

Introduction

Philosophy, Representation, and History

GEORGE SANTAYANA WROTE of his philosophy that it would have been the same “under whatever sky I had been born.” His view was that, so far as philosophy is concerned, one part or stage of the world is like any other, and that nothing properly philosophical belongs to one rather than another time or place. Santayana wrote a classic in the philosophy of art, *The Sense of Beauty*, in which he argued that beauty is pleasure objectified, by which he seems to have meant that the pleasure caused in us by art or nature, considered aesthetically, is unconsciously projected outward onto its causes and treated henceforward as among their objective properties. Beauty is a subjective state regarded as an objective presence. His philosophical model for this theory was David Hume, who famously argued that the concept of causal necessity is a projection outward of a habit, instilled in us by our experiencing constant conjunctions of like events with like. The necessity we believe connects cause to effect is but the force of habit objectified—a state of mind misread as a state of the world. Under whatever sky, Hume might have insisted, there is nothing more to causality than this, whatever may have been believed by philosophers trapped in earlier systems of thought. And although it can at least be questioned whether Santayana could have arrived at his view under a sky that did not include his great predecessor, Santayana

similarly believed that there is no more to beauty than pleasure miscast as an objective property of what happens to give us pleasure, even if, under different skies, different orders of things may cause individuals to feel pleasure.

Santayana came to see his views of beauty as after all indexed to a certain historical moment. "You must remember," he wrote the aesthetician Thomas Munro in 1921, "that we were not very much later than Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, and Matthew Arnold: our atmosphere was that of poets and persons touched with religious enthusiasm or religious madness. Beauty (which mustn't be mentioned now) was then a living presence, or an aching absence, day and night." His ingenious analysis of the sense of beauty might still hold good, wherever we take pleasure in things. But pleasure and beauty ("which mustn't be mentioned now") had become decreasingly relevant to the experience of art. Nothing in Ruskin, Pater, Swinburne, or Arnold would have prepared anyone for Cubism, or Dada, or German Expressionism. Notoriously, Ruskin was unable to assimilate Whistler to his idea of art, let alone his idea of beauty. Ruskin was so harsh and angry a critic that it is easy to suppose that what he said about the advanced art of his times, in which the connection between beauty and art was beginning to weaken, was the projection outward of the pain it caused him: Whistler's painting was irascibility misread as ugliness. In any case, a philosophy of art based on beauty and pleasure under European skies in the late nineteenth century would be entirely out of touch with art made under the skies of Modernism.

The thought that philosophy must be everywhere and always the same encounters some difficulty with the kinds of transformation exhibited in the change from traditional to modernist, and then post-modernist, art. Philosophies of art based on nineteenth-century artworks are nineteenth-century philosophies of art and cannot easily be exported into the twentieth century, when art is so different from, for example, the Pre-Raphaelite work that Ruskin so admired. The concept of art, which the philosophy of art aspires to understand, may indeed be

timeless. But any familiarity with the history of art must make it plain that most actual philosophies of art were so constrained by their historical moment that they could not easily be applied when future artistic possibilities unfolded, ones so radically discontinuous with the works of art from which they were derived that an initial impulse is, as with Ruskin, to deny them the status of art at all. For to think of them as art means that what we thought was philosophical truth was restricted to a historical moment. One can be certain one's philosophy is indemnified against future history only if the belief can be justified that nothing the future brings will force abandonment of or adjustment in the concept we have arrived at. A truly timeless philosophy of art must be compatible with every possible artworld, as a timeless philosophy of causation must be true under every possible sky, however hidden it may be from thinkers blinded by the smoke of inadequate theories. The bird of wisdom, Hegel writes, takes flight only with the falling of the dusk. Philosophy paints its gray in gray only when the history of its subject will have run its course.

