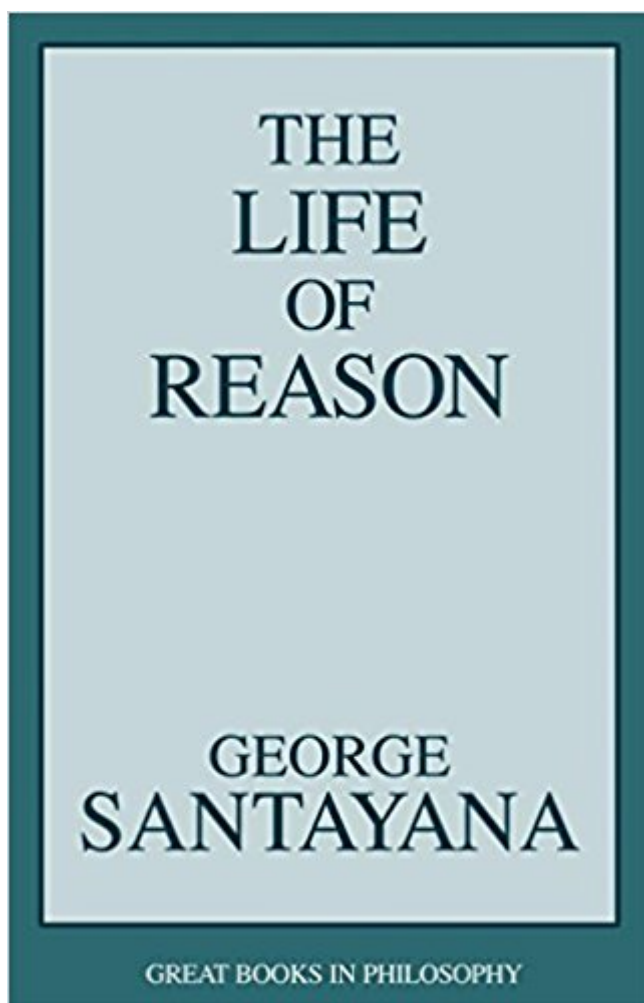


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The Life Of Reason (Great Books In Philosophy)



Synopsis

Comparing the lived world with the ideal world, noted American philosophical naturalist, poet, and literary critic George Santayana (1863-1952) seeks in this influential compilation of his earlier works to outline the ancient ideal of a well-ordered life, one in which reason is the organizing force that recognizes the need to allocate science, religion, art, social concerns, and practical wisdom their proper role and appropriate emphasis within the fully developed human experience.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

GEORGE SANTAYANA was born in Madrid, Spain, on December 16, 1863. When his parents were separated nine years later, in 1872, his mother took him to Boston, Massachusetts, where he attended the prestigious Boston Latin School and Harvard College. Upon graduation from Harvard in 1886, Santayana spent two years studying in Berlin, but he returned to the United States to pursue a doctorate in philosophy at Harvard, where he studied under William James. After earning his degree, Santayana joined the university faculty. In 1912, however, the philosopher received a legacy from his mother's estate which allowed him to retire from teaching. He traveled to Europe, spending time first in England and Paris and later settling in Rome. He remained there until his death on September 26, 1952. A poet and literary critic as well as a philosopher, Santayana made significant contributions to aesthetics, primarily through the publication of his earliest major work in this area, *The Sense of Beauty* (1896), which focuses on the imaginative life of humanity

rather than on the underlying structures of reality or on humankind's methods of grasping reality. This theme is continued and expanded upon in Santayana's most famous work, *The Life of Reason* (5 vols., 1905-1906). Santayana retained a naturalistic approach in all his writing, holding that everything ideal has a natural basis and that everything natural has an ideal development. Santayana's other works include *Skepticism and Animal Faith* (1923) and *the Realms of Being* (4 vols., 1927-1940), as well as his critically acclaimed novel, *The Last Puritan* (1935), and his autobiography, *Persons and Places* (3 vols., 1944-1953).

