit.

¹² M.I. Baym, *A History of Literary Aesthetic in America*, cit.

all the aesthetic ideas circulating in the United States were based on English and Scottish periodicals and books. In fact, there was a mutual exchange between the United States and England, which can be seen in the fact that it was common for British writers to contribute to American periodicals and vice-versa¹³.

This heritage is recognized, for example Thomas Munro in an article about the beginnings of aesthetics in the United States wrote: «We are direct heirs of the long British tradition in the philosophy and psychology of art»¹⁴. For Munro, this legacy is such that even when the Germans become the great referent as was already said, they do so through British intermediaries. For example, the works of Coleridge, Bosanquet and Carritt are essential to draw public attention to what was happening in Europe.

By approaching Santayana and Hutcheson we attempt to demonstrate that the connection between the aesthetic traditions of the United States and England may have weakened at a certain specific point in the late nineteenth century, but it has never disappeared completely. Whether in the early days of this academic tradition, as we want to show here, or later¹⁵, when relations were more openly established, as Guyer pointed out, when was common that philosophers worked in both countries.

Perhaps what these two Anglophone traditions have in common is that they have received little attention from philosophical historians until very recently. For example, although the British aesthetic tradition can be considered older than the Germanic¹⁶ one, it was only very recently that a broader secondary literature on it emerged¹⁷. The American case is not different, with the first substantial scholarships going back to the 70s¹⁸.

This investigation follows the trends of revival of and deliberation on these two traditions, the British and the American. It aims to provide a further piece for this puzzle, by trying to show how, even at a time when there was supposedly less British influence, it was not completely ignored, presenting itself through important writers such as Santayana. As this connection is so important, the following section is dedicated to understand the context in which this reappropriation took place.

¹³ W. Knight, *The Philosophy of the Beautiful, Being Outlines of History of Aesthetics. Volume I: Its History*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905.

¹⁴ T. Munro, *Aesthetics as Science: Its Development in America*, in «The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism», IX (1951), 3, p. 163.

¹⁵ «While in the first part of the twentieth century there was not much interaction between British and American aesthetics, in the second part there was, and some of the leading figures even divided their careers between the two countries» (P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, cit., p. 2).

¹⁶ Although a large part of current philosophical historiography places the birth of aesthetics in Germany, with the publication of Alexander Baumgarten's works that would name the discipline, some historians in the last decade have drawn attention to the importance of production on British soil that anticipated many of the characteristics and themes that would later reappear in this well-known and prestigious German tradition. In this respect, it is worth quoting the words of that: «the intellectual roots of modern aesthetics are buried deep in British soil» (T.M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition. From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 1) and also, the work of Guyer (*A History of Modern Aesthetics*, cit., p. 98): «Although it would not receive its name until ten years later in Germany, and that name would not be adopted in Britain for another century, the history of what we now call aesthetics as a specialty within academic philosophy began in Britain with the *Treatise Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design* by Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), the first part of his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* of 1725».

¹⁷ C.W. Korsmeyer, *Relativism and Hutcheson's Aesthetic Theory*, in «Journal of the History of Ideas», 36 (2), 1975, 319, pp. 319-330. G. Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995. P. Kivy, *The Seventh Sense. Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003. T.M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition. From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, cit.

¹⁸ M. I. Baym, *A History of Literary Aesthetic in America*, cit.; M.J. Neil, *Toward a National Taste: America's Quest for Aesthetic Independence*, cit.; W.B. Gulick, G. Slater (eds.), *American Aesthetics: Theory and Practice*, cit.

2. The context of the connection: the writing of «The Sense of Beauty»

The hypothesis proposed here is that the meeting point between the two traditions occurs in George Santayana's essay *The sense of Beauty* (1896). According to Paul Guyer, one of the merits of that essay is to recover the idea of 18th century British theories that appreciation of beauty is a spontaneous and immediate experience. The difference is that the Spanish contemporary philosopher tries to update the psychological background with the discoveries of 19th century.

As Danto wrote in his critical introduction¹⁹, the importance of this work is twofold. On the one hand, it represented a turning point in Santayana's personal history since it was this book which gave him a reputation as a philosopher (he had published other work before, but in the field of poetry). On the other hand, the work also lays the foundations, as it has been said, for the canon of the American tradition, and today not only does it have this historical value, but it also remains a fruitful reading for those interested in the topic of beauty.

