

The Similarities in the Moral Philosophy in T. S. Eliot and George Santayana

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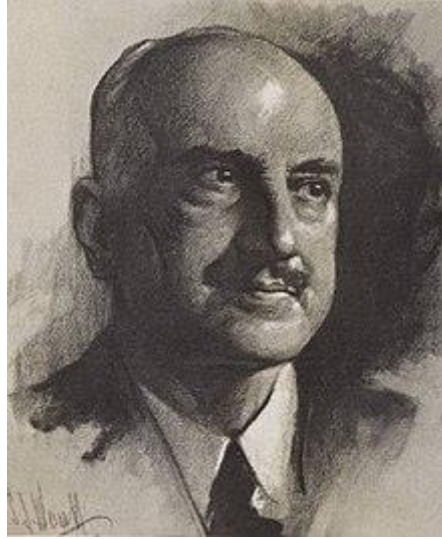
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Abstract

This paper aims at understanding the philosophy of life in *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), an American-born poet, playwright, and critic. The idea of humility is reinforced by T. S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*. This is also a major theme in Santayana's writings. George Santayana (1863-1952), the Spanish-American philosopher and poet received his doctorate degree from Harvard University in 1889 and later became a faculty member there. He was a highly respected and inspiring teacher, and his students included poets Conrad Aiken, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens. He emerged as a central figure in American Philosophical circles. The paper examines the similarities in thought in the poems of T. S. Eliot and George Santayana.

Keywords: George Santayana, T. S. Eliot, humility

Four Quartets refers to a series of four poems by T. S. Eliot in 1943; the work is considered to be Eliot's masterpiece. "Burnt Norton" (1936) was published in **Collected Poems** 1909–1935; it then appeared in pamphlet form in 1941. Burnt Norton is a country house in the Cotswold Hills of Gloucestershire that Eliot visited in the summer of 1934. It is set in the rose garden of the house. The opening lines are assumed to be taken from a passage which was deleted from his play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). "East Coker" (1940) appeared in the *New English Weekly* and then in pamphlet form. "East Coker" is named after the hamlet in Somersetshire where Eliot's ancestors lived before immigrating to America in the 1660s; he visited the site in 1937. "The Dry Salvages" (1941) was first published in the *New English Weekly* and in pamphlet form. The title of the poem refers to a formation of rocks near Cape Ann, Massachusetts which Eliot had visited as a child. "Little Gidding" (1942) appeared both in the *New English Weekly* and in pamphlet form. The title is taken from the name of a village in Huntingdonshire where Nicholas Ferrar established an Anglican community in the 17th century. The poem is set at the Little Gidding chapel in winter. (Britannica)



A 1936 *Time* drawing of Santayana

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Santayana

George Santayana is considered to be a “philosopher, poet, literary and cultural critic,” says Saatkamp, a scholar who has researched the works and philosophy of Santayana. “His naturalism and emphasis on creative imagination were harbingers of important intellectual turns on both sides of the Atlantic. He was a naturalist before naturalism grew popular; he appreciated multiple perfections before multiculturalism became an issue,” says Saatkamp further. Santayana “thought of philosophy as literature before it became a theme in American and European scholarly circles.” He naturalized Platonism, updated Aristotle, fought off idealisms, and provided a “striking and sensitive account of the spiritual life without being a religious believer.” He “presents views equal to Tocqueville in quality and importance. Beyond philosophy, only Emerson may match his literary production.” (Saatkamp)

Santayana’s philosophy of life as exemplified in his prose and poetic works emphasise on a “spiritual life” that “entails a complete transformation of the person: in being liberated from oneself one comes to feel for the first time that one/s oneself; in being liberated from the world one becomes capable of a universal love of nature” (Michelsen). Michelsen quotes Santayana from the book *The Philosophy of Santayana* published in 1940:

Your detachment will not be spiritual unless it is universal; it will then bring you liberation at once from the world and from yourself. This will neither destroy your natural gifts and duties nor add to them; but it will enable you to exercise them without illusion and in far-seeing harmony with their real function and end. Detachment leaves you content to be where you are, and what you are . . . yet in your physical particularity detachment makes you ideally impartial; and in enlightening your mind it is likely to render your action also more successful and generous... (Michelsen)

Michelsen explains that Santayana's "rational ethics is an intellectual attempt to bring order and harmony into natural morality" and further compares it to Buddhist ideology of "overcoming of greed, hatred and the delusion of an ego isolated from other happenings and existences" (Michelsen).

This paper attempts to study the similarities of thought in the poems of T. S. Eliot and Santayana.