The Life of Reason is such an ominously serious-sounding title, one so ponderously heavy that the book's purpose and meaning may take the reader by surprise. When George Santayana refers to the life of reason he means one that is lived in a way and in an institutional context that promotes human happiness. As things stand, the author finds much in our world that is man-made and deemed important, even essential to living a decent and responsible life, but that is thoroughly incongruent with human happiness. He explains this and a great deal more in a book that is distinctive for the author's mastery of elegant English prose and his voluminous knowledge. *The Life of Reason* is surely the work of an author comfortable with an astonishingly broad range of commonplace and simple, as well as sophisticated and complex material that he discusses masterfully at a very high level of abstraction. His style is well suited to a cosmopolitan intellectual who approaches his work as a rigorously disciplined scholar. His wide sweep of interests and attainments is consistent with the breadth and nature of his objective, covering just about every organization and activity that bears, for good or ill, on attaining human happiness and thereby living a life of reason. The specific issues dealt with, as a result, are sometimes ones that today's readers will find familiar: the family, politics, religion, sex roles, and ethnic differences are among them. Santayana's remarkably candid and accurate account of the over-time changes in feelings and objectives that characterize the contemporary family is one of the best things I've read on this mundane topic. It is clearly a developmental typification that works best when applied in a middle class or upper middle class setting, and may be the sort of thing that all involved understand in an unspoken way. But it's illuminating and morally refreshing to see it made specific in an insightfully detailed manner, though its class-based character is one of the book's limitations. The foundation of Santayana's presentation is the observation that there is nothing elusive or difficult to fathom about human nature. Instead, human nature is nature, an integral part of the world that we share with each other and all else that is alive or remembered. Human beings, after all, are animals of a specific and, as it turns out, mutable kind. This mutability is manifest in Darwin's theory of evolution through

natural selection, which for Santayana means that we are always changing. This means, of course, that human nature, too, is changing, as are the conditions necessary for living a life of reason. Once the author has taken the position that the reasonable is the good, namely that which makes our lives richer and more fulfilling thereby fostering happiness, he has inevitably called forth countless implications, all worthy of investigation and discussion. For example, he sees no value in an all-consuming religious mysticism that characterizes some religions and their rigorous practice; it lends nothing to human happiness and is not part of the life of reason. On the other hand, he sees real value -- reason -- in some religions and their modes of being, especially those that poetically express what it is to be, hence his fondness for some forms of ancient mythology. Santayana's brilliantly interpretative accounts of the centuries-long emergence of Twentieth Century Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism are, in my limited experience, wholly original. Though his rendering of Twentieth Century Protestant asceticism and striving for wealth and other worldly attainments as ends in themselves is not new, it's interesting to read his dismissal of Protestant life as not consistent with a life of reason because it is a manifestation of pointless self-abnegation. While he understands that the rites and rituals of Catholicism are of no instrumental value, he endorses their worth as wholesome modes of emotional expression. Nevertheless, Catholicism and dogmatic Judaism are given their full share of unfavorable commentary insofar as they, also, impose limitations and standards that serve no purpose save as inhumane prohibitions and obstacles that are at odds with human nature. Santayana recognized the power and flexibility of language as a form of discourse, but he only hints at the notion that it is language that makes us human and with which we make our world. He does, however, note that human beings are the only animals that have language, though he does not discuss its genesis, except for an off-handed reference to naming. However, his account of issues such as the relationship between poetry and prose, and his repeated references to the nature of the dialectic are brilliantly insightful. Still, he avoids the "language is everything" assumption so pervasive in scholarly discourse today. Those of us who are less well informed than the author and who have thought less about life and its manifestations and activities, especially when viewed historically, will sometimes be unable to fully appreciate his argument and its meaning. As an example, Santayana's discussion of the nature of music is brilliantly rendered, offering interpretations that, to my knowledge, are completely original and, therefore, forbiddingly unfamiliar. Nevertheless, for Santayana art of all kinds contributes to the life of reason insofar as it enriches and delights those of us who see or hear it. Art, after all, is another way of giving structure and meaning of a specific and beautiful sort to the flux of unfettered existence. Sometimes this is intended, as in the case of a Gothic cathedral, and sometimes it is an