Santayana's work took several years to be created. Although it was written relatively quickly, it was based on the lectures that the thinker used in the Aesthetics courses that he taught at Harvard between 1892 and 1895, and which had not been published until then. Later, Santayana would refer to this book and these courses in a very negative way, calling them «sham», and even going so far as to state that: «Although I didn't have, and haven't now, a clear notion of what 'aesthetics' may be, I undertook to give a course in that subject»²⁰.

Curiously enough, one of the most important books in the American tradition was born out of the external pressure its author was under to keep his work. As K.P. Skowroński²¹ describes the president of Harvard at the time, Charles Eliot, was on the verge of firing Santayana because he did not meet what was expected since he was looking for a specialist in each area of philosophy for the department, not a freethinker in the manner of the Greeks, as Santayana would have liked to be²². Regarding this pressure, we have highlighted below an excerpt from one of his biographers who encountered the philosopher.

At one point I said something about *The Sense of Beauty*. Santayana answered that he wrote the book only because he was coming up for tenure at Harvard and his friends had warned him that in order to keep his job he would have to publish a scholarly work. «But what can I write about?» he had asked them. «There's that course of lectures you've been giving on aesthetics», someone suggested. «Why not that?» Santayana laughed as he added that he followed this advice just to stay on at Harvard²³.

Now, the negative tone used by Santayana years later to refer to one of his most important works has captured the interest of different interpreters until the present date²⁴. Such a negative interpretation of the philosopher should not, however, overshadow the

¹⁹ A.C. Danto, *Santayana's The Sense of Beauty: an introduction*, in G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1988, pp. xv–xxviii.

²⁰ G. Santayana, *Persons and Places: Fragments of Autobiography*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1986, p. 393.

²¹ K.P. Skowroński, *Santayana and America. Values, Liberties, Responsibility*, Newcastle (UK), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007.

²² About Santayana's conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom and as a way of life, we recommend the work of D. Moreno, *Santayana filósofo. La filosofía como forma de vida*, Madrid, Trotta, 2007.

²³ I. Singer, *George Santayana, Literary Philosopher*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 10.

²⁴ G. Tiller, *Santayana in 1896: The Sense of Beauty and Studies in England*, in «Overheard in Seville: Bulletin of the Santayana Society», 39, 2021, pp. 7-15. W.E. Arnett, *Santayana and the Sense of Beauty*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1957.

oeuvre, since as the latter critic noted, it seems to be contaminated by Santayana's negative retrospective view of his years in the United States, and more specifically, at Harvard.

Although Santayana's is not a very fond recollection, this early period at Harvard, and particularly the years between 1889 and 1896, when he taught aesthetics and organized his manuscript to be published, are essential to the point made here. Thus, although it is difficult to find direct references to Hutcheson – and even to other authors from this tradition – in the work itself, it is known from context that these classic thinkers of British aesthetics were not unknown to the Spanish philosopher. One look at the public archives of Harvard University can show that Santayana taught many seminars on English philosophy in those early years. For example, in his first semester as a professor, in the fall of 1889-1890, he taught a course on English philosophy. Then, in the next semester (1890-1891), he offered a seminar on «English Philosophy from Hobbes to Hume – Lectures and theses», which possibly included Hutcheson's work at some point. These seminars were repeated in the semesters of 1892-1893, 1894-1895, and 1897-1898. Turning specifically to aesthetics, in the 1893-1894 semester he taught «Aesthetics. –The Psychology of Taste and the History of Aesthetic Theories», which probably reviewed all the great names in classical British aesthetics including Hutcheson²⁵.

It is worth remembering here that as Santayana's most famous biographer pointed out, the Spanish thinker always had affection for English society and institutions, and although he was a critic of British empiricist tradition, he was also an admirer, to the point that the historian wrote about him: «in the intellectual exchange, however, his manners were British rather than American»²⁶.

