

Josiah Royce: Classical American Philosopher; Pragmatist, Phenomenologist, Process Thinker and Advocate for Community

Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce and John Dewey are the usual actors in the drama called “Classical American Philosophy,” and their significance as philosophers is rightfully captured by John McDermott: “They represent one of the most creative clusters in the history of philosophy.¹ I believe part of the creativity comes from the rich interchange and relationships between the four.² These four philosophers shared significant intellectual as well as personal relationships. Peirce and Royce were deeply interested in the logic and science of their time and both developed doctrines of a triadic form of knowledge known as interpretation. Royce was the first person to sift through Peirce’s papers and he published the first post-mortem assessment of the significance of those papers and of Peirce’s thought in general (Royce and Kernan, 1916, The close relationship between William James is well known to many but I believe is best summarized by James’ own words: “Royce and I love each other like Siamese twins” (Correspondence, 10:530).

In this paper I focus on Josiah Royce’s thought primarily in the context of pragmatism, though brief references will also be made to his relationship to phenomenology.³ Some of Royce’s unique contributions to American philosophy will also be discussed: his excellent theory of community; his analysis of the relationship of genuine communities and genuine individuals and his understanding of religious experience as a fundamental aspect of human existence and of human development into well-functioning individuals.

The four Classical American philosophers as pragmatists each placed stress on meaning and ideas as plans of action as well as looking to future consequences; they emphasized temporality, process, uncertainty, and a world full of rich possibilities. Each, in different ways, saw experience and the human self as essentially embedded in both a physical and social world. Finally, all argued against various false dichotomies particularly those between mind/body, body/emotion, fact/value, human/nature, individual/community; they stressed continuity in experience and nature.

Logic, Nominalism, and Science

Peirce disagreed with James on the general nature of pragmatism, adopting the term *pragmaticism* to characterize his view in contrast to that of James. On several occasions, however, Peirce expressed the opinion that Royce’s views, especially as expressed in *The World and the Individual*, (CP 8:119) came closer to his own view in its stress on the long-range *conceivable* consequences of a belief and in working out an idea’s consequences in formal logic. (CP 8:119) Peirce saw Royce’s notion of the internal meaning of an idea to include “all the experiments which would verify it.” (CP 8:115) He writes: “I think Royce’s conception in *The World and the Individual* comes nearer to the genuine upshot of pragmaticism than any

other exposition that a pragmatist has given, than any *other* pragmatist has given “(Annotated *Catalogue*, 1967, MS 284.)

At the core of Royce’s epistemology and metaphysics is his definition of an idea as a “plan of action.” An enduring theme of all his early articles is “a theory of knowledge and reality which in its essence is activist and social.” (Lowenberg, Introduction, *Fugitive Essays*, 11). Royce wholeheartedly rejects, as do the other pragmatists, any copy theory of knowledge, arguing that knowledge is a mode of action; it is an active search for the fulfillment of purpose. He tells us that “thoughts are not dead and finished mind products. . . . Thoughts are living and each thought lives in the most literal sense, but a moment.” (*Fugitive Essays*, 75-76). He also posits the essence of thinking as “originality.” In the essay, “How Beliefs are Made,” Royce asserts: “Thus, all knowing is, in a very deep sense, acting; it is, in fact, reacting and creation” (*Fugitive Essays*, 362). In this essay Royce focuses, long before James, on the role of “attention” in knowing; he also stresses recognition as another key factor.

Part of the manner in which Peirce distinguished his pragmatism from that of James was in terms of his attack on nominalism and his belief in the importance of “general ideas,” especially for scientific progress. (CP 5:3) Royce, like Peirce, discusses the necessity of “general ideas” for science and also speaks of them as habits. Royce writes: “Conscious general ideas are simply conscious habits of conduct in the presence of the objects to which these ideas apply.” (Royce, 1893, Lecture I) There is clearly a behavior-pragmatic element in Royce’s analysis of general ideas as indicated in the following: “*The whole general idea involves what one may well call ‘a plan of action,’ that is, a way of behavior is fitting to characterize and portray an object of the class in question*” (Royce, 1893, Lecture VI). Royce also sees selective interest as central in general ideas: “there is, in the object of your general idea, that character which guides your interest and your attention to make this response” (Royce, 1893, Lecture 2)

These clear emphases on habit, on interest and selection demonstrate Royce’s pragmatic tone. In his discussion of general ideas Royce also anticipates phenomenology with a notion of *motor intentionality*. He states that the real test of a general idea is the presence of “that element of motor consciousness, that awareness of the thinking being concerning what he proposes to do with the object and characters that he thinks about” (Royce, Lecture II)

Both Peirce and Royce wrote extensively on science and advocated for the significance of general ideas in science.⁴ Like Peirce, Royce differentiates between mechanical processes and non-mechanical processes in Nature and he, like Peirce, holds that “laws of nature” should be interpreted as habits -- they are approximate rhythms: “Nature, as actually observed, shows us rhythms that tend *within limits*, to be pretty constant” (WI II, 222)—it is “certain that physical Nature is full of *approximate rhythms* that tend to repeat over and over (WI II, 222).

