

## Wittgenstein's Private Objects: *Investigations 277 and 304*

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### ABSTRACT

It is commonly thought that in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein denies that there are private objects of awareness in the sense of objects of which only the person experiencing them can possibly be aware. The reason for this belief is Wittgenstein's denial that any such objects can furnish a basis for knowledge or language or form a screen between us and the external world. I show that he doesn't deny there are such objects of awareness, but only that they can come between us and the world. The awareness of the objects is noncognitive – i.e., nothing can be said about them. Comparing what Wittgenstein says in paragraphs 277 and 304 I show that such objects function noncognitively as do special kinds of objects of awareness in Santayana's philosophy. I explain what kind of awareness this is and how such objects differ from sense-data and are not normally objects of awareness. Only in special situations such as that described in 277 do we become conscious of them. Finally I show that in the famous passage on page 207 Wittgenstein is denying the existence of sense-data, not of these private objects. Thus I reconcile 277 and 304 with page 207.

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I believe it is commonly thought that in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein denies there are private objects of awareness. By 'private' here is meant objects, of which only the person experiencing them can possibly be aware. The reason for this belief is Wittgenstein's denial that any such objects can either furnish a basis for language or for knowledge. There are two passages which acknowledge such private objects, 277 and 304. However, since Wittgenstein is concerned to deny the view which makes such private objects foundational for knowledge and language, he nowhere sets forth a reasonably comprehensive account of how they *do relate* to knowledge and to language. In what follows I shall argue that such objects function noncognitively in the same way as Santayana's "simple essences". Let us begin with paragraph 277 where Wittgenstein is explaining the origin of the view that our sensory terms refer immediately to private objects of awareness in our minds and only indirectly to properties of physical objects outside our minds:

But how is (it) even possible for us to be tempted to think that we use a word to *mean* at one time the colour known to everyone —and at another the 'visual impression' which I am getting *now*? How can there be so much as a temptation here?— I don't turn the same kind of attention on the colour in the two cases. When I mean the colour impression that (as I should like to say) belongs to me alone I immerse myself in the colour— rather like when I 'cannot get my fill of a colour'. Hence it is easier to produce this experience when one is looking at a bright colour, or at an impressive colour-scheme.

Wittgenstein doesn't develop this suggestion, but the type of awareness he describes is precisely the aesthetic type of awareness which Santayana describes as awareness of "essences". More importantly his explanation of the confusion which produces the view that perception involves a first stage consisting of the immediate perception of private objects of awareness parallels precisely the view which was mistakenly attributed to Santayana because of his espousal of simple essences as such objects. Just as Wittgenstein has been charged with denying such private objects because he denies they *play a cognitive* role in language, so Santayana has been charged with assigning such objects a cognitive role merely because he espouses them, in spite of the fact that he explicitly asserts that the awareness of them is *noncognitive*. The confusion lies in the relation of Santayana's doctrine of "animal faith" to knowledge. Those who charge him with holding there is an immediate perception of private objects of awareness construe him as holding there is knowledge prior to animal faith —namely knowledge of the private objects of awareness— whereas he insists animal faith is prior to (and essential for) the very possibility of knowledge. According to the mistaken interpretation of Santayana he replaces the foundationalism of Cartesian scepticism with a new foundationalism, with the difference that this foundational knowledge cannot provide us with any reason to believe in anything external to the present moment. We escape

from this foundational solipsism of the moment only by a leap of "animal faith" in which we acquiesce in our instinctive propensity to believe in an external world. For instance Douglas Greenlee claims Santayana's doctrine that infallibility is limited to intuition of sensory "essences" ("data") has the result "that the mind is screened from the world by appearances", for such essences "play the role in knowledge of the external world only of signs posited as representations of objects and events". It follows there is "no cognitive exit from the given" since "what we know in sense perception are only the immediately given essences"<sup>(1)</sup>. Others have replied that Santayana's position doesn't really amount to scepticism in this foundational sense, because the infallible intuition of essences is not a form of knowledge by acquaintance<sup>(2)</sup>, but is a noncognitive type of awareness which is neither true nor false<sup>(3)</sup>. They reject Greenlee's use of the term 'know' in "what we *know* in sense perception are only the immediately given essences". There can be no knowledge prior to animal faith, just as for Wittgenstein there can be no knowledge prior to (or outside of) the current language game.

