

## *Spirituality and Moral Struggle*

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So much of Royce's philosophy is concerned with transcendence that I am inclined to believe that religion, and spirituality in particular, was the greatest interest of his life. One can hardly read *The World and the Individual* or *The Problem of Christianity* without becoming aware of spirituality as a profound human need: a fervid longing for what lies beyond. But the word "spirituality" is rarely used by Royce even when spirituality is under implicit discussion and the use of the word would enlighten the reader. The word "spirit" appears now and then like a signal flare but its meaning is never expounded and we are left in the dark. Let us see what clarifying light can be shed on Royce's conception of spirituality.

That this conception is vague and not explicitly developed is most unfortunate, but Royce is not entirely to blame. What spirituality means is vague in the literature of the great spiritual traditions. But if it means anything special at all, it must mean the opposite of worldliness. Spiritual gifts must be such as the world cannot give.

Peace is one of these gifts. The world may give us wealth and power, pleasure and happiness, on rare occasions even love, but it cannot give us peace. *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives.* Spirit does not give as the world gives because the world is not its home, and even when it appears in the world it prefers not to dwell there. Its primary gift is neither wealth nor power nor any mundane treasure, but rather liberation from the cares of the world.

Travail is inseparable from worldly life, but whoever lives in the spirit, though he may seem to die in the sight of the unwise, is at peace. Spirituality is therefore at least

compensatory. Here the major religions of the East are in agreement with the New Testament. “The Tao is always at ease” (Lao-tzu 73). It is serene. Suzuki-roshi describes Nirvana as “perfect composure” (Suzuki 94). Yet peace, serenity, and perfect composure can be understood negatively to mean the mere absence of suffering. Spirituality needs a positive dimension if the peace of Christ is to mean more than the nihilism of bodily death.

The New Testament and Catholic philosophy suggest a second spiritual gift which is not compensatory. Those who are liberated from the cares of the world are not only at peace: they are supremely happy. *These things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.* According to St. Thomas, the blessed in heaven are filled with joy at the immediate knowledge of God which is given to them. The world may satisfy our needs and make us happy from time to time, but worldly happiness is inevitably undercut. Spirituality renounces the world in which happiness and loss are one in exchange for the boundless joy of eternity.

According to Royce, all human suffering is a consequence of sin and by sin we should understand a defect in a will. We suffer because we ourselves have sinned or because our neighbors have sinned and their sins are finally indistinguishable from ours. And since even the natural world is supposed to be an expression of intelligent agency —“all Nature is an expression of Mind” (Royce 2: 158)—evil is also explainable as the result of some defect in the will of nature. Thus when suffering cannot be traced to the sins of a human agent, it can be traced as readily to the agency of nature and its explanation called sin rather than misfortune or absurdity. Royce’s conclusion is that all evil is moral evil.

The idea that nature as a whole is an expression of mind and can be held accountable for sin is *prima facie* implausible, but some plausibility can be given to it by considering the reasoning from which it supposedly flows. Mind and matter seem to be very different: the first is unquestionably conscious, the second apparently unconscious; but there are pervasive similarities between them. Matter seems to display purposiveness as does mind. Flowers seem to reach purposively for the sunlight and rivers appear to flow for the sake of reaching the ocean. Material systems tend to repeat the same highly organized patterns with predictable regularity. What we sometimes call tendencies or rhythms in matter we call habits in mind. The emergence of mind out of matter is unintelligible and it is absurd to reduce mind to the motions of matter. Therefore, we may conclude, with Peirce, that “physical events are but degraded or undeveloped forms of psychological events” (Peirce 173). From here it is not completely unfounded to maintain that there is a kind of willfulness in nature or resistance to order which amounts to sin.

This account of evil as in every case deriving from a moral problem has the advantage of making all evil seem tractable. We can atone for sin, and presumably a defective will can be repaired and made to distinguish properly between right and wrong. But this view has a disadvantage also. It makes us responsible not only for ourselves and others but for nature as well. When a hurricane devastates a city or wild fires raze hundreds of acres of valuable forest, we should feel guilty, as if we had wrought the destruction with our own hands, and we should redouble our atonement. On this view, we are obliged to accept an infinite moral task which only God could reasonably be expected to complete.

Royce's account of spirituality is a response to moral evil. In our finitude, which means our moral imperfection, we are disunited with God. Spirituality means uniting ourselves with God by working to defeat moral evil. This account has two markedly different outcomes: one compensatory because it means to be, the other compensatory in spite of hoping to be more.

Traditional Christian theology maintains a sharp contrast between God and the world. God's perfection would be sullied by contact with mundane affairs, so he is said to exist in a realm apart. But according to Royce, the infinite order and the finite order, the eternal order and temporal order, "are not divided in their Being" (Royce 2: 386). Their being is ideal and they are related dialectically as all ideal objects are related. They are names for the same reality viewed under two different aspects.