Thus, although Hutcheson is not explicitly mentioned in Santayana's 1896 work, his presence can be inferred. Moreover, it seems highly probable that the Spanish philosopher had a good knowledge of him, either because he was interested in British culture and manners, or because he spent years teaching about this tradition at Harvard, including the time when it came to the more specific field of aesthetics.

The theoretical proximity between Hutcheson and Santayana has not gone entirely unnoticed in the secondary literature on both authors. On Santayana's part, Arthur Danto already indicates this closeness in his introduction to the critical version of the work, while on Hutcheson's part, both Costelloe and Korsmeyer signal this heritage. For example, the latter even states more openly that: «Santayana's theory of beauty is also reminiscent of Hutcheson's»²⁷.

What Santayana takes from Hutcheson is an ontological model of thinking about beauty, where beauty is in simple terms «not a property of an object distinct from our response to it, but rather the pleasurable “idea rais'd in us” by an object»²⁸. The difference is that Santayana, as it will be seen below, does not share some of the presuppositions endorsed by Hutcheson and the tradition that would succeed him. In broad terms, Santayana adopts a wider version of the sense of beauty, where there are not so many rules, but everything that causes pleasure and stimulates the play between our faculties making it seem as if it were part of the object, is beautiful. Let us now look in more detail at what «sense of beauty» meant in each philosophical theory.

²⁵ Harvard University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences (2009). *Courses of Instruction 1879-2009*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Archives. <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:40128815>

²⁶ J. McCormick, *George Santayana: A Biography*, cit., p. 205.

²⁷ C.W. Korsmeyer, *Relativism and Hutcheson's Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 322.

²⁸ P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, cit., p. 257.

3. Francis Hutcheson and «the sense of beauty»

The concept of «sense of beauty» appeared in Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725). Although this book remained unnoticed for many years among secondary philosophical literature, since the beginning of 1970s it has been gaining more attention from commentators and it has come to be considered by many specialists²⁹ as the first treatise on aesthetics in the modern sense of the English word.

Hutcheson's purpose in this book was twofold. On the one hand, he sought to explain, using philosophical language, how the mind is naturally capable of perceiving and enjoying beauty. On the other hand, he tried to clarify what properties objects must have in order to generate such a response in the observer contemplating them. In this sense, it can be said that his theory tried to contemplate both the internal subjective sense of perception and the external properties of the object.

One point in Hutcheson's main argument that deserves a brief mention here is that for the philosopher, as it can be seen from the excerpt highlighted below, there is a «sense of beauty» that is natural and innate in all human beings. This «sense» is a natural predisposition that helps to understand how men weave an agreement in relation to formal questions of taste that seem so disparate.

In the first Treatise, the Author perhaps in some Instances has gone too far, in supposing a greater Agree-[xvii]ment of Mankind in their Sense of Beauty, than Experience will confirm; but all he is solicitous about is to shew, «That there is some Sense of Beauty natural to Men; that we find as great an Agreement of Men in their Relishes of Forms, as in their external Senses which all agree to be natural; and that Pleasure or Pain, Delight or Aversion, are naturally join'd to their Perceptions». If the Reader be convinc'd of such Determinations of the Mind to be pleas'd with Forms, Proportions, Resemblances, Theorems, it will be no difficult matter to apprehend another superior Sense, natural also to Men, determining them to be pleas'd with Actions, Characters, Affections. This is the moral Sense, which makes the Subject of the second Treatise.³⁰

The starting point of Hutcheson's argument is quite simple: there are objects that generally please most individuals immediately when they are perceived while others do not have the same effect³¹. In some cases, the opposite can happen, i.e. the perception of a certain object may result in dislike. Now, this premise, which helps to support the edifice of his argument, is not open to debate since it functions more like the observation of an empirical fact. In a sense, what is claimed here is that there is a certain structure of the human mind that translates experiences in terms of dislike or pleasure.

According to George Dickie³², Hutcheson starts from the previous observation to build his argument in four major steps. The first, which includes the preface and the first section of the book, is where the thinker seeks to demonstrate the existence of such an internal

²⁹ P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetic. Volume 1: The Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 98. P. Kivy, *The Seventh Sense. Francis Hutcheson and Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

³⁰ F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 2004, p. 10.