Hegel would not have supposed his philosophy would be the same "under whatever sky." Rather, he saw his philosophy as internally connected with the historical moment in which he arrived at it. His masterpiece, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, was composed in the university town of Jena, just when the cannons of Napoleon were firing outside its gates. He saw Napoleon as fulfilling through action what he, Hegel, brought to self-consciousness in his writing. His philosophy, he makes plain, would not have been possible at any earlier phase of history. "Absolute knowledge became—objectively—possible," Hegel's great commentator, Alexandre Kojève, wrote, "because in and by Napoleon the *real* process of historical evolution, in the course of which man *created* new worlds and *transformed* himself by creating them, came to its end."¹ His view was that a true philosophy is internally connected with the history it culminates, the same way we understand what happened in a story only by reading the last page. A skyless philosophy is what philosophers aspire to, but their actual philosophies, like Santayana's aesthetics, are parochial

reflections of specific moments in the history of their subjects. Even under Hellenic skies, in which mathematics was venerated, it would have been difficult to attain an adequate philosophy of numbers. Nothing the Greeks recognized as numbers—integers and fractions—could solve $x^2 = 2$, so one had to invent a special kind of number—irrational numbers—whose relationship to rational numbers had to be reflected in philosophical representations of what numbers are. New kinds of numbers had similarly to be invented to solve equations beyond the reach of the numbers one knew about. To base one's concept of numbers merely on the natural numbers would be like basing one's conception of art on the work of Giotto, at the beginning of art's long development. And in the end the concept of number is astonishingly more abstract than anyone would have recognized whose paradigm was adding 2 and 2.

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel declared that the history of art was just such a story, and that it had come to an end. He based this in part on the view that art was no longer able to relate to society as it once had done, in Greek or in Gothic times, expressing the objective spirit of those eras. A gap had grown up between society and art, which had increasingly become a subject for intellectual judgment rather than, as beauty was felt to be in Santayana's rueful recollection, an object of sensuous or spiritual response. A philosophy of art was now possible. I certainly felt this to be true when I began to write on the philosophy of art, at a moment when it seemed to me at last possible to grasp what the history of art had been about and the time for its philosophy was at hand. If it was good philosophy, it would be true for any sky under which art was to be found; but *my* philosophy of art would hardly have been the same under skies other than those of Manhattan in the latter decades of the twentieth century. I began to take Hegel especially seriously as a philosopher when I was forced to think about the fact that certain works of art that interested me deeply did so precisely because they could not have been made in earlier times. The art of Andy Warhol—the Napoleon of my own philosophy of art history—consisted in part of objects that would not have been possible as art a century earlier than

their fabrication. *Brillo Box*, of 1964, is to a degree characterized by the fact that it would look like a box of Brillo *under whatever sky*. But only under the Manhattan sky in the 1960s could it have been seen as a work of art. It (but not it alone) made clear that there is no special way that works of art have to look: they can look any way at all. And that was like bringing into the art world the values of the French Revolution—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Artists were free to make what objects they chose, all such objects were ontologically equal, and works of art constituted a kind of brotherhood, standing to one another in systems of relationships from which mere objects were excluded. Warhol demonstrated that art and reality could resemble one another to whatever degree one desired. But only when this happened could a philosophy of art like mine be thought.

Aside from Hegel's, very few philosophies internalize their own histories, and in this respect most philosophers are disciples of Santayana. They address their subjects, accordingly, in ways from which any possibility of historical difference has been subtracted. Thus knowledge, according to epistemological practice, is had when someone says, "Red here now," when confronted with a patch of red. The tacit agenda is that if certainty is to be found anywhere, it is to be found in episodes like these, episodes that are subhistorical and foundational, like the basic propositions of the logical positivists or the "formulations of what is given in experience," in the philosophy of C. I. Lewis. Philosophers have of course wrangled over whether, even in these most reduced of cognitive encounters, certainty can be ascribed. But for purposes of debate, human beings are represented in a mode of primitivism cleverly captured in a piece of doggerel composed by Quine: "The unrefined / And sluggish mind / Of *Homo javenensis* / Could only treat / of things concrete / And present to the senses." The Java Man is a kind of epistemological cartoon, but it is not greatly distant from the conventional philosophical portraits of *Homo sapiens*' sapience. The epistemologist H. H. Price likened "Here now red" to a thermometer reading and considered a theory suggesting that human beings register differences in their environment the same way thermometers do.² We can imagine ourselves in this way as cognitive

thermometers, emitting signals, but that would be so distant a picture of what it means to be human that we know it will have to be abandoned when we seek to close the gap between *Homo javanensis* and, let us say, the philosopher Hegel, who sees knowledge, and especially philosophical knowledge, as having a history. If knowledge were restricted to representations, epitomized by “Red here now,” it is difficult to see how we could even understand the concept of history. It would be a staccato of sensory reports.