What follows from the dialectical identity of God and the world is that God suffers with us as we suffer and strives with us as we strive to improve ourselves and the world by atoning for sin. On the one hand, because he is infinite and eternal, God is complete. Nothing can be added to God and nothing taken away. There is no past or future in him, which means no striving, no loss, and no gain. On the other hand, as finite and temporal, God is incomplete forever, suffering and striving endlessly on behalf of everything good.

The difference between human beings and God is both a difference of degree and an absolute difference. The difference is absolute because finitude is different in kind from infinity; it is one of degree because the movement from a finite to an infinite quantity is continuous. Royce plays on the dialectic of the finite and the infinite. Human beings are finite and limited. God is infinite and unlimited. God strives as we strive, but his striving is infinite. We grow old eventually and retire from the fray, but God is never weary and he

never ceases to fight against evil. God suffers as we suffer, but with the benefit of infinite understanding. He sees the far off good which our pain is working, the good which, if we could see it, might at least help us to accept our plight.

In one sense, union with God is *fait accompli*: “In him you are even now at home” (Royce 2: 427-28). But union in this basic sense is imperfect and not particularly spiritual. Spirituality means exchanging our finitude for the infinity of God by deliberately identifying our narrow selves with the Absolute Self. In Royce, as in Emerson, limitation is the only sin. We transcend our limitations and shed our finitude by broadening our span of moral attention to infinity and by working for the broadest possible loyalty. This means recognizing that I ought to atone not only for the sins I can trace directly to my narrow self, but for all sin. The sins of my neighbor and even of nature are mine also, and salvation means undertaking to atone for all the sins of the world.

Atonement is noble enough to be called spirituality, but is it properly spiritual? Uniting ourselves with God would not end our suffering but multiply it since God suffers with us and his suffering is infinitely greater than ours. The more we identify ourselves with God, the more we undertake to atone for all the sins of the world. The magnitude of our struggle and in turn of our suffering approaches infinity. The best we can hope for is to fight bravely and to be honored as heroes. We cannot ask for peace, and to do so would be sinful. We would be asking God to take a moral holiday.

Atonement is an affair of the world, and I have already said that spirituality cannot be another name for involvement in the affairs of the world. If spirituality would deliver us from suffering, it must teach us to transcend not only our narrow selves, but self altogether, redirecting our gaze away from the affairs of the world in the direction of something

beyond. Otherwise there can be no escape from the demands of living, no perfection which is not moral perfection, and no peace for the Children of Adam.

Recognizing the insufficiency of the first outcome, here and there Royce comes close to offering a second. The second outcome begins to show itself when Royce considers what else it can mean to identify ourselves with God. To identify with God is not only to undertake an infinite moral task. It is also to adopt a God's eye view of human history. The final sentence of *The World and the Individual* has us discovering at last "the homeland of Eternity." God sees the world *sub specie aeternitatis* and we may see it that way also insofar as we identify ourselves with him. We are parts of God simply by virtue of being human. "Close is our touch with the eternal" (Royce 2: 452). In a sense, the view from eternity is our birthright.

Such a grand vision might be a source of joy as it is in Catholic philosophy, and Royce's prose is full of asseverations wherever eternity is mentioned as if he hoped it would be. But in Royce's system the object of God's eternal vision is framed in infinite struggle and pain. Whether finite or infinite, a self is always hemmed in by enemies, and spiritual practice consists in trading our finite selves for an infinite self, so that anxiety about the future of a particular being with particular values is multiplied to infinity. Peace and joy cannot be had while a finite self, much less an infinite one, remains to take thought for the evil of tomorrow. On Royce's account, spirituality can only mean accelerated worldliness. The second outcome is as unsatisfactory as the first because even in union with God we cannot be happy. There is no beatific vision in which to rejoice.

Royce was a great moralist and that is why he counseled us against peace: "Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion" (Royce 2: 407). Righteousness demands hard work.

Virtues require endless practice to be approximated and they are never quite mastered. We may always succumb to temptation, if only by being lazy. In the eyes of a moralist, the desire for peace looks like weakness of will or flimsiness of commitment, like the childish desire to skip school on Friday. But it is weakness or flimsiness only in her eyes. Children often know better than adults how to bask in the simple enjoyments of the moment, and they may have a keener sense of how little everything matters in the end.

Royce understood the longing for peace as an outcome of spirituality and wrote about it with solemnity: “The only way to give our view of Being rationality is to see that we long for the Absolute only in so far as in us the Absolute also longs, and seeks, through our very temporal striving, the peace that is nowhere in Time, but only, and yet absolutely, in Eternity” (Royce 2: 386). But according to Royce’s official view, spirituality always has a moral structure and a moral outcome, so that peace is ever out of reach.