³¹ «In reflecting upon our external Senses, we plainly see, that our Perceptions of Pleasure, or Pain, do not depend directly on our Will. Objects do not please us, according as we incline they should. The presence of some Objects necessarily pleases us, and the presence of others as necessarily displeases us. Nor can we by our Will, any otherwise procure Pleasure, or avoid Pain, than by procuring the former kind of Objects, and avoiding the latter. By the very Frame of our Nature the one is made the occasion of Delight, and the other of Dissatisfaction» (Ivi, p. 8).

³² G. Dickie, *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century*, cit.

sense of beauty, which in other words would be that mental faculty which deals with perceptions, and which is responsible for responding to this with pleasure – when there is beauty. In the next, between sections two and four, the philosopher indicates what characterizes a beautiful object, emphasizing a classic characteristic of unity in variety. In the third step, sixth section, Hutcheson argues that the sense of beauty (i.e. this mental faculty) is universal, i.e. it is present in all human beings. Finally, he arranges the final segments by developing his thesis on pleasure and displeasure in relation to diverse experiences of beauty.

We do not intend to delve into the steps of Hutcheson's argument here. It suffices to focus on his concept of an internal sense of beauty. According to Hutcheson, there is an external as well as an internal sense of beauty. The former is the source of experiences, i.e. inputs that then pass to the internal senses. The first internal sense would be precisely that of beauty, harmony, and regularity; the second internal sense is that of morality, which looks at actions, at an individuals' character and virtue. This division between morality and aesthetics as meeting points in a single theory recurs in Santayana's work.

When focusing on the first internal sense, Hutcheson argues that this is dedicated to perceive beauty and that it is a type of distinctly human mental faculty that precedes social customs, education and even examples. This mental faculty is made up of a perceptive capacity that is activated when the external sense is stimulated. The following elucidates this connection between the mental faculty and beauty.

For Beauty, like other Names of sensible Ideas, properly denotes the Perception of some Mind; so Cold, Hot, Sweet, Bitter, denote the Sensations in our Minds, to which perhaps there is no resemblance in the Objects, which excite these Ideas in us, however we generally imagine that there is something in the Object just like our Perception. The Ideas of Beauty and Harmony being excited upon our Perception of some primary Quality, and having relation to Figure and Time, may indeed have a nearer resemblance to Objects, than these Sensations, which seem not so much any Pictures of Objects, as Modifications of the perceiving Mind; and yet were there no Mind with a Sense of beauty to contemplate objects, I see not how they could be call'd beautiful³³.

To Hutcheson's understanding, this inner sense should not be taken as an axiom, but rather as a characteristic that is part of the human being's natural structure. Thus, it can be said that the internal sense that deals with beauty is nothing but the ability to passively receive such ideas of beauty that are projected from certain objects that possess certain characteristics, such as unity in variety. This mental faculty seems to be intended to receive specific ideas when a type of particle organization penetrates it, this is the case with beauty, but it could also be the case with sound through the vibration that propagates in the air.

To some extent, Hutcheson's argument seems to try to combine the two most common answers to the nature of beauty. Namely, whether it is objective or subjective. The thinker's solution is that both spheres are necessary. On the one hand, objects need to have certain characteristics and organizations to be able to arouse the inner mental faculty. On the other hand, this internal mental faculty cannot be ignored; its existence is necessary for the experience to be completed and the subject to feel pleasure or not. So, in short, while the internal sense is subjective, it depends on something external and objective to be activated.

Now, we can see in Hutcheson's theory of the sense of beauty an example of how his empiricism, so marked at the beginning of the book, slowly makes way for a kind of

³³ F. Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, cit., p. 27.

Platonism, where objects are at the same time part of a more universal class, even if they are accessible³⁴. Although there is an internal sense of beauty, universal, a priori in everyone, it is only accessible when it encounters certain objects, and although they have many forms, and beauty presents itself in many ways, to be beautiful is have some level of unity in variety.

4. George Santayana and the «sense of beauty» revisited

Santayana's «Sense of Beauty» is his most famous philosophical work, and despite the author's prolific work, it has remained his best-seller³⁵. There are many reasons for this, one is that Santayana was one of few authors who turned to the theme of beauty, amid a growing obsession among 19th century theorists to discuss art, its nature, and its value³⁶. He thus offered an aesthetic in the midst of a rising wave of works on the philosophy of art.

