

## **Late Royce: An Interpretative Formulation**

Gregory R. Aldin  
Fordham University  
greg.aldin@gmail.com

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Only marginal attention has been given to Josiah Royce over the past century. Overlooking Royce is often justified as a result of fatal problems typically associated with his doctrine of absolute idealism, which William James broadly dismissed as a “metaphysical monster.”<sup>1</sup> However, in 1912, Royce made a profound shift in his philosophical thinking that is largely ignored, or at least seen as failing to overcome his fundamental problems.

I would like to suggest, on the basis of G. H. Howison’s personal idealism, an orientation to Royce for further efforts concerning a new interpretative formulation of his idealism within the “Community of Interpreters” that overcomes these difficulties. Specifically, I believe Royce is strengthened through an emphasis of his robust theory of the Communities of Interpreters, and its fundamentally pluralistic nature, over his Peircean and monistic “Spirit of the Community” commitments.

Royce is often misunderstood as he revised his metaphysical theories a great deal over the course of his life. In his early and middle period, Royce believed there to be a necessary Absolute. Knowledge, for Royce, had its source in experience, which necessitated future and possible experiences to be contained in the Absolute.

This absolute idealism is not generally appealing. The problems posed by such a system were one of the central themes of the famous 1895 debate in California, which the *New York Times* called “a battle of the giants.”<sup>2</sup> Among Royce’s most vocal critics was G. H. Howison.

Howison levels two charges against Royce’s monistic Absolute. First, he claims that Royce may be guilty of pantheism. Since Royce ambiguously claims that human

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1932), 46.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Buckham and George M. Stratton, *George Howison, Philosopher and Teacher* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 80.

experience is contained by the Absolute Experience, he seems to imply that “we are merely part of that Being.”<sup>3</sup> Second, Howison suggests Royce is susceptible to solipsism. Howison writes, “the finite self and the Infinite Self are but two names at the opposite poles of one lonely reality” in Royce’s monism.<sup>4</sup> While Royce defends himself against these claims, the problems remain in his mind long after the encounter. John McDermott suggests that, “Although Royce did not publicly acknowledge that his effort was a failure, it remained that he had serious misgivings about his positions such that he returned over and over again to the biting criticism of Mezes and Howison.”<sup>5</sup>

In part because of these criticisms, Royce’s final shift in metaphysics radically changes the Absolute. His late metaphysics stresses the “Spirit of the Community” instead of what he once called the Absolute. Royce introduced this concept by saying:

The universe, if my thesis is right, is a realm which is through and through dominated by social categories. . . the system of metaphysics which is needed to define the constitution of this world of interpretation must be the generalized theory of an ideal society. Not the Self, not the Logos, not the One, and not the Many, but the Community will be the ruling category of such a philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

While Howison certainly played a part in this shift, Royce has also had his “Peircean Insight” with its social hermeneutic approach. The introduction of Charles Peirce’s semiotics brought new facets to Royce’s long standing concern for loyalty and community. In Royce’s words, Peirce allowed for “a new concreteness, a new significance, and a new relation to the methods and to the presuppositions of inductive science” in his work.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gary L. Cesarz, “Howison’s Pluralistic Idealism: A Fifth Conception of Being?” *The Personalist Forum* 15,1 (Spring 1999): 36.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Le Conte, G.H. Howison, Sidney Edward Mezes and Josiah Royce, *The Conception of God: A Philosophical Discussion Concerning the Nature of the Divine Idea as a Demonstrable Reality* (Norwood: Norwood Press, 1897) 99.

<sup>5</sup> John J. McDermott, “The Confrontation Between Royce and Howison,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 30,4: fn18.

<sup>6</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1913), 280-81.

<sup>7</sup> Josiah Royce, First Berkeley Lecture, July 20, 1914, in *Josiah Royce’s Late Writings: A*

Just as Descartes moved beyond the first level of traditional ontological metaphysics with his subject-centered approach, Royce moved to a third, higher level. This new level of metaphysics is communal, where the “whole reality to which language, sign theory, and hermeneutics refer.”<sup>8</sup> While not abandoning the first two levels of metaphysics, Royce hopes to point towards “an attainment of a larger unity of consciousness” in community, upon which individuals depend “for insight and for salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

There are divided opinions as to whether this final move saves Royce from the inherent problems of his absolutism, which are typified by Howison’s above criticisms. Dwayne Tunstall, following a Marcellian critique, suggests the only viable option to save Royce’s theories as a whole is to “sever the tie between Royce’s ethico-religious insight and his idiosyncratic absolutistic idealism.”<sup>10</sup> Others, such as Griffin Trotter, simply deal with Royce in regard to his social and public philosophy and his ethics. These attempts are misguided, however, as they simply abandon the metaphysical insight that is central in Royce’s late works, leaving whatever ethico-religious element that is left unintelligible and empty.