The *Analytical Philosophy of History*, my first book, addressed itself to narratives as modes of representation. A narrative, I thought, will describe events in terms that later events make available but that generally cannot have been known about when the earlier events took place. Thus someone might point to a tree stump in a Tuscan inn yard and tell this story: Once a holy man climbed the tree that grew there to escape pursuing wolves. The innkeeper’s daughter drove the wolves away, and the holy man prophesied that she and the tree would be blessed. The tree was cut down and fashioned into barrel heads for the innkeeper, and on one of these the greater painter Raphael, enchanted by the daughter’s beauty, depicted her with her children. This work, the *Madonna della seggiola*, is the jewel of the Pitti collection, and art lovers the world round come to admire it. The narrative refers to an early state of the tree with reference to a later one, and it is perhaps an epistemological privilege of holy men, one denied the rest of us, that they can see the present in prophetic terms—terms that will become available to historians only later, after the events have occurred with reference to which the historical meaning of the earlier ones can be understood. Who could have known when the abduction of a princess by Persian merchants took place that this was the beginning of the tremendous conflict between Greece and Persia? But in telling the story of their antagonism, Herodotus begins his narrative of the Persian Wars there.

It does not especially matter that this story of the Persian Wars is, in Herodotus’s view, false and self-serving for one of the antagonists. It does not matter either that the story of Raphael’s masterpiece is but

myth. If it is believed, then historical significance is conferred on a stump no more different from other stumps than they are from one another. The tree was singled out by an interest in Raphael's work, in just the way Stratford-on-Avon is singled out as the birthplace of Shakespeare. The birth of William Shakespeare in 1564 was bound to have deep and universal meaning for Shakespeare's parents, but it would be a historical joke to imagine a neighbor excitedly exclaiming that "the author of *Hamlet* has just been born." What could reference to an unwritten masterpiece have had for anyone when its future author had barely entered the world? If it could have meaning, the masterpiece must in some sense already have been written, but be readable only to prophetic eyes, since the implied narrative demands an unavailable knowledge of the future. But there are no cognitive difficulties, after 1600, in re-describing the earlier event as the birth, in 1564, of the author of *Hamlet*. It is a mark of narrative descriptions that in order to have known them true when the earliest event referred to took place, one would have needed to possess prophetic vision. There are problems about knowing the past, of course, but it does not require a cognitive miracle, the way knowing the future would. What makes narrative sentences true is not something present to the senses of someone contemporary with the earliest events narrated. The best they could come up with would be "Stump here now" or "The Shakespeares have a baby boy."

I thought the cognitive asymmetry of narratives, together with the way in which they connected time-separated events, to be so distinctive a feature of historical representation that what I termed "narrative sentences" might serve to distinguish history from any other descriptive endeavor. Of course, historians aim at *true* narratives, and claim on that basis to be contributing to knowledge. But at the time I wrote that book there was, among tough-minded philosophers, some consensus that the discipline of history should be replaced by some set of social sciences, and historical events understood in the light of general laws. That, though, would effectively eliminate the narratives through which, it seemed to me, history acquires its intellectual autonomy. A great deal of

our interest in things has to do with the narratives they elicit: the laws of dendrology and (if there are any) of lumbering will not entail the narrative meaning of a tree stump, which has no special physical aura to distinguish it from others of its kind. This will be true of historical descriptions generally, which are beyond the reach of science, whose descriptions are disinterested and universal. But narrative sentences depend precisely on human interests: later generations so esteemed Raphael's painting that they wanted a story magic enough to explain *its* magic. That interest could have made a shrine of a stump in an inn yard, the way the story of Walter Benjamin's suicide near the Spanish border has conferred that status on what locals say is Benjamin's grave when pilgrims ask to be shown where the great man lies. It could be any grave or no grave at all, but simply a pile of dirt with a counterfeit placard. We are interested in Shakespeare's birth because we are interested in *Hamlet*. Stratford-on-Avon might erect a plaque proclaiming itself "the birthplace of the author of *Hamlet*." That phrase could have been written in 1564, but it could not have meant what it came to mean when *Hamlet* was written, thirty years or so later, and an interest was excited in its author.