As mentioned earlier, it is known that Santayana was very familiar with the British philosophical tradition. Thus, the title for his book cannot have been a random choice, but a deliberate one. In this regard, Costelloe wrote that «The title of the work [...] clearly (and deliberately, one assumes) recalls the tradition of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Reid»³⁷. This connection can be inferred when we look at the argument behind this concept that «human beings are endowed with an inner sense for beauty comparable or analogous to the external ones that perceive their objects in the form of sight, hearing, and touch»³⁸.

Again, as Costelloe noticed, the proximity between the two thinkers is remarkable, since «despite a gap of two centuries, only the idiom really separates the work from its eighteenth-century predecessors»³⁹. Let us now see what similarities and differences there are in the concept of the «sense of beauty» proposed by Santayana. We begin by emphasizing an excerpt to understand what Santayana specifically means by the word «sense».

There is notoriously no great agreement upon aesthetic matters; and such agreement as there is, is based upon similarity of origin, nature, and circumstance among men, a similarity which, where it exists, tends to bring about identity in all judgments and feelings. It is unmeaning to say that what is beautiful to one man ought to be beautiful to another. If their senses are the same, their associations and dispositions similar, then the same thing will certainly be beautiful to both. If their natures are different, the form which to one will be entrancing will be to another even invisible, because his classifications and discriminations in perception will be different, and he may see a hideous detached fragment or a shapeless aggregate of things, in what to another is a perfect whole - so entirely are the unities of objects unities of function and use. It is absurd to say that what is invisible to a given being ought to seem beautiful to him. Evidently this obligation of recognizing the same qualities is

³⁴ G.L. Hagberg, *Francis Hutcheson*, in A. Giovannelli, *Aesthetics: the Key Thinkers*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021², pp. 59-73.

³⁵ «I see that my first book *The Sense of Beauty* remains my “best seller”: I had a shock on reading that *The Last Puritan*, had not sold any copies at all; but at the foot of the page I found that *The Last Puritan* for \$ 5.00, had sold several hundred copies. I do not understand these mysteries of the trade, but decretely bow to them» (G. Santayana, *The Letters of George Santayana, Book Eight (1948-1952). The Works of George Santayana, Volume V*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, The MIT Press, 2008, p. 190).

³⁶ C. Sartwell, *Six Names of Beauty*, New York and London, Routledge, 2004.

³⁷ T.M. Costelloe, *The British Aesthetic Tradition. From Shaftesbury to Wittgenstein*, cit., p. 255.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 257.

conditioned by the possession of the same faculties. But no two men have exactly the same faculties, nor can things have for any two exactly the same values⁴⁰.

As it is evident from this excerpt, Santayana's concept of «sense of beauty» is similar to the one presented by Francis Hutcheson. Both consider it as a mental faculty. Or one could say that in Santayana the «sense» is the human perceptual apparatus. For example, in Singer's interpretation, the title of the Spanish thinker's work could be translated also as: «the organic and other conditions under which beauty appears»⁴¹ or «the human faculty of being susceptible to beauty », or simply «the aesthetic experience»⁴².

In another significant passage later in the book, Santayana explains that the senses «are indispensable working instruments developed by the needs of life [...] their perfect development produces a harmony between the internal structure and instinct of the organ and the external opportunities for its use»⁴³. This apparatus produces an effect of harmony, which ends up resulting in the objectified pleasure that we later know and call «beauty».

Now, it should be noticed that there are also significant differences between the two philosophers. For example, Santayana's concept of the «sense of beauty» is somehow deceitful, since it is actually a condition that makes one perceive something that is not, in the sense that the perceptual apparatus transforms a perceptual sensation into a quality, thus objectifying what has been experienced⁴⁴. Beauty, in fact, is not something that exists in itself, but exists as an element that constitutes the process of experience. It is a quality, but it does not have an independent existence as it might initially seem, this is exemplified in the excerpt below.