These laws of nature are not nomological necessities and unlike mechanical laws, these “Habits and natural rhythms, contrawise, are by their very nature asymmetrical and time-reversible” (WI II 222). Further, these laws of nature are subject to the evolutionary process and thus are only temporary—“Take them in a long period, and these rhythms tend to pass and to be lost in revocable decay”; they come into existence and pass away in the course of cosmic history. (WI II, 221,222, 223; See also, Royce, *Herbert Spencer*, 29-45.)

As general ideas, the laws of science must be seen as idealizations. Mechanical laws, Royce argues, are abstractions from concrete reality; they have heuristic value, serving as “inference tickets,” enabling us to predict what, given antecedent conditions, the subsequent conditions will be. They are tools, “only extremely ideal ways in which science finds it convenient to conceive facts for the purposes of a brief theoretical description of vast ranges of experience. . . . They help us compute, to predict, to describe, and to classify phenomena” (WI II, 214, 224). Both Peirce and Royce took on the so-called “Doctrine of Necessity,” arguing that it is commonly accepted in the absence of any empirical warrant and that it is basically a metaphysical doctrine. (Peirce, *The Monist*, 1892) Royce, acknowledging his debt to Peirce’s keen criticism, writes:

Hence, the so-called axiom of the unvarying character of the laws of nature is no self-evident truth, is not even at once an empirically established and an universal generalization and possesses its present authority because of the emphasis our social interest give to the discovery of uniform laws where we can discover them. That we do discover and verify them over a very wide range of our experience of Nature is an unquestionable fact, and one of which every Philosophy of Nature must take account. But it is much to know that this discovery is not due to any innate idea, or to any first principle of reason, but is an empirical, although by no means an universal generalization, which we have been led by social motives to *emphasize and to extend as far as possible*, and so to conceive as if it were universally characteristic of Objective Nature. (WI II, 195) ⁵

Royce's second argument against mechanical notions of scientific law is a version of the "under-determination of scientific theories" argument posited by Duhem and Quine and recent philosophers of science. Royce writes: "Nobody can doubt that they [scientific theories] are 'ideal constructions' since science may enter its accounts by other methods of bookkeeping.....We know that Nature, as it were *tolerates* our mathematical formulas. We do not know that she would not equally well tolerate many other such formulas instead of these" (WI II, 216 and 225). Here, Royce shows significant insight into the processes of modern science.

Royce also argues that non-mechanical laws, habits, are common to both physical and mental phenomena. Indeed, in good pragmatic fashion, Royce argues that this fact serves to "efface the contrast between matter and mind." (*The World and the Individual*, II, 219). Royce, like Peirce and Dewey, argued strongly against the false dichotomy between the physical and mental and for continuity in nature. In *The World and the Individual*, Royce offers three hypotheses about nature: (1) "the vast contrast which we have been taught to make between material and conscious processes really depends upon the accidents of the human point of view;" (2) "we have no right whatever to speak of really unconscious Nature, but only of uncommunicative Nature;" and (3) "in the case of Nature in general. . . . we are dealing with phenomenal signs of a vast conscious process, whose relation to Time varies vastly" (WI II, 224-226). He goes on: ". . . we can never know how much of Nature constitutes the life of a finite conscious individual, unless we are in intelligent communication with that individual's inner life (WI II, 232-3).

Mind, Knowledge of Mind and Other Selves

James, Royce, and Dewey were all practicing psychologists and all three served as Presidents of the American Psychological Association. Both James and Royce wrote Introductions to Psychology and Dewey's much discussed article on the "reflex arc" has been pivotal in recent developments of radical embodied cognition and neuropragmatism (Dewey, 1896; James, 1890; Royce, 1903; Chemero, 2009, Rockwell, 2005; and Solymosi, 2011). James expounded ideas in his work that Royce had earlier explored and continued to develop, e.g. attention, and the stream of consciousness. Although they shared many ideas in common, Royce found James too individualistic and prone to nominalism. Further, James struggled with two

central problems that Royce was able to address—(1) how we can know the reality of other minds and (2) explaining how two human minds can know one and the same thing.