Human beings have been pretty much the same, physiologically speaking, under whatever skies have covered successive generations from the first *Homo sapiens* down to us. From the perspective of the human genome, humankind has no history, since historical differences do not penetrate the genetic material, which changes only through mutation. Because the species has not evolved for a hundred thousand years, historical differences between representations cannot be referred to our physical endowment, which has been more or less always the same. This endowment must therefore be consistent with whatever differences there are between one historical moment and another, and at the same time explain how we are able to live in history—which means to represent present, past, and future in relationship to one another and to our interests. Today the tough-minded think of us as so much nervous tissue, and the language in which we must ultimately describe our-

selves is that of highly sophisticated neurophysiological theory. Almost certainly, when I believe that Shakespeare was born in 1564, I am in some neurochemical state, different from that I am in when I (falsely) believe Shakespeare born in 1645. Perhaps that means that having these beliefs is identical with being in these states—that the belief and the neuro-state are one and the same. Having then a common reference, we can drop the language of thought and speak henceforward in the language of synapses and neurotransmitters, as Richard Rorty once contended. But that is true if and only if meaning is restricted to reference—to what Frege called *Bedeutung*—and not to ways in which co-referential terms can mean different things depending on the mode in which what is referred to is presented. The philosophical torment of the mind/body problem arises from the difference between the mode of presentation of neural states and that of states of mind, like beliefs and attitudes. The first essay here, “Representational Properties and Mind/Body Identity,” attempts to explain this discrepancy.

Meanwhile, although electric discharges lead only to electric discharges, beliefs give information of an entirely different order, just as—the example is justly famous—“Morning Star” and “Evening Star” convey information which reference to the planet each of them designates will not yield. It was a *discovery* that the Morning Star and Evening Star are one; it happened at a certain moment in history, when beliefs about the heavens were being represented in new ways. Our systems of representations *change* from sky to sky. If we write narratives of the history of science, it will be a history of scientific representations; how one system changes into another has to do with the meanings of representations and not merely (or at all) with the neurophysiological states of scientists at different states, granting that representing refers to neurophysiological states. My own sense is that we can explain changes from one state to another only by explaining the change from one system of representations to the other. But the laws of neurophysiological change alone cannot yield explanations of such changes, because the terms in which we

describe representations have no place in neurophysiology. Eliminativists, who insist that we are only nervous tissue, can explain changes—but not historical changes. The problem is easily solved if we deny, as they do, that there are mental states, there then being nothing to explain, since the whole language of psychology belongs to a discredited theory that neurophysiology will replace. The difficulty, then, is for Eliminativists to account for their own philosophy, which is after all a set of beliefs about beliefs—a representation of mental representations—intended to refute other representations, held by other philosophers. Perhaps in the promised land of future neurophysiology, philosophy will fade away with the mental language it attempts to analyze. But what about the science that will be required to ferry us to this understanding? And what about understanding itself, as for example when someone understands at last that we are but nervous tissue?

Several of the essays in this volume examine the differences between individuals at different stages of a common history making contributions to that history. In “History and Representation,” for example, I contrast how the first generation of microscopists represented paramecia, which had just been discovered, and how scientists three centuries later were able to represent these animalcules using instruments and theories of which the first observers of infusoria had to have been ignorant, since the knowledge came only in a future unimaginable to them. In “Beautiful Science and the Future of Criticism,” I contrast the work of John Dalton, who discovered color blindness, with the work of Jeremy Nathans and his associates, who discovered the genetic basis for that abnormality. The history of science is not simply a succession of discoveries: it is the successive transformations of an entire body of representations, each of which defines a moment in scientific practice. The bodies of representation which express scientific understanding at either end of two centuries of continuing investigation can certainly not be translated into one another, except for such common elements as an underwhatever-sky philosophy of science might recognize. Seventeenth-century theories of animalcules would be regarded in some ways as crazy