To see why the intuition of simple essences is noncognitive, let us consider the nature of such intuition. It is specified in two ways. It occurs naturally, so to speak, in certain intense aesthetic experiences, such as that described by Wittgenstein. But it can be produced artificially, or at least we can see what it would amount to, by what

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(1) GREENLEE, Douglas: "The Incoherence of Santayana's Scepticism", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, 1978, p. 54. See also John Lachs' two articles, "The Proofs of Realism" (*The Monist*, vol. 51, 1967) and "Santayana's Philosophy of Mind", (*The Monist*, vol. 48, 1946), and Sidney Grossman's "The Scepticism of George Santayana", (*Tulane Studies in Philosophy*, vol. XVIII, 1969).

(2) Though Santayana called it that a scant five years earlier: "Any intuition gives *knowledge by acquaintance* with an essence, not subject to error, since the intuition...asserts no existence of that object". ("Literal and Symbolic Knowledge" in *Obiter Scripta*, George Santayana, ed. Justus Buchler Benjamin Schwartz, Charles Scribner's, N.Y., 1936, p. 128; my italics). At this time he distinguished between intuition of essences which is "literal" knowledge (i.e., is immediate) and "symbolic" knowledge of existences which is not direct. Though I won't argue the point here, I believe that at this time Santayana *did* hold the view Greenlee imputes to him, but changes his view in *Scepticism and Animal Faith*. The fact that such intuitions of essences are momentary, while it undermines traditional foundationalism, wouldn't undermine Santayana's earlier view that such momentary essences provide the foundation for specific perceptual claims made at a certain time. The person needn't rely on his memory of essences intuited in the past to be able to identify the essence as the same as one intuited earlier so that he can apply a concept to it and so recognize it as an instance of a certain category (i.e., recognize it as blue, or round, etc.). For knowledge by acquaintance doesn't require judgement about the object or classification of the object known. (If it did it would be knowledge by description, not by acquaintance). See Herman Saatkamp's article "Some Remarks on Santayana's Scepticism", (in *Two Centuries of American Philosophy*, ed. Peter Caws, Rowman Littlefield, Totowa, N. J., 1980), pp. 138-139, for what seems to amount to the same view on this matter. Of course, if I'm correct in my argument below to the effect essences cannot be either appearances or experiences, then there cannot be any such thing as knowledge by acquaintance.

(3) See Sprigge, Timothy L. S., "Santayana and Verificationism", *Inquiry*, vol. 12, 1969; Saatkamp, op. cit., pp. 138-139; see also Beth J. Singer's article, "Signs of Existence", (*Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, 1978).



Santayana calls the "sceptical method". Through a process of critical reflection upon the nature of our experience and arguing about what would be left of such experience if we deliberately suspend or set aside *all* of our beliefs we isolate a residual awareness which doesn't include awareness of the self or awareness of the world (or even awareness of itself as an intuiting): "If I confine myself to the given essence without admitting discourse about it, I exclude all analysis of that essence, or, even examination of it. I must simply stare at it, in a blank and timeless aesthetic trance"<sup>(4)</sup>. Such an essence or datum wouldn't seem to represent any thing or property of a thing in the external world, because we've suspended belief in such a world, nor would it seem to belong to our mind because, as Hume noted, the self isn't given in experience. Furthermore, since only the object of the intuition is given and the act of intuiting doesn't have itself as its object, the act of intuiting isn't given either. The act of intuiting would have to be intuited by another, different act of intuition, which would have to assume the correctness or validity of what Santayana calls "primary memory" by which he means the memory from moment to moment of the immediately preceding moment. But the correctness of such memory isn't itself given; its assumption is part of animal faith. The only item given is the essence or datum itself; it is given in complete isolation, unrelated to anything else. Thus it follows from the nature of intuition that essences don't exist in Santayana's sense of the term, because 'existence' is restricted to items which have external relations to other items. The fact that essences don't exist follows from the fact that in intuition *all beliefs* are suspended with the result that the external world, the intuiting self, and the act of intuition itself disappear from awareness, leaving only the object of intuition, the essence, which is completely isolated from (i.e., has no external relation to) anything else, even other essences. Since Santayana restricts the term 'know' to claims about existences, it follows that essences cannot be known. Intuition of essences isn't knowledge. However, as John Michelson notes, this conclusion rests upon stipulations about the terms 'existence' and 'know' which, as they stand, seem arbitrary<sup>(5)</sup>. Until a reason is given for these stipulative definitions, Santayana's refusal to call intuition of essences knowledge must seem arbitrary. Moreover whether intuition of essences is *called* knowledge or not might seem to be an unimportant verbal point since it is crucial to Santayana's position that essences can be *grasped by the mind* for they are *introduced* as what is left of experience when one suspends all beliefs: "that which appears, when all gratuitous implications of a world beyond or a self here are

