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The circumstances of George Santayana's translation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* are uncertain.¹ References to the project are relatively scarce, with only a few letters around the turn of the century as a reference point for the work. What we do know is the translation was never finished, and eventually found its way into Harvard's collection at the Houghton Library, in the form of forty-five folders of manuscript, where it seems to have been mostly untouched since the 1940s. To the best of my knowledge, the following transcription is the first attempt to publish Santayana's translation. John McCormick, in his biography of Santayana, suggests Santayana simply lost interest in the effort, which may be the best available answer to why the document remains unpublished.² But letters Santayana wrote before and during his translation suggest, at least initially, he very much intended to seek publication of the manuscript. Examining these letters, rather than clarifying Santayana's work and intentions, largely serves to raise three important questions. Was the translation the work of one person, or a collaboration amongst several minds? Why was the translation left unfinished? And how did it come to reside in the Harvard collection? Unfortunately, I can't answer these questions definitively; there simply isn't enough evidence. Nonetheless, in this brief essay, I'd like to present the evidence as it exists, and offer a constructive, speculative case to answer these intriguing questions.

¹ *Metaphysica*: manuscript, undated, MS AM 1946:2, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

² John McCormick, *George Santayana: A Biography* (New York; Alfred A. Knopf, 1987). 129. McCormick makes a single mention of the *Metaphysics* project. He probably didn't have access to some of the later letters I've referenced in this essay.

First, I'd like to offer a brief history of Santayana's work on the *Metaphysics*. Santayana first mentioned his plan to translate Aristotle's work in the summer of 1899, in a letter to Boylston Adams Beal recounting his recent acquisition of several books related to the *Metaphysics*, translations in German and French, as well as "lots of commentaries."³ The German version seems to have had a significant influence on Santayana's efforts; Santayana's comments about an 1890 edition of Herman Bonitz' German translation can be found in his marginalia.⁴ His notations are primarily critical of Bonitz' translation, and seem to point to Santayana's reading of Aristotle in preparation for *The Life of Reason*. It's probably impossible to determine exactly when Santayana began his personal efforts at translation, although we can narrow it down. On 2 October, 1900, he wrote to D. Appleton and Company to inquire about a few back issues of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, containing articles by Thomas Davidson, who Santayana believed to be pursuing a translation of his own at the time.⁵ On the ninth of October, Santayana wrote to William Torrey Harris, thanking him for the two requested issues of the journal, and noting "My translation of the *Metaphysics* is only just begun and I hardly dare to think when it may be finished."⁶ And in a following letter to Harris on the nineteenth of October, he says

³ George Santayana to Boylston Adams Beal, August 7th, 1899, in *The Letters of George Santayana: Book One, [1868]-1909*, ed. William G. Holzberger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2001). 198-199.

⁴ George Santayana, *George Santayana's Marginalia: A Critical Selection, Book One: Abell-Lucretius*, ed. John McCormick (Cambridge, Massachusetts; The MIT Press, 2011). 22-27.

⁵ George Santayana to D. Appleton and Company, October 2nd, 1900. *Letters: Book One*, 219-220. This appears to be the only letter referenced by McCormick.

⁶ George Santayana to William Torrey Harris, October 9th, 1900. *Ibid.* P. 220.

the translation is going slowly.⁷ So I think we can reasonably say Santayana began his translation sometime between August of 1899 and October of 1900, probably shortly after his return from summering in Europe.

In November of 1900, Santayana wrote a letter to Anna Boynton Thompson, apparently responding to her interest in a reading group he had started.⁸ Santayana and a few students had begun reading and individually translating the *Metaphysics*, meeting on a weekly basis to compare their work. From here on, virtually every reference to the translation in Santayana's correspondence is in regard to this reading group, specifically to Thompson's interactions with the group. But these brief mentions can be used to paint a reasonably realized picture of Santayana's efforts. The group, as detailed in this first mention, was made up of Santayana and three graduate students. Thompson had recently completed an M.A. at Radcliffe College. Benjamin A. G. Fuller was just beginning studies towards an M.A. at Harvard, largely under Santayana.⁹ And the final student, Mr. Doroty, was a student at the nearby Episcopal Divinity College.¹⁰ A following letter to Thompson on 12 November further clarified the project at hand: Santayana was primarily concerned

⁷ George Santayana to William Torrey Harris, October 19th, 1900. Ibid. P. 220-221.

⁸ George Santayana to Anna Boynton Thompson, November 9th, 1900. Ibid. P. 222.

⁹ Herbert L. Searles and Wilbur Long, *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 30 (1956-1957).111-112. Fuller, a former president of the APA, was eulogized in the "Memorial Minutes" section of the meeting.