Royce believed that one could not develop an adequate theory of self or of mind maintaining the traditional division of types of knowledge, namely, conceptual knowledge and perceptual knowledge. Expanding on the ideas of Peirce, Royce advocated a third type of knowledge called “interpretation” to understand the ideas, feelings, and intentions of our fellow beings as well as for self-understanding. In his essay on “Mind,” Royce cites the example of someone crying “Fire.” He says that in this case I am called upon to regard my fellow’s cry as a sign or expression of the fact either that he himself sees a fire or that he believes there is a fire. Or that, at the very least, he intends me to understand him as asserting there is a fire. Of course, says Royce, I cannot understand my friend’s cry unless I hear it, unless I have at least some perceptual knowledge. Further, I need some conceptual knowledge of fire, of his object. But even more, argues Royce, my knowledge of my fellow’s meaning, my ‘grasping of his idea,’ consists neither in the percept of the sign nor in a concept of its object which the sign arouses, but in my interpretation of the sign as an indication of an idea which is distinct from any idea of mine, and which I refer to a mind not my own, or in some wise, distinct from mine. For Royce, we come to know that minds not our own are in the world by interpreting the signs that these minds give us of their presence. (Royce, 1916, 154)

Royce emphatically rejects the hypothesis that we can assert the existence of our neighbor’s mind upon the argument from analogy. Royce argues that an argument from analogy is not its own verification; rather it is essentially unverifiable in the normally required terms, i.e., in terms of immediate perceptions. My neighbor’s states of mind can never become for me objects of immediate acquaintance unless they become my states of mind and not his, precisely in so far as he and I are distinct selves. And we all know in analogical reasoning, differences can be as telling as similarities. What if my own case of mental states may be unique or atypical or abnormal? Indeed, how well do I know my own mental states at all? Royce asserts that despite well-known assertions to the contrary nobody has any adequate intuitive knowledge of acquaintance with himself. Royce also observes that the argument by analogy for knowledge of other minds has very limited application, again because of the significance of dissimilarities. Does it apply equally to children, the mentally ill, even women, if drawn on analogy with a man?

The third type of knowledge, “interpretation,” is never verified through immediate data, or through the analysis of conceptions, but rather through conversation. In conversation our neighbor expresses ideas which contrast with our own present ideas, but we view them as intelligible but requiring us to probe their meaning. We give back to our neighbor our interpretation of his meaning, in order to see if this interpretation elicits a new expression which is in substantial agreement with the expression we expected from him. Our method is “conversation.”

Royce also argues that self-knowledge is a process of interpretive knowledge. The present self interprets the past self to the future self. I am always engaged in an interpretive act, interpreting the past self to the future self. “In brief,” says Royce, “my idea of myself is an interpretation of my past- linked also with an interpretation of my hopes and intentions as to my future.” (WI II, 42). For Royce, the “self” is a series of interpretations- we achieve the unification of separate ideas and experiences through interpretation. The self is a temporal, ongoing process, unified by continual reflection and communication. The self also continually confers meaning on itself. It is engaged in creating a meaningful narrative.

In answering James’ second question, “how can two human minds know one and the same thing?” Royce highlights the communal and temporal nature of all consciousness; again, interpretative awareness of others is fundamental. He pointed to the kind of shared knowledge had by two oarsmen rowing the same boat.

Each man views the boat and the oars and the water as objects which he experiences for himself. At the same time, each of the two men believes that both of them are experiencing, while they row together, the same external fact-the same boat, the same oars, the same water.
(*Problem of Christianity* 317-8)

The oarsmen are engaged in a process of interpretation that is fully triadic—other rower, physical object, and oneself, all are sending and receiving signs—and in their teamwork the oarsmen rely on these processes as if they had achieved their goal of knowing the same realities together. Royce says: “Our social consciousness is, psychologically speaking, the most deeply rooted foundation of our whole view of ourselves and of the world....” (*Problem* 330). Royce

has, in my judgment, an interactionist view of experience and of knowledge not too different from that of Dewey.

The Individual and the Community

Both Dewey and Royce discussed the conditions for building community while also critiquing a prevalent and false individualism that they believed threatened community and even the future of democracy (Dewey, 1957, 1062; Royce, 1908, 1913, 1916). False individualism was tied in with property rights and economic and pecuniary values; an individualism that Dewey and Royce believed led to “lost” and isolated individuals. They argued for conditions that fostered the development of individuals capable of achieving their full potentialities and full and rewarding experiences and lives, and yet also capable and concerned to contribute in creative ways to the common life. Both philosophers advocated for building a “Great Community.” Dewey promoted the role of genuine communication in building communities, while Royce developed his doctrine of interpretation as the means for creating genuine communities.