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(4) SAF., p. 114. *Only one type of essence* is introduced in this way, but it is the only one that is a private object in the sense in which we're using the term. Other essences presuppose "discourse" by which Santayana means the use of signs, including (but not limited to) language, and are approached through the different method of "dialectic". See *Realms of Being*, chapter 1. Descriptions of such essences are not infallible. See Saatakamp, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

(5) Michelson, John, "Santayana's Non-Existent Symbols", *Transaction of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. 9, 1973. Michelson locates a rationale for these stipulations, but not in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* itself, but only in the later book *Realms of Being* in a different set of doctrines and different context. I locate the rationale in the original context in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* itself.

discarded, will be an *essence*"<sup>(6)</sup>. It would be absurd to introduce essences as what is left after the suspension of belief, but admit that one doesn't, as a result, grasp *what it is* that is left: "I have absolute assurance of nothing save of the character of some essence; the rest is an interpretation added by my animal impulse"<sup>(7)</sup>. No doubt those who think Wittgenstein denies there are private objects do so because they cannot see how such objects could fail to be objects of immediate knowledge. Statements by Santayana such as the last one quoted above suggest that in perception the intuition of essences provide a foundation to which the interpretation of animal faith is added by psychological *intent*. Seen this way, as Michelson concludes, Santayana is maintaining (and supposedly Wittgenstein *would* also be maintaining) "that there are two ontologically distinct *objects* of perception, a direct and an indirect one"<sup>(8)</sup> with the essence as the direct object and the transcendent physical object as the indirect object. This would give Greenlee all he needs to convict Santayana. Michelson says "One must be extremely cautious in one's talk about a second, 'direct' object intervening between the perceiver and the transcendent 'indirect' object; for one is all too easily tempted...to conclude that such an intervening object deprives one of access to the transcendent object"<sup>(9)</sup>. I don't see how all the care in the world could save us from arriving at just such a conclusion.

Such a conclusion doesn't follow only because, while essences are involved in perception, they are never direct objects of perception, for if they were then they could be reached by the Cartesian method of doubt (the regress argument) in which one moves back step by step from an ordinary perceptual claim to an indubitable foundation. The intuition of essence *would* be a (momentary) foundation for the perceptual claim. But essences cannot be reached in this way. Consider for comparison A. J. Ayer's use of the regress argument to introduce sense-data. Taking the case in which he believes he is seeing a cigarette case, he says:

... if I wish to give a strict account of my present visual experience... I must not say that I see the cigarette case...but only that it seems to me that I am seeing it. ...The next step is to convert the sentence 'it now seems to me that I see a cigarette case' into 'I am now seeing a *seeming*-cigarette case'. And this seeming-cigarette case, which lives only in my present experience, is an example of a sense-datum.

The seeming-cigarette case is *not* an essence precisely because it is a *seeming*-cigarette case. It *seems* to be a cigarette case; it is an *appearance* of a cigarette case. But it wouldn't

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(6) Santayana, George, *Realms of Being*, (in *The Works of George Santayana*, vol. XIV, Charles Scribner's, N. Y., 1936), p. 4.

(7) SAF., p. 110.

(8) Michelson, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

(9) Michelson, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

seem to be a cigarette case if Ayer didn't believe there were cigarette cases. For to believe the supposed object looks like a cigarette case one must believe one knows how cigarette cases look, and to *believe* this one must believe one has in the past experienced cigarette cases. That is, one must not only believe there are cigarette cases, but that one has seen them, and so knows how to tell a cigarette case from something else. Hence while Ayer has suspended his belief that there is a cigarette case which he is seeing in this particular case, he has *not* suspended his belief that there is a world which contains such things as cigarette cases. It might be objected that someone who doesn't believe there are unicorns might nevertheless believe that he seems to see a unicorn. However to believe that he seems to see a unicorn he must believe that he knows how unicorns look, and for this to be the case he must believe that he has seen pictures of unicorns and or he has been given a correct description of what unicorns are like from which he can form a mental image of a unicorn. Obviously, to believe either of these things he must not only rely upon his memory of his past but also believe there is an external world containing pictures of unicorns and or people who know what unicorns look like. What he cannot do is believe he has no idea of what unicorns look like, but is simply deciding arbitrarily to baptize his present mental image with the name 'unicorn'.