¹⁰ Doroty goes unidentified in the collected letters of Santayana. Like many questions here, I haven't found a definitive answer as to who he was. The only approximately matching student at the Episcopal Divinity School at the appropriate time was William Edmund Dowty Jr., listed as a Junior Harvard BA student in the 1899 EDS catalog. Episcopal Divinity School Student Catalog, 1899.

with creating a clean, translated copy of the *Metaphysics* for eventual publication.¹¹ By the time of this letter, Santayana and the students had translated up to about the middle of Book Three.

This second letter to Thompson seems to reflect some early doubts in the project. Unfortunately, we don't have Thompson's letter to Santayana for reference, but some inferences can be made from Santayana's reply. Thompson seems to have been hesitant to join the group, expressing concern about being under Santayana's direction. She seems to have had more interest in studying commentaries than in translating herself, and Santayana encouraged this, noting "the study of commentators and of such sources as there are would often throw light upon the text." Thompson also seems to have had doubts about attending the weekly meetings, and Santayana assured her she could attend as she pleased, or even have alternate, private meetings with him at another time.

Nearly a year passed before Santayana mentioned the group again in his letters, but again, we can infer that work on the translation occurred throughout the spring semester. In a letter to Thompson dated 1 October, 1901, Santayana discussed plans for the group for the fall of 1901.¹² Fuller, it seems, had been ill, would be returning to Cambridge the following week, and was the only other remaining member of the group, Doroty having left for an unexplained reason. Because of these changes, Santayana seemed to be uncertain of when the group would resume meeting, but promised to inform Thompson as soon as details

¹¹ George Santayana to Anna Boynton Thompson, November 12th, 1900. *Letters, Book One*, 222-223.

¹² George Santayana to Anna Boynton Thompson, October 1st, 1901. *Ibid*, 238.

emerged. The letter does help to clarify the work of the past year. According to Santayana, the year's work left the group at book four of the *Metaphysics*, where he intended to resume once the group reconvened. Fuller had expressed interest in translating books eleven and twelve. From this letter, it also appears Thompson never attended meetings in 1900 or early 1901, having only corresponded with Santayana about the project.

Only two more letters reference the project, in rapid succession, at the end of October of 1901. On the 28th, Santayana wrote to Thompson to cancel their weekly meeting; apparently Fuller's father was on his deathbed, and Fuller was not able to attend.¹³ As the group was then just a trio, Santayana suggested it wouldn't be particularly profitable for Thompson to make the trip if Fuller couldn't attend. Thompson, it seems, did not receive this letter on time. In a following letter on October 31st, Santayana apologized for Thompson's wasted time, but it seems the damage was done.¹⁴ Thompson had decided to not attend the meetings after this one failed attempt. Santayana expressed dismay, but understanding, given the taxing nature of the trip and his feelings that the meetings may not be as valuable to Thompson as to the others. Moreover, Fuller had still not yet returned to Cambridge, although he was expected soon. Nonetheless, Santayana encouraged Thompson to send her notes and translations along to him, both to receive comments and to be used to help in revising the past year's translation, which he considered "too loose."

Unfortunately, this is the extent of references to Santayana's *Metaphysics* project we have within the historical record. Nonetheless, I do think I can endeavor

¹³ George Santayana to Anna Boylston Thompson, October 28th, 1901. Ibid, 239.

¹⁴ George Santayana to Anna Boylston Thompson, October 31st, 1901. Ibid, 242.

to answer all of the questions I've proposed at the beginning of this essay, based on these letters and the translation manuscript itself. First, I'd like to suggest the translation was far from a solo work of Santayana's. It seems relatively clear that Santayana was working with these few students, particularly with Fuller, throughout the translation project. While Santayana may have done an initial draft of the translation on his own, I think all evidence points to significant editing based on collaboration with these students. While the transcription I've offered is a clear text version, the original manuscript is rife with strike outs and edits. In places, Santayana has struck entire pages, meticulously replacing sections with a substantially different translation. While it is possible Santayana, upon thoroughgoing reflection, simply changed his own translation, in light of these letters it seems substantially more likely he adapted the suggestions of Fuller, Doroty and, possibly, Thompson. Given the unpublished nature of the manuscript, we really can't be sure what sort of credit he intended to give in a potential published version. It's entirely possible he intended to allow for multiple authors, or a special thanks to the students involved, or even details of his method in an explanatory preface.

The second question, regarding why Santayana abandoned the translation project, is probably the most difficult to answer. The manuscript is substantial, containing a translation of roughly two thirds of the *Metaphysics*. Interestingly, the missing portions are not entirely from the end of the book. Santayana, or as I've suggested Santayana and the group of students, completed translation of books one through seven, as well as books nine and twelve. Books eight, ten, eleven, thirteen

and fourteen remain unfinished. As the earlier letter suggested, Fuller had intended to translate books eleven and twelve, so perhaps Santayana redirected his efforts to book twelve to work alongside Fuller. It's clear from the letters that Santayana completed an initial draft (possibly the manuscript in question) with the study group in the fall of 1900 and the spring of 1901. Santayana probably worked on the rest of the manuscript during the following academic year, after the last letter and into the spring of 1902. Why he stopped, though, is still puzzling. With a substantial portion complete, it seems it would have been worthwhile to finish the work.

