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Atonement and Eidetic Extinction

Josiah Royce's philosophy holds many attractions: his ethics of loyalty, his painstaking effort to do justice to insights from both religion and science, his thorough knowledge of the history of philosophy, his treatment of non-Western philosophies, his attention to language and literature as sources of wisdom, his profound philosophy of community. His visionary concept of atonement is especially compelling, pointing as it does toward a practical and constructive role for philosophy in society.

Royce's Absolute Idealism, famously repudiated by William James, has been regarded by even sympathetic readers as a liability. No doubt it has driven some potential interpreters away from his work altogether, and led others to avoid the topic and focus politely on other aspects of his system of thought. This skittishness about the Absolute is unfortunate: not only was and is Royce best known as a metaphysician, but Royce clearly believed that this brand of idealism was the core of his philosophical vision.¹ It certainly underlies his compelling account of atonement.

A historian of ideas who wishes to understand a philosopher must, I believe, learn to think with and like the mind that is his subject. This in turn requires that one be able to

¹ Elsewhere, I argue that Royce's commitment to Absolute Idealism remained constant, even though in his last writings the Absolute itself was reconceived in terms of the Infinite Community (Parker 121-23).

accept the philosopher's core beliefs sympathetically, *as if they were the core of one's own thought*. Only after such a truly sympathetic understanding—reading a philosopher from the inside, so to speak—can one accurately assess the philosopher's particular insights, or form an estimation of the body of work as a whole.

The present exploration of Royce's theory of atonement arises from an effort to comprehend his attraction to the metaphysics of Absolute Idealism. It may be that for Royce this was more than an intellectual attraction, but rather a personal need linked to his sense of his position in a world beset by challenge and even tragedy. It is a position of sorrow, of insight into suffering, into *the unbearable idea of complete loss*. I propose the term *eidetic extinction*, to be explained later, to capture the nearly unthinkable severity of this idea. It is from this stance, the awareness of the specter of eidetic extinction, that Royce worked out his remarkable insights into the nature of loyalty, his account of genuinely loyal communities animated by living, superhuman spirit, and the idea that he apparently regarded as a permanent source of hope: the always-present possibility of atonement for any transgression.

Royce's great insights, born of the awareness of the possibility of complete loss, were developed a hundred years ago, before the horrors of the twentieth century had unfolded. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we must test them against what has ensued—world wars, systematic persecution and torture, state-sponsored terrorism, genocide.² My

2 Royce was indeed aware of deep loss, of course. His painful personal experience with the mental illness and death of his son Christopher is well-known (Clendenning, 320). His sensitivity to the unique moral implications of large-scale moral atrocities is less well-

aim here is to challenge Royce's Absolute Idealism by engaging what may be the central questions for his philosophy: *What are the requirements of atonement?* and *What are its limits?* These questions bear ethical, social, political, and religious significance; in the context of Royce's thought, though, they ultimately emerge as metaphysical questions. In the course of clarifying these questions in our twenty-first century context, we will engage both objections and supporting insights from several recent European thinkers. Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Václav Havel, and Immanuel Levinas, all of whom who have written in direct response to the catastrophic human events of the past century.

1. The Attraction of Idealism

Naïve Idealism: Suffering as Justified in God's Inscrutable Will

Let us begin with a famous scene from Dostoyevsky, the conversation between the brothers Ivan and Alyosha Karamazov at the Metropolis tavern. Explaining his rejection of

known. It is demonstrated by his early recognition of an incident that some today identify as the “radical evil” of genocide: he singled out the Turkish killing of Armenians for condemnation in “The Problem of Job” in 1898. This campaign by Sultan Abdul Hamid II was the precursor of the more widely known offenses against the