The seeming-cigarette case is also an *experience* in Ayer's mind, so Ayer has not suspended the belief he has or is a mind. The datum is *not given as either an appearance of a cigarette case nor as an experience*. Essences are not appearances because they contain no implicit reference to an external world, and they are not experiences because they contain no implicit reference to a mind. Both of these implicit references are contributed by animal faith. Ayer is still moving within the sphere of animal faith. For Santayana sense-data are *existences* (not essences) because they are both appearances of something else and experiences in a mind. By virtue of these facts they must be externally related to other items, and so must exist. An appearance is related to other appearances in virtue of the fact it purports to be an appearance of a transcendent physical object. Because they purport to be appearances of the same physical object appearances can either agree or conflict. A physical object presents different appearances on different occasions, but not every appearance which happens to present itself can be taken as an appearance of the physical object because appearances can conflict, as illusions and hallucinations show. Hence an appearance is related to other appearances by virtue of the fact it purports to be an appearance of the same physical object as that of which they purport to be an appearance. In addition an appearance is also an experience, since it is an appearance to some mind. By virtue of the fact it belongs to some mind, an experience is related to other experiences —namely the other experiences of that mind.

When Santayana denies that essences exist, he is denying that they are either appearances<sup>(10)</sup> or experiences. Obviously if they are neither, they cannot play any

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(10) Santayana uses the term 'appearance' in different senses. By 'appearance' I mean what Santayana calls "the proper and pregnant sense of this word". In this sense "The datum ceases to be an appearance"



cognitive role in perception (or in language). In limiting 'know' to claims about existences Santayana is making the point that essences aren't symbols (appearances) because they don't purport to refer to anything or to designate anything. Since they're not symbols they cannot play any role in knowledge. That is why he claims knowledge presupposes animal faith. Only in so far as we assume both an external world and an observing mind, can there be symbols (appearances), and without symbols there cannot be thought and without thought there cannot be knowledge. A being which confined itself to the type of aesthetic experience described by Wittgenstein and only intuited essences without in animal faith taking them to be experiences of an external world couldn't think and couldn't have the *idea of* a world: "None of the separate data of sense, which are only essences...would become terms in knowledge, if a prior...faith did not apprehend them"<sup>(11)</sup>. We can compare this view with Wittgenstein's claim "I can be as *certain* of someone else's sensations as of any fact... 'But if you are *certain*, isn't it that you are shutting your eyes in face of doubt?' They are shut". (p. 224) There could be no language or knowledge without this prior assumption or faith. (However Wittgenstein wouldn't call it "faith", as Santayana does, because it isn't anything we're aware of deciding, and so, in his sense, we don't make any assumption. We just act without reasons. Of course in calling it *animal* faith Santayana is making the same point—that it is not a deliberate decision or any assumption we consciously make).

The very confusion which led Greenlee to charge Santayana with being in effect a sceptic is the confusion which Wittgenstein claims is the origin of the notion of sense-data—the idea that 'red' refers to a private object of awareness and also to an objective property of transcendent physical objects. This confusion consists in identifying private objects of awareness (essences) with something occurring at a certain stage in the process of perception (and occurring as an object of perception), instead of realizing that such objects are the objects of a different type of awareness entirely. (This is not to say that such essences do not occur when we perceive something but only that they are never *objects* of perception; they become *objects* only in the type of experiences described by Wittgenstein or through Santayana's "sceptical method"). Such private objects

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if "it ceases to imply any substance that appesars or any mind to which it appesars". —i.e., to be an appearance the datum must purport to refer to a transcendent physical object and to be an experience of a mind. If it doesn't do this then it can be "an appearance only in the sense that its nature is wholly manifest..." (SAF., p. 39) For a discussion of these different senses see Michaelson's "Santayana's Non-Existent Symbols", p. 225. Clearly Greenlee uses 'appearance' in the pregnat sense.