Royce valued and honored the individual in his metaphysics as well as his social and political philosophy. His exposition of the relationship between individualism and community I believe is one of his unique contributions to philosophy. Royce argued that worthwhile individuality and community arose out of their mutual interaction in a creative ongoing, infinite process. He argued for the following claims: (1) Individuals are inescapably rooted in a social context and true individuality is forged out of that context. The individual is *both* self-made and a social product and the genuine individual self is the responsibility of *both* the individual and community; (2) Community is a social product. True community is created by the hard work of free, self-conscious, self-committed, self-creative, moral individuals; (3) the task of the individual is both to fashion a “beautiful” life and to build a “beautiful” community, while the obligation of the community is to foster the development of true individuals; (4) individuals are finite, sinful, fallible and need to extend self to develop morality and overcome error. Royce asserted that humans fall prey to parallel sins: (a) the sin of self-loss, becoming part of the crowd, a “they,” instead of an “I;” and (b) the sin of self-sufficiency, of the individual who “goes it alone” and believes that genuine selfhood can be achieved in this manner; (5) Individuals keep communities alive, moral, and sane by keeping them from stagnating into inveterate habit, moving toward exclusivity and intolerance, or degenerating into mob madness. For Royce,

individuals without community are without substance; communities without individuals are blind.

In *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce addressed the conditions of genuine communities, providing another unique contribution to philosophy. These include: (1) the power of an individual to extend his/her life beyond self and one's self-context; (2) the presence of communication among selves in the community as well as attentive listening to the ideas and hopes of others; (3) the willingness of individuals to engage in interpretation of meanings to each other—such interpretation involves respect and regard for each self and idea involved; reciprocity and mutuality and genuine humility; (4) recognition of the cooperative efforts of each member of the community—without this interaction of co-working selves, the community could not accomplish its aim.

In this work Royce also outlines the requirements of genuine religious community, an understanding that John E. Smith argues provides many valuable insights for philosophy of religion and the religious community itself. In his *Source of Religious Insight*, Royce stresses the individual and communal aspects of religion and religious experience, in contrast to James's individualistic stress in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902). Royce's arguments for the necessary interaction of genuine individuality and genuine community are valuable for understanding religious experience and for social and political issues. About the religious Smith provides a compelling assessment: “

Finally, in view of the omnipresence of the religious community in the history of religion, it is essential to arrive at a proper understanding of the relation between the individual and the community as it concerns religious faith. The common assumption that religion in its social or community form represents merely 'organized' religion in contrast with a purely individual (and therefore, 'real' or 'genuine') piety, needs to be reexamined. The emphasis on 'conversion' as a purely private and personal affair, plus suspicion of the church as an institution, have had much to do with the failure of Protestantism to find a *viable* form of *religious* community. . . . The nominalistic outlook that leads to an exaggerated individualism in many regions of modern life has also infected religion in America, with the consequent loss of proper regard for the bonds that transcend the lonely individual and bring him into a community of suffering, of joy, and faith. The fact that wherever we look among the monuments and records of religious traditions we are

brought face to face with communities of some kind suggest that community can be neither external nor accidental. (Smith, 1995, 17-18)

In making a difference in contemporary society one cannot ignore this insight and Royce's valuable exposition of various aspects of religious experience and religious community. Royce is clearly as classical American philosopher whose thought is well worth more careful examination.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Frank M. Oppenheim S.J., in his preface to *Reverence for Relations of Life*
2. Royce sought continuously to enrich his own experience and ideas and often astonished his students by his openness to criticism and questions. One of those students, Richard C. Cabot writes: "he shocked me into perceiving that a man could really welcome difference of opinion as a precious gift." Richard C. Cabot, "Josiah Royce as a Teacher," *Philosophical Review* 25, no.3 (1916: 466-72, 467).
3. The relationship of Royce as well as other pragmatists to process thought should be explored. A recent dissertation analyzes Royce's thought via that of Whitehead's. (Anderson, 2011) and Sandra Rosenthal argues that "The passage from temporality as the basis of meaningful experience to process metaphysics as the basis for understanding its ontological character is operative in all pragmatists" (Rosenthal, 2012).
4. Little scholarly attention has been paid to centrality of the philosophical ramifications of modern science- physical, biological, and formal and mathematical figure in Royce's philosophy, so I fully applaud the assessment of Michael Futch when he writes: "Even the most cursory glances at his [Royce's] corpus reveals a systematic and deep engagement with many of the leading developments in nineteenth century science, from the nebular hypothesis, or evolution in both its Darwinian and Spenserian form, to the work of Cantor and Dedekind. It would perhaps not be going too far to suggest that, from his first to last writings, the development of Royce's philosophy is in no small measure driven by an attempt to come to terms with these developments" (Futch, 2012) Dewey, of course, valued science and wanted to harness its power constructively, but I believe that Peirce and Royce were more conscious than Dewey of the limitations of science (See Kegley 2010).
5. In a later work, Royce says that one of the salutary effects of the statistical approach to scientific law which he and Peirce advocate will be "to relieve us of a certain unnecessary reverence for the mechanical form of scientific theory- a reverence whose motives are *neither rationally nor empirically well founded.*" (*Royce's Logical Essays*, 55,)

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