by most twentieth-century scientists. Still, it was those extravagant beliefs, so discrepant with our own, which motivated the observations made through awkward single-lens instruments of magnification and led to modern scientific triumphs (and which, along a different coordinate of culture, gave rise to the flea circus). It *is* the glowing vision of science to arrive at truth, which would be the same under whatever sky. But how is one then to treat scientifically, let alone philosophically, the fact that systems of representation differ to the point of incongruence under *different* skies? If there is anything universal about human beings, it is that given a largely identical biology, they (we) will represent the world differently from stage to stage of the histories in which they (we) participate.

What concerns me in these essays is what must be true of human beings for us to live in history, assigning meanings to past events, telling conflicting stories that justify actions in our own eyes, embarking on courses of action the suitability of which emerges only when the future puts the past in a certain light. I am asking what human beings must be like for representations like these to be housed in our heads, determining us to act and desist in certain ways. That is why histories of representations, as in histories of science or of art, are so crucial to my analyses. There is, I think, an analogy between representations and physiology, on the one hand, and, on the other, between the sentences I type and the swarm of electronic transformations within the computer on which I type them. Someone could analyze computers entirely in terms of electronic transformations, but these sentences have contents in which such firestorms of electric pulses do not figure. Only beings with brains and bodies like our own are capable of living in history; it does not follow, however, that living in history can be understood through our brains and bodies alone. "The Asiatic, according to the Persians, took the seizure of women lightly enough, but not so the Greeks," Herodotus writes. "The Greeks, merely on account of a girl from Sparta, raised a big army, invaded Asia, and destroyed the empire of Asia. From that root sprang their belief in the perpetual enmity of the

Grecian world toward them.” Dissonances in moral attitudes generate a great history and enter into the explanation of the rise and fall of powers and the deaths of countless men. Herodotus considers alternative accounts, inconsistent with the ways Asiatics view the history of their calamities. Inconsistency is a logical relationship, holding between representations. Do neurophysiological states stand in logical relationships to one another? Only if they have the structure of representations already. The theories of the Eliminativists, though, were intended to disqualify representation as belonging to an archaic kind of science and as being no more part of human reality than phlogiston, after Lavoisier, was part of chemical reality. But then how is conflict to be explained, say of the sort which engages Eliminativists on one side and the rest of us on the other?

Anyway, as I argue here in various ways, neuroscience is a science, and hence a system of representations in its own right, which defines a moment in a history of representations, owners of which will differ precisely through differences in their representations from one another, and these will be different from stage to stage in that history. Under this view, individuals are systems of representation—are representational *texts*. And texts are held together by connections of an entirely different order from the electrochemical forces that bind neurophysiological processes together. One sentence follows another sentence in the text I am writing—or fails to follow, subverting my intentions. But whatever the relationship—illustrating a point, drawing a consequence, evolving a story—these sentences have no place in the design of my computer. The brain is the brain, under whatever sky, and the neural system the neural system. What is important about brains, however, is the way they house different systems of representation at different times. No philosophy should cut itself off from what makes it possible. It is, after all, a narrative sentence (even if a self-defeating one) that our present theories of mind will be invalidated by the neurosciences of the future!

For some considerable while I have viewed representation as the central concept in philosophy, with differences among philosophers arising

in the ways they account for how representations connect to the world, connect to the individuals who possess them, and connect with one another to form systems of beliefs, feelings, and attitudes. The main connections to the world are causation and truth, each of which figures in philosophical accounts of knowledge and of action: a representation is knowledge when caused by what makes it true (which is what renders knowledge of the future suspect, since what would make its representation true cannot explain the representation unless causation should run backward; something is an action when caused by a representation it makes true. There is doubtless more to knowledge and to action than this exiguous catalog of components and connections, but I mean to stress that only to a representational being—a *res representans*—can knowledge or action be ascribed, as well as error and misperformance, which are after all failures of fit between representations and the world. In the simple, attenuated episodes on which philosophers base their epistemological hopes, representation is an *effect*. In the no less simple episodes of action—like raising an arm or moving a stick—modifications of the world are *effects* of representation. Representation is the common element in the philosophy of knowledge and the philosophy of action, as well as in the analytical philosophy of history. In this collection of linked essays, however, I advance a philosophy of human beings as systems of representations, some of which represent portions of that system, and so constitute the kind of self-consciousness Hegel supposed he had attained to when he wrote the *Phenomenology*, relating earlier and later representations under narrative descriptions.