unplanned consequence of an artist's effort to capture something especially affecting, as with an abstract juxtaposition of colors in what otherwise would be a conventional landscape. "The value of art lies in making people happy." The Life of Reason is loaded with brilliant insights that often occur in an aphoristic but almost incidental way. The aphorisms are not self-consciously produced to provide powerfully effective sentences. Instead, they occur naturally, emerging from a text that is extraordinarily rich with learning and unique perspectives. One of my favorites is "dogmatism in the thinker is only the speculative side of greed and courage in the brute." Santayana is not to be read without paying close attention. His classically well-wrought mode of expression and richness of meaning, from one page to another, makes this essential to understanding him. The relentless abstractness of his presentation is a primary factor in making this book a fairly difficult read. It also makes concentration for long periods difficult to maintain, or so it seemed to me. The Life of Reason originally appeared in five volumes, but each was subsequently pared into a chapter, an effort to which Santayana devoted the last years of his life. Even in one volume, however, it is clear that Santayana was a man who devoted his life to scholarship and thought, as unfettered as anyone can be by the demands of fashion, unreasonable tradition, and blindingly personal bias. His truly was a life of the mind, as is overwhelmingly evident in The Life of Reason.

The Kindle version of this book is not very well-done. It's taken straight from the Gutenberg project and can only be read with the large Kindle turned sideways into landscape mode. There is ANOTHER Kindle edition from Dover which is a heck of a lot better! Check it out yourself: download a sample and see what you get! Now, as for "The Life of Reason" itself, you need to know that this philosophical masterpiece was originally published in five volumes, and that the one-volume version involved (of course) serious re-writing. But where can you find the original five-volume edition?! It's out of print. The Kindle edition from Dover has all five volumes, and it's a great deal. But I grew frustrated at trying to deal with this huge masterpiece on the Kindle, and finally found a bookshop offering the five Dover volumes used (for about \$50). If you come to like Santayana, you may well go this route yourself. The Kindle is a great invention, but it's not so hot for constant page-flipping, comparison, and all that. For some things, you will want the actual printed books.

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Dense writing. Glad this book was not required when I was in college.

In a century in which philosophy has been taken over by pedants eager to "analyze" every technical problem ever devised by the perverted ingenuity of the mind of man--technical problems, moreover, which, as Santayana himself once put it, are "solved best by not raising them"--it is comforting to know that at least one major philosopher never forgot what philosophy is really all about: namely, wisdom and love of knowledge. Whereas other philosophers seek to impress by being original or controversial or obscure, Santayana merely attempts to describe things as they are. Santayana is above all a realist, not merely in the philosophical sense of believing that external objects exist outside of man's consciousness, but also in the more general sense of accepting the world as it really is and not as we might wish it could be. So many philosophers seem motivated primarily by a desire to rationalize away the disagreeable aspects of reality. Santayana's approach is different. While recognizing that reality has its disagreeable elements (Santayana was certainly no optimist), he seeks to distinguish, as he once put it, the part of this disagreeable or mixed reality "that could be loved and chosen from the reminder." In "The Life of Reason," Santayana sought to explain how reason emerges in five separate areas of human existence: thought, society, religion, art and science. Originally, Santayana devoted one book to each subject. In this present edition, all five books have been abridged by the author and made into a single volume. The unabridged version is superior to this one. The abridged version is more difficult to follow, because in the process of condensing five books into one, gaps have been created in the exposition of Santayana's thought. Unfortunately, the original five volume edition is no longer in print. The best two volumes of the unabridged version were "Reason in Common Sense" and "Reason in Religion." The first of these books shows how men came to discover the external reality of nature and the independent existence of other minds. There are chapters on how thought is practical, on the "malicious psychology" of philosophers like Kant, Hume and Berkeley, on how thought is practical, and on Santayana's contention that ideas are not abstractions. "Reason in Religion" is one of the most

interesting books on religion ever published and ought to be read by every atheist and agonistic who regards religion as a mere tissue of delusion and irrationality. Santayana, while denying the literal truth of religion, contends that religion nonetheless represents a sort of poetic and moral truth expressed in symbols that can be grasped on a very human level. "Religion remains an imaginative achievement, a symbolic representation of moral reality which may have a most important function in vitalising the mind and in transmitting, by way of parables, the lessons of experience."The over-riding theme of "The Life of Reason" is Santayana's conviction that only by recognizing the material world and the "conditions of existence," can the spirit become enlightened concerning the source of its troubles and the means of its happiness or deliverance. There is, I would contend, no philosophical work of the twentieth century that is more sane, that expresses better judgment on the main issues of philosophy, or that demonstrates a deeper wisdom about the nature of things than this classic work.

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