If we say that other men should see the beauties we see, it is because we think those beauties are in the object, like its color, proportion, or size. Our judgment appears to us merely the perception and discovery of an external existence, of the real excellence that is without. But this notion is radically absurd and contradictory. Beauty, as we have seen, is a value; it cannot be conceived as an independent existence which affects our senses and which we consequently perceive. It exists in perception, and cannot exist otherwise. A beauty not perceived is a pleasure not felt, and a contradiction⁴⁵.

One substantial difference with Hutcheson, which can be observed in the first Santayana's highlighted quote, is that although he works with the existence of such mental faculty, the use of this term seems to be somewhat «satirical» as remarked by Danto since his argument is that «if there is a sense of beauty, it does not, for all the features it may share with the standard senses, function like them at all»⁴⁶.

A further difference observed by different interpreters⁴⁷ is that in Santayana's theory beauty is not being approached from a determination of characteristics that it must have. His book is more a reflection on how the human apparatus works in response to an impulse presented to it and ends up objectifying it. Santayana does not define any single or

⁴⁰ G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, cit., pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ I. Singer, *Santayana's Aesthetics: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1957, p. 35.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 52.

⁴⁴ I. Singer, *Santayana's Aesthetics*, cit.

⁴⁵ G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, cit., pp. 30-31.

⁴⁶ A.C. Danto, *Santayana's The Sense of Beauty: an Introduction*, cit., p. xxi.

⁴⁷ G. Patella, *George Santayana: de la estética a lo estético*, in «Limbo», 28, 2008, pp. 91-97. P. Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics. Volume 3: The Twentieth Century*, cit.

necessary characteristic for such objectification. In Hutcheson's view, unity in variety must be present and cannot be suppressed, but here, in Santayana's view, there is simply no such unifying characteristic, there is only a kind of phenomenological test carried out by the subject in each situation.

A third distinction is that Santayana does not agree with most modernists' idea that qualities such as universality and disinterestedness are necessary components of the aesthetic experience (or the beauty experience)⁴⁸. All our functions work together to process and form the experience of beauty. The pleasure of beauty is nothing but the pleasure in which the process of association between the aroused response and the object that aroused us reaches a peak, becoming a fundamental and central experience point. Therefore, more than universality or interest, pleasure is what matters to configure an experience as aesthetic. In Santayana's words «aesthetic merit may then very plausibly be regarded as the pleasure objectified»⁴⁹.

Finally, Santayana also discusses the relationship between ethical and aesthetic «sense» in his book as also did Hutcheson. For the Spanish thinker, beauty is not restricted to the arts, but it is an essential component of life as a whole and cannot be separated, since it is part of the human beings' perception apparatus⁵⁰. Therefore, a life without beauty is not merely ugly or worrying because it lacks an aesthetic sense, but it is degrading for those who live it.

5. Conclusion

Unfortunately, Santayana did not explicitly mention Hutcheson's name not even once in the course of his 1896 work. This, however, is not particularly unexpected, as the Spanish thinker quotes few authors by name in this book, leaving the reader familiar with the tradition to detect each of the philosophers behind the ideas quoted.

Despite this, due to biographical facts that have been addressed, such as Santayana's knowledge of the British philosophical tradition, his knowledge of the aesthetics developed by such thinkers during the 18th century, and his personal preference for the British over the American culture where he was raised, are elements that allow to infer Hutcheson's presence in his work.

This particular inference functions here as a bridge between traditions, in an attempt to show how this British tradition, which has received little attention from interpreters, influenced the development of American aesthetics in its early years as an academic discipline. Although Santayana separates himself from Hutcheson by adapting Hutcheson to the contemporary language of the late 19th century, this does not diminish the value of the fact that he chose this terrain to base his theory on.

Last but not least, this research is the result of a humble attempt to give life to an aesthetic tradition and to understand its history, since so far few efforts have been made in this direction. Far from being a closed question, this is also an invitation for more researchers to reflect on this period of American philosophical history and all the connections that still need to be established.

⁴⁸ C.W. Korsmeyer, *Relativism and Hutcheson's Aesthetic Theory*, cit.

⁴⁹ G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, cit., p. xxvii.

⁵⁰ R. Lida, *Belleza, Arte y Poesía en la Estética de Santayana*, Tucumán, Editorial Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1943.