The other option, employed by Frank Oppenheim, is to see late Royce as a “born-again Peircean pragmatist.”<sup>11</sup> Oppenheim embraces the significance of Royce’s shift from the Absolute to the “Spirit of the Community.” He also stresses the new elements in *The Problem of Christianity* that Peirce’s semiotics allows, showing many insights within

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*Collection of Unpublished and Scattered Works*, vol. 1, ed. Frank Oppenheim (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Frank M. Oppenheim, *Reverence for the Relations of Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 196.

<sup>9</sup> Josiah Royce, “The Will to Interpret,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press), 292, 287.

<sup>10</sup> Dwayne Tunstall, “Concerning the God that is Only a Concept: A Marcellian Critique of Royce’s God,” *Transactions of the Charles Peirce Society* 42,3 (2006): 395.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

ethics, religion, and dialogue between Royce and his fellow pragmatists.

Yet Oppenheim's interpretation of the "Spirit-directed process of communities" also fails on a central point.<sup>12</sup> It does not sufficiently address the critique of Royce's earlier absolute idealism position. As Tunstall suggests, it does not change "the most problematic feature of Royce's idealism: its inadequate, untenable, and overly rationalistic conception of the absolute, or God."<sup>13</sup> Oppenheim's interpretation of Late Royce does not move far enough away from earlier ideas of the Absolute and does not fully embrace new developments that arise in Royce's final years.

Oppenheim's formulation places an emphasis on the directing process of the Spirit, where "one is called by the Spirit."<sup>14</sup> In a letter written six months before his death, Royce answers a question posed to him in regards to what extent *The Problem of Christianity* is a departure from his earlier absolute idealism. While Royce seems to purposefully avoid a direct answer, his statements do illustrate a discontinuity that is problematic to Oppenheim's interpretation. Royce writes that the relation of his Spirit to the Community is similar to the relation of Christ to the Church, saying that "the divine being in whom the members seek, [is] at once their fulfillment, their unity, their diversity, and the goal of their loyalty."<sup>15</sup> Instead of Oppenheim's *external* Spirit which *directs* the process of interpretation similar to the earlier absolute idealism, "the infinite is actual as the infinity of minds in community, as the interpreter or spirit."<sup>16</sup> Royce's Spirit is the higher consciousness of the united community, but precisely predicated on those *particular*

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<sup>12</sup> Oppenheim, *Reverence*, 196.

<sup>13</sup> Tunstall, 395.

<sup>14</sup> Oppenheim, *Reverence*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> See Royce's letter to Mary Whiton Calkins, March 20, 1916, in *Josiah Royce's Late Writings: A Collection of Unpublished and Scattered Works*, vol. 2, ed. Frank Oppenheim (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> John E. Smith, *Royce's Social Infinite* (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950), 107.

interpreting minds

Oppenheim also places undue stress on the similarities of Royce and Peirce.<sup>17</sup> While Royce does fundamentally owe his semiotic formulations to Peirce, Royce often uses its ideas in ambiguous ways. For example, Peirce uses the term “interpretation” as a specific function within the triadic process while Royce uses it for both the process of cognition as well as the product.<sup>18</sup> As Oppenheim himself cites, “Royce acknowledged that Peirce influenced him, yet rarely without adding a distancing phrase like ‘remote as my views often are from his [Peirce’s].’”<sup>19</sup> While Oppenheim does embrace shifts in Royce’s late theories, it still falls short.

I would like to suggest a new direction that Royce can be taken in his late theories that allows for sufficient distance from absolute idealism. As McDermott points out, the critiques of Howison had a profound effect upon Royce’s development. I believe that “The Spirit of the Community” and *The Hope of the Great Community*, both written in the last two years of Royce’s life, point towards a further development that comes remarkably close to Howison’s own position of personal idealism.

Howison summarizes his personal idealism with ten points given in the preface of *The Limits of Evolution*.<sup>20</sup> I will quote these points at length to show that Royce can subscribe to and make use of Howison’s insights to highlight beneficial and largely ignored elements in his thought.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See the second chapter of *Reverence for the Relations of Life*, “The Thought of Late Peirce and Royce: Different? Alike? Both?” where the major differences between Royce and Peirce include “temperament,” “chance,” “interests,” and “values.”

<sup>18</sup> See Smith, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Oppenheim, *Reverence*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Howison, G. H., *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays* (London: MacMillan, 1905).

<sup>21</sup> In the interest of brevity, I have summarized Howison’s points found in *Limits of Evolution*, xii-xviii.

