

April 1, 1987 (vol. 2, no. 17)

Dear Colleague:

I am reading John McCormick's biography of George Santayana (Knopf, 1987). Santayana was up for promotion at Harvard University. Both William James and Josiah Royce supported Santayana strongly. But the President of Harvard, Charles Eliot, demurred: He wrote: "I agree with you that Dr. Santayana's qualities give a useful variety to the Philosophical Department, and that he is an original writer of proved capacity. I suppose the fact to be that I have doubts and fears about a man so abnormal as Dr. Santayana. The withdrawn, contemplative man who takes no part in the everyday work of the institution, or of the world, seems to me to be a person of very uncertain future value. He does not dig ditches, or lay bricks, or write school-books; his product is not of the ordinary useful, though humble, kind. What will it be?"

At the time, Santayana had been an instructor at Harvard for seven years. He was already well known for his excellent grasp of German philosophy, he was an eloquent and popular teacher, and he had published a well received book The Sense of Beauty (1896), which by the way is still in print. The question was whether he was to be kept on and promoted to assistant professor. Royce argued that Santayana was a philosopher of such established originality that by the time he reached fifty years of age he might make it to full professor.

Nowadays, we start as assistant professor and many of us become full professor before we reach forty. Such is progress! On the other hand, we are still required to dig ditches--and indeed ditch-digging is taking up so much of our time that the naughtiness of contemplation is hardly a viable choice.

President Eliot ran into Santayana in the yard and asked him how his philosophy class was doing. Santayana replied that his students were making progress through Plato and should soon move on to Aristotle. "No, no, Santayana, what I meant by my enquiry is, how many students have enrolled for your lectures?"

Best wishes,