(11) Symbols belong to "discourse", which, as Santayana uses the term, means any set of signs. But discourse is never certain, because we cannot be certain we are referring to the same item on different occasions of using a symbol, since the referent will either be a transcendent object or, if it is an experience or essence, the having of the experience or intuiting of the essence will lie in the past, so we must assume the correctness of our memory. Hence the title of Michaelson's article, "Santayana's Non-Existent Symbols", is misleading, for in so far as they're symbols they exist, whereas if they're non-existent they are not symbols, but merely essences.

don't constitute a stage in perception because perception always occurs within the realm of animal faith (or within our everyday language game).

This fact explains the puzzling nature of the other passage in which Wittgenstein acknowledges such objects. In reply to an imagined interlocutor's charge that according to him the sensory quale pain itself "is a nothing", Wittgenstein remarks: "Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve as well as a something about which nothing could be said". (304) One feels like asking "How can 'not a *something*' mean anything except 'a nothing', or how can 'not a nothing' mean anything except 'a something'? Obviously by 'something' Wittgenstein does not mean the opposite of 'nothing'. Notice how such a description would fit Santayana's essences, since they don't "exist" in that they have no relations to anything else, and yet they *are* since they occur in perception (though not as objects and not as known). Of course here Wittgenstein isn't considering the case of perception, but rather the sensory element (essence) involved in pain (including pain behavior). However his point is that just as a private object is involved in perception, but isn't an isolatable stage or object in the process, so such objects are involved in having a pain but *not as objects*, since they cannot be isolated from the process as a whole including the expression of pain in behavior. What he means by an object which is "not a something, but not a nothing either" is "a something about which nothing could be said" —i.e., something which can only be an object of a noncognitive awareness, such as Santayana's essences. For nothing can be said about Santayana's simple essences, for while they can become appearances of something else (through animal faith), *qua* essences they're not appearances of anything; nor can they be the object of reference of another sign since they have no relation to anything else in virtue of which a sign could refer to them<sup>(12)</sup>.

In concluding I must defuse an obvious objection which has probably already occurred to the reader—namely that on page 207 of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein explicitly uses the term "private object" in order to get rid of them. This will also enable me to emphasize a peculiarity of what I'm calling private objects (Santayana's essences)—namely that they're purely sensuous (which is why Wittgenstein describes them as the sort of thing that is the object of one's awareness when one is totally absorbed in an aesthetic experience). Obviously I must show that the private object Wittgenstein gets rid of is quite different from the private object I'm arguing he assumes. In discussing the phenomenon of figures which can be seen now as being of one thing, now as being of another thing—the phenomenon of "seeing as"—Wittgens-

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(12) Of course one could construct a phrase which referred to them, such as "The simple essence which is involved in the perception I'm having now of the computer on which I'm writing this", but this wouldn't isolate it as an object of awareness or give me or anyone else knowledge of it. When I say nothing can be said about them obviously what is meant is that they cannot be referred to apart from the perceptual process as a whole and or the whole process of expressing pain, and so cannot be the basis or foundation of perception or of the process of expressing pain.



tein says: "Always get rid of the idea of the private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes, but that you do not notice the change because your memory constantly deceives you". Here he is not talking about a private object in the same sense as in paragraphs 277 and 304. He is talking about a figure—a combination of black and white shapes— which can be seen either as a white cross against a black background or as a black cross against a white background. Hence by 'private object' he means either a white cross against a black background or a black cross against a white background when this object is understood as a mental image which is the immediate object of perception. He does *not* mean the figure viewed noncognitively—i.e., non-representationally—as a mere combination of lines and black and white colors. The image *qua* image of either a white or black cross is an intentional object because which image it is depends on what the object which is being represented is taken to be—i.e., what the pattern of black and white shapes is taken to *represent*. It is not purely sensuous, but involves an implicit interpretation. hence it cannot be what Santayana means by an essence, for, since what the private object *is* depends upon what the physical object represented is taken to be, what the supposed private object is depends upon beliefs such as that the object looks the way in which white or black crosses look. But in the intuition of essences all such beliefs have been suspended.

What this passage shows is that Wittgenstein's private objects aren't mental images in the sense of sense-data. As paragraph 277 asserts, it is precisely the confusion of purely sensuous, non-representational aesthetic private objects of awareness with sense-data (mental images in the sense of appearances) which leads to the idea that a private language is possible.