*I. All existence is either the existence of minds or their experience. All material objects are contained within these experiences.*

*II. Time and Space owe their existence to the correlation and coexistence of minds.*

In addition to their shared idealistic premises, Royce and Howison share sentiments on the nature of space and time. In *The Problem of Christianity*, for example, Royce claims that time “expresses a system of essentially social relations. The present interprets the past to the future. At each moment of time the results of the whole world’s history up to that moment are, so to speak, summed up and pass over to the future for its new deeds of creation and interpretation.”<sup>22</sup>

*III. The coexistence of minds form the eternal "unconditionally real" world, the "City of God." Each has the common aim of fulfilling one rational ideal. God is the fulfilled type of every mind, the bond of their union, their final causation.*

*IV. These members have no origin other than the purely logical one of reference to each other. They are, like God, eternal.*

*V. They exist only in and through their mutually thought correlation.*

*IX. These conceptions are founded on the idea of a World of Spirits as the circuit of moral relationships and they carry within them a profound change to the habitual idea of God. Creation is no longer an event, but is ongoing. God represents the realized final cause. Without this goal they would be but void names and bare possibilities.*

*X. The Final cause is not merely the guiding principle but the grounding and fundamental principle of all other causes.*

Howison’s “City of God” and Royce’s ideal Universal Community bear striking similarities. God is the link between society and its fulfillment in both. Howison also describes what Royce suggests the Spirit contains; a goal the Community of Interpreters aim to achieve. For Royce and Howison, a self is in “essence a life which is interpreted, and which interprets itself”<sup>23</sup> and that “Man is an animal that interprets; and therefore man

<sup>22</sup> Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 280.

<sup>23</sup> Josiah Royce, “The Body and the Members,” in *Pragmatism and Classical American*

lives in communities, and depends upon them for insight and salvation.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, without interpretation, Royce suggests, “perceptual and conceptual knowledge is once for all inadequate to the wealth of facts of life.”<sup>25</sup>

*VI. They are thus free in reference to the natural world and to God.*

*VII. This pluralism is held in union by reason. The World of Spirits is the genuine unmoved that moves all things. It is the final cause of all activity.*

Overcoming his early problems of solipsism and pantheism, Royce allows for an emphasis on both the freedom of individuals to interpret as well as their plurality that is clearly summarized in these two points of Howison. Oppenheim stresses the fact that Royce “preferred ‘to develop the Many out of the One,’”<sup>26</sup> but does not fully appreciate how Royce, “became increasingly pluralistic towards the end.”<sup>27</sup> For example, instead of the unified “beloved community” that Royce uses in *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce later states:

First, its members will not be merely individual human beings, nor yet mere collections or masses of human beings, however vast, but communities of some sort, communities such as, at any stage of civilization in which the great community is to be raised to some higher level of organization, already exist.<sup>28</sup>

A pluralism of communities can form the higher goal of civilization.

*VIII. This movement of things changeable toward the goal of the common ideal is what is called the process of Evolution. Evolution is universal in this essentially incomplete and tentative world of experience. The world of spirits, as the ground of it, can therefore not be a product of evolution itself, nor subject in any way to evolution.*

Here Howison addresses the evolution of conceptions within the mind while preserving an

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*Philosophy*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press), 276.

<sup>24</sup> Royce, “The Will to Interpret,” 287.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>26</sup> Oppenheim, *Reverence*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas A. Goudge, Review of *Royce’s Social Infinite* by John E. Smith, *The Philosophical Review* 60,2 (April 1951): 253.

<sup>28</sup> Josiah Royce, *The Hope of the Great Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 42-43.



objective ground in the “World of Spirits.” For Royce, this continual development is the natural result of never-ending process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

This comparison reveals a deep congruence of thought between Royce and Howison as well as many complementary elements. Howison’s personal idealism is plagued by vagueness. Royce, however, can lend a deep understanding of community and interpretation to Howison’s broader picture. Also, Howison struggles to make sense of the relation of pluralistic individuals to a larger group, without robbing them of their freedom. Royce is able to achieve this balance through his triadic interpretative process at the individual level, individuals who are at once forming the community and informed by the community. Likewise, Howison stresses the evolving and pluralistic process of change within a community that is apart from the “World of Spirits.” These are elements Royce moves towards in his late development that the opening Howison provides can show more completely.

Royce’s late theories of metaphysics, underlined through Howison, has broad applications. With what can be seen as a more pragmatic picture of evolving conceptions, emphasis is placed on diverse and particular communities that actively participate in the process instead of the “Spirit-driven” communities within Oppenheim’s formulation. Offering a more robust public philosophy, this system can imagine “a public figure who works in personal and semiprivate conversations, who directly and constantly engages the popular mind.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise in the political sphere, there is an opportunity for a single event to give rise to radically new interpretations within the process of social evolution. Such a theory may even aid in lending a deeper understanding to Thomas Kuhn’s “paradigm

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<sup>29</sup> Kelly A. Parker, “Josiah Royce on ‘The Spirit of the Community’ and the Nature of Philosophy: An Interpretive Reconstruction,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 14,3 (2000): 190.

shifts” or Rorty’s progression of “redemptive truth.”

I believe this new interpretative formulation of Royce’s idealism correctly emphasizes his Community of Interpreters and the significant insights found therein, while not abandoning the Peircean and “Spirit of the Community” elements. The possibility of such a new formulation shows Royce’s continuing importance and complexity that still has much to offer.