Eliot in 1934 by Lady Ottoline Morrell

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T. S. Eliot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T._S._Eliot)

T. S. Eliot presents the idea of negating the self in *Four Quartets*. He describes a rose garden in "Burnt Norton" in which there are "other echoes" that "inhabit the garden." When these echoes are followed one meets the "first world." This natural world is "dignified" and "invisible" to the public eye; it lives without "pressure"; the air here is "vibrant"; "unheard music" is "hidden":

There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves,
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hidden in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had the look of flowers that are looked at. (Burnt Norton)

This scene evokes a life devoid of ambition and greed. It deconstructs the concept of achievements, success, and limelight. The roses in the garden look as if they have been in the limelight and have the air of success. But Eliot goes in search of the hidden music of the shrubbery - ordinary pleasures. The poem recommends a life that aims at "inner freedom from practical desire." One has to move away not only from "outer compulsion", but also from "inner compulsion." He brings in the symbol of "white light" that signifies peace and harmony:

The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded
By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving,
Erhebung without motion, concentration
Without elimination, both a new world
And the old made explicit, understood
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,
The resolution of its partial horror. (Burnt Norton)

“Erhebung” means elevation. Man has to liberate himself from the need to win which will elevate him. He is caught in the net of desire. This net of desire controls him and dictates terms to him. He loses his flexibility and fluidity of existence. Action binds the human heart and builds a prison of thought from which man cannot escape. He is caught in good and evil and perceives himself as a winner or victim. Eliot perceives action as bondage that creates conflicts in the human mind.

Man imagines that he is progressing. Nature has a different message to share. Eliot says that nature recycles itself; there is no difference between the end and the beginning or death and birth or success and failure; cities are born, only to die and to be reborn again:

In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf. (Burnt Norton)

The Wasteland also talks about the same idea: “Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens
Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal” (*The Wasteland*).

Burnt Norton says that “Houses live and die: there is a time for building / And a time for living and for generation / And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane / And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots / And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto” (*Burnt Norton*).

In *East Coker* Eliot says that old men are full of folly, instead of wisdom; they are scared of life and are fearful of fear itself; the only wisdom man can acquire is “the wisdom of humility: humility is endless” (*East Coker*). A wise man knows how to be humble. Acquiring such humility is true wisdom.

In *Dry Salvages* Eliot confesses his monotheism and acknowledges: “I do not know much about gods.” He realises the power of nature and surmises: “but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable, / Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier; / Useful, untrustworthy, as a conveyor of commerce.” Once man understood the way to solve the challenge of crossing rivers by building bridges, he forgot the superior position he had given to the river as a god, Eliot argues. Men in cities created religions that did not view the river as a God. The river is an earthly brown god who is “almost forgotten.” The man of the city began to worship the machine. The river began to wait and watch the activities of men. Eliot says mankind has been embedded with the awareness of the existence of the river: “His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom, / In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard, / In the smell of grapes on the autumn table, / And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.” The memory of the river “is within us” and “the sea is all about us.” The sea from the world of nature has “many voices, / Many gods and many voices” (*Dry Salvages*). Monotheism had already separated man from nature in Europe and, hence, in America. Anthropology of the nineteenth century brought back ancient religions and rituals to the academic world, and thinkers began to reflect on the shift from nature to man in religious approaches.

One is reminded of Nietzsche when he said in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “In order to be able to live, the Greeks must have created these gods out of the deepest necessity” (Nietzsche). Accepting multiple Gods and religions on the part of T. S. Eliot could be interpreted as his interest in anthropology, as a general trend of the age in which he lived -- the “tendency in nineteenth-century anthropology to construct rationalist explanations of how religion initially evolved out of primitive societies,” says Alexander Noel Ivan Polunin in his article “Eliot, Yeats and the Anthropologists: The Spiritual Quest of the Moderns” (Polunin 98).

The end of the journey would be similar to the beginning: “If you came this way, / Taking the route you would be likely to take / From the place you would be likely to come from... It would be the same at the end of the journey” says Eliot in *Little Gidding*. The purposeful approach to life is meaningless and “And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all” (*Little Gidding*). Life reaches its purpose only when we realise we are nothing: “You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying” (*Little Gidding*).

Man cannot have a special purpose on earth; he is a mere part of the universal plan; we are facets of the earth and its operations; we cannot fathom the principles of our lives; humanity cannot claim to hold a superior position on the planet; the importance we give to ourselves is meaningless, says Eliot: “Either you had no purpose / Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured / And is altered in fulfilment” (*Little Gidding*).