Representing, of course, is how we would characterize certain public activities—describing, for example, or picturing. Vermeer's *A View of Delft* is a pictorial representation of the city he lived in. Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* is a description of a life as congruent with the one he lived as *A View of Delft* is to Vermeer's city. These kinds of representations are addressed in the essays on art which compose a companion volume, *Philosophizing Art*, but here I am to be concerned primarily with the philosophical anatomy of beings composed of representations—of

beliefs and thoughts, feelings and intentions, desires and regrets. Descartes, in one phase of his thought, houses representations—what he terms *idées*—in *res cogitans*, or thinking substances, which is preoccupied with how to avoid error and find truth. The *res cogitans* is logically separable from the body that accompanies it through life, thus making room for its immortality, which Descartes considered an achievement of his metaphysics to have established. But in another phase of his philosophy—which I address in “The Body/Body Problem”—he saw the mind as so intimately bound up with the body that together they formed a single, if complex, whole. The *res cogitans* is *embodied*, which means that the representations, which are its essence, are embodied the same way meanings are embodied in physical marks or sounds, or *The View of Delft* is embodied in the paint Vermeer manipulated to achieve it. As such, the *res representans* brings something to the world it would otherwise lack—a point of view, with reference to which objects are transformed into instruments and obstacles, and hence systems of meanings. But points of view—which I discuss in “The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History”—connect us with living in history, since those with different points of view will view the past under different narrative sentences, the way Greeks and Persians did centuries ago. What would it even mean to speak of computers, under the kinds of description in which electronic engineers are fluent, as having different points of view?

In fairness, it must be said that Santayana served as a model for me in having composed *The Life of Reason*, a philosophical work in five volumes, each treating reason under a different aspect: in science, art, religion, politics, and common sense. Somewhat against the literary grain of contemporary philosophy, which for a long time gave privilege to the single article over books, and certainly gave single books priority over the multivolume systems that would have been prized in earlier times, I conceived the hubristic idea of writing a philosophy of representation that would require five volumes, different of course in content from

Santayana's volumes. Beginning with *Analytical Philosophy of History*, I went on to write *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* and *Analytical Philosophy of Action*. When I came to write my philosophy of art, it did not *feel* like an analytical philosophy of art, and this is reflected in the title I chose: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. A book on *res representans* was to have concluded the series and completed the system. These essays were written with that goal in mind, but, for better or worse, they will have to stand proxy for that book.

Each of the books just cited was built around some central idea, originally presented in an independently published article in one or another philosophical publication. None of these is republished here, so this is not a collection of my best-known papers. *Analytical Philosophy of History* pivots on the idea of narrative sentences, *Analytical Philosophy of Knowledge* on the theory of beliefs as sentential states, *Analytical Philosophy of Action* on the idea of basic actions and on the structural parallels between knowledge and action. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* transfigured its own animating essay, "The Art World," in that it takes representation to be part of the definition of works of art. After that book appeared I published *Connections to the World*, which endeavored to represent the whole of philosophy in representationalist terms and, subversively, to insinuate my own system as a contribution to the question of what philosophical representations are. (Were that book to have been conceived of as part of the larger work, it might have been titled *Analytical Philosophy of Philosophy*.) For complex reasons, I was inhibited from writing the book about human beings as representational systems. What I discovered, however, in selecting from among my essays for the present collection was that those on which the book on us as *res representans* was to be based said pretty much what I would have wanted to say in that book, at least as I conceived it when they were written. Of course, one does not know in advance what differences will emerge when books in fact get written, and a fortiori one does not know how earlier volumes in a multivolume work will look when the later ones are written. Books, too, have to be understood within the narrative of their being written. The