My thought is that two factors influenced Santayana's decision to abandon the manuscript. The final letter to Thompson seems to suggest Santayana isn't entirely satisfied with the quality of the translation of the prior year, which might suggest he wasn't entirely happy with the overall work in general. As previously noted, Santayana's marginal notes on Bonitz were highly critical of the translation efforts, indicating an almost perfectionist attitude about the quality of translation. Second, Fuller completed his M.A. at Harvard in 1902, moving on to Christ Church at Oxford to begin PhD studies.¹⁵ Santayana, then, dissatisfied with the overall quality of the previous work, and without his primary collaborator simply lost interest, as McCormick suggested, and moved on to other projects.

The final question, how the document eventually ended up in the Houghton Library Collection at Harvard actually once again largely revolves around Fuller. After his graduation in 1902, Fuller began PhD studies at Oxford, before eventually returning to Harvard to complete them in 1906, after which he began teaching at his

¹⁵Searles and Long, *Proceedings*, 111-112.

alma mater. Santayana and Fuller were, by all accounts, reasonably good friends, carrying on correspondence throughout Santayana's life. When Santayana traveled abroad, Fuller often occupied his apartment at Brattle Street, and whenever Santayana published a new work, Fuller was amongst the recipients of complimentary copies from the publisher.¹⁶ Santayana even asked Fuller to dispose of some of his property. In a letter from January of 1906, while Fuller continued to occupy Santayana's apartment, Santayana tells him "You may have all my furniture that pleases you."¹⁷ Santayana was living at his mother's home in Brookline, and never returned to the Brattle Street apartment.

So what does all this have to do with the provenance of the manuscript? This question brings us back to the arrival of the manuscript into the Harvard Collection, in 1946, as a gift from Fuller. In 1946, Fuller donated a large collection of his papers to Harvard. At some point since its arrival in the collection, the document has been re-categorized and removed from the Fuller collection. But while the *Metaphysics* manuscript information in Harvard's collection website no longer indicates it, the document itself clearly bears the stamp indicating Fuller's donation.

So it seems likely the manuscript came into Fuller's possession in one of two ways: either he found it amongst Santayana's abandoned papers at the Brattle Street apartment or Santayana specifically left it in Fuller's hands. I'm inclined towards the latter of the two options. As far as I can tell, the evidence all seems to suggest Fuller

¹⁶ George Santayana to B.A.G. Fuller, January 11th, 1905. *Letters: Book One*, 291-292. Santayana here declares that, as he'll be remaining abroad for an additional year, Fuller may keep his rooms, which he continued to do for several years. A number of letters to the publisher Charles Scribner's and Sons indicate Fuller was a recipient of newly published books.

¹⁷ George Santayana to B.A.G. Fuller, January 29th, 1906. *Ibid*, 3335-336.

was Santayana's most active collaborator in this translation effort. That, coupled with their long-term correspondence and ongoing friendship, makes me more than happy to conclude Santayana left the manuscript with Fuller with a sense of fondness, a sort of remembrance of their work together.

Hopefully, I've helped to illuminate some of the details of this largely lost effort of George Santayana. Most importantly, I think it's instructive about Santayana's method and thought process as a writer, philosopher, and professor. Rather than merely accept the translations and commentaries of others, Santayana endeavored to translate Aristotle's work himself in order to garner a better understanding of the material, and pushed several of his students to do the same. Moreover, I think the collaborative nature of the work points to a degree of humility in Santayana we might not typically see, given Santayana's reputation as aloof and detached. Santayana was happy to consider the opinions of the students he worked with, and even seems to have edited and reconstructed much of his translation around those suggestions.

From a methodological perspective, the manuscript is filled with challenges. The copy of the document in the Santayana Edition's possession is a facsimile taken from the microfilm held at Harvard, a microfilm image of a document in poor condition in the first place. The first page of the document is badly damaged, ripped in several places and significantly faded. As noted above, the document has also been heavily edited, both in superscripts and subscripts, as well as extensive strike-outs and transpositions of text, requiring a moderate amount of editorial oversight to make sense of the author's intentions. Throughout the document, I've included

clarifying footnotes to indicate how and why the text was selected, as well as additional footnotes containing any of Santayana's marginalia. Santayana's penmanship is also inconsistent, varying from exceptionally clear to almost completely illegible in places. Of course, none of these issues are insurmountable, but taken together, they made for a long road to creating a publishable document. But while the translation is certainly a rough draft, it is nonetheless an interesting, valuable attempt at presenting one of Aristotle's most important works from one of the most intriguing philosophers of the twentieth century.