Whatever path we have chosen in our lives will ultimately take us to the same end; we could have started our journey from any point; we could have been born at any time; still our lives have similar elements of struggles, happiness, sorrow, pain and joy. Eliot says: “If you came this way, / Taking any route, starting from anywhere, / At any time or at any season, / It would always be the same” (*Little Gidding*). Man has to come out of his ideologies of himself and the world;

his identity is an artificial construction; human beings are mere species that are mortal; “you would have to put off / Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,” Eliot argues in *Little Gidding*.

Santayana in *Persons and Places* addresses similar views discussing humility as a value that makes us realise the insignificance of human lives: “This Spanish dignity in humility was most marked in my father” (Santayana 14). He celebrates life:

I love moving water, I love ships, I love the sharp definition, the concentrated humanity, the sublime solitude of life at sea. The dangers of it only make present to us the peril inherent in all existence, which the stupid ignorant untravelled land-worm never discovers; and the art of it, so mathematical, so exact, so rewarding to intelligence, appeals to courage and clears the mind of superstition, while filling it with humility and true religion. (Santayana 127)

Santayana insists on values of detachment and spirituality for living: “I mean devotion, I mean humility and renunciation” (179); “genuine Catholic humility” (222); “scientific humility and peace” (223); “Catholic discipline” (302); “Christian humility” (334).

He says that “No part of time is lost in eternity... Enjoy the world, travel over it, and learn its ways, but do not let it hold you. Do not suffer it to oppress you” (427). We have to be aware of the facets of the world, but not get caught in its web of complexities. Materialism can trap human lives: “To possess things and persons in an idea is the only pure good to be got out of them; to possess them physically or legally is a burden and a snare” (428). In *The Life of Reason* Santayana emphasises on substituting faith for knowledge which he assumes will “teach the intellect humility.” He argues that “experience, in bringing humility, brings intelligence also” (Santayana).

He writes in a poem: “I would I might forget that I am I, / And break the heavy chain that binds me fast, / Whose links about myself my deeds have cast.” The question of “I” poses a challenge to human cognition; we are products of a particular society and carry its identity along with a gender which we perceive as “I”; it is a chain that binds every human being. Santayana says further in this sonnet: “What in the body’s tomb doth buried lie / Is boundless; ’tis the spirit of the sky, / Lord of the future, guardian of the past, / And soon must forth, to know his own at last.” The spirit lies within the body that is the spirit of the sky; it is immortal and not bound by time and space; it is the Lord of the past and present as it has no birth or death; it is the body that is born and that dies later; the spirit has no boundary; it lives everywhere. (Santayana, Sonnet VII)

In another poem “There may be chaos still around the world,” Santayana says that “the whirlwind cannot awe / A happy snow-flake dancing in the flaw” recommending humility (Santayana). Tamil lyricist Kannadasan wrote in a song: “The grass that stands on the river bank / Does not fall down even during a storm / A seasoned mind does not collapse” (Kannadasan). Interestingly this leads us to wonder if these thoughts are Indian in nature. Santayana was inspired by Indian thought and understood the limitations of materialistic thinking says Coleman:

... Santayana saw no need to distinguish philosophies within Indian traditions. In a letter, he wrote “I make no distinction between Buddhism and Brahmanism, between Vedanta and Samkhya philosophies. This is not wholly an effect of

ignorance, but because the differences touch mythology or metaphysics only, and not the wisdom which is all I care for in these (or any other) philosophers” And Indian wisdom he acknowledged to be of greater perceptiveness than European traditions in at least one respect.

In *Reason in Science* (1906) he remarked the “Indian sages [who] long ago” observed “that all victors perish in their turn and everything . . . falls back into the inexorable vortex”. This sort of insight, wrote Santayana, “is what renders [Indian] philosophy, for all its practical impotence, such an irrefragable record of experience, such a superior, definitive perception of the flux. Beside it, our progresses of two centuries and our philosophies of history, embracing one-quarter of the earth for three thousand years, seem puerile vistas indeed”. (Coleman)

Coleman’s theory of Indian influences does sound reasonable, but Santayana has very clearly traced the concept of humility to Christianity and to science. A structural scientific approach to life would tell us that all species have their roles to play in the functioning of the universe, and one is not above the other as it might appear to us. Every life has its purpose, and it fills a certain place and cannot be removed from its functionality. Humility thus becomes a sign of a mature understanding of our position in this universe; it also emerges as a sign of intelligence and wisdom and T. S. Eliot and his teacher Santayana insist again and again.

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