Royce’s student Santayana was at odds with his teacher in many particulars, but the two shared an abiding interest in spirituality. Much of Santayana’s theory of spirituality can be read as a continuation of Royce’s work on the same subject, yet Santayana makes progress where Royce does not by distinguishing carefully and consistently between spirituality and morals. Santayana knew better than Royce that when spirituality mingles with values it becomes ensnared and turns into worldliness.

Spirit, which is another name for consciousness or attention, must not be confused with the animal psyche in which it arises. One is content to be absorbed in the moment while the other is constantly striving to improve external circumstances. The animal has no choice but to concern itself with good and bad, since it flourishes under some conditions and declines under others. But spirit flourishes in all circumstances as long as the animal

lives on which it supervenes. Ugliness or depravity would be as fascinating to a pure spirit as goodness or beauty. On this view, spiritual life is the opposite of moral life, and spirituality has nothing to do with values: “it is *disintoxication* from their influence” (Santayana 30).

Considered apart from its inevitable connection with an animal host, spirit is purely contemplative, dispassionate and unbiased. It has no stake in external circumstances because it has no desires of its own. The future is of no concern to spirit because any present is as good as any future could be. Spirit is like the birds of the air that neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns yet their Father in heaven feeds them. Its whole life consists in contemplating forms and one form is as good to contemplate as another. In a way, spirit is a poet and spiritual life a kind of poetry. Forms are adored for their own sakes and each one so completely that spirit would never trade it for another if the animal underneath did not become tired of standing in the same position or begin to worry about catching cold or finding love or making dinner.

Spirituality is consciousness undisturbed by belief. It requires self-transcendence but not of the kind which eventuates in a larger, more burdensome self. By self-transcendence we should rather understand self-forgetfulness or the temporary annihilation of self altogether, as in the famous passage of Emerson’s where he becomes transparent to the world. The meaning of self is ambiguous in Royce but very clear in Santayana. A self is a material psyche, a particular animal struggling to maintain its existence and hence vitally concerned with the use of objects and the outcome of events. In self-forgetfulness, one identifies for the moment with spirit for which the accidents of existence are a



delightful show. The result is temporary liberation from the anxieties of animal life by means of absorption in the objects of intuition apart from any beliefs about them.

In Royce, spirituality is an answer to suffering. It is compensatory even when it would be joyous. We seek it because the world makes us unhappy. But Santayana asks us to take seriously a kind of spirituality which is more than compensatory, one that animates the highest reaches of our consciousness. In duress and possibly in dying we may retreat inward, forget ourselves, and identify instead with spirit which if crushed here springs to life again somewhere else. In doing so even the instruments of our suffering may seem beautiful or at least laughable. Why should *these* villains be tormenting us and not some others?

Shortly before the battle of Antietam, Union and Confederate regiments fought courageously at Fox's Gap in Maryland. As the soldiers of the 9<sup>th</sup> New York climbed the Old Sharpsburg Road to join the fighting, Private David Thompson paused to observe the progress of the whole First Corps that followed them. He described what he saw in writing: "a monstrous, crawling, blue-black snake, miles long, quilled with the silver slant of muskets at a 'shoulder,' its sluggish tail writhing slowly up over the distant eastern ridge, its bruised head weltering in the roar and smoke upon the crest above" (Sears 136). Confederate general D. H. Hill observed the same scene from the summit of the mountain. He knew the fighting would shortly intensify, but the sight of the Union advance, he later wrote, was "grand and sublime" (Sears 136).

Yet we do not need to be in trouble before we can identify with spirit and live for a while in its eternity. The most ordinary forms can be delightful and absorbing if we are not too distracted to attend to them. Red lights at the top of a crane blinking against a black

sky, voices shouting angrily in the street or the sound of glass breaking, the fragrance of the breeze along the shore or the texture of cut grass may take us outside of ourselves for a moment and give us a perspective on eternity. Such ecstatic enjoyments are spontaneous, not compensatory. They are arguably the highest of perfections because in them consciousness, which is the crown of material life, is most nearly pure.

The Christian tradition confuses spirituality with morals and politics, and they are no less confused in Royce's philosophy. As inheritors of both, we may be tempted to look for salvation in the wrong places. Santayana guards against this temptation by driving home the difference between spirituality and morals. Salvation is nowhere to be found in the affairs of the world, no matter how heroically we conduct ourselves in them. The more we attend to them the more distracted and bedeviled our lives will be. Yet if we can loose the ties that bind us to the world, if we can forget ourselves and follow instead the promptings of form, surely we will dwell in the house of the Lord a little while. In the view from a hilltop or in the colors of a sunset we may find the peace of God which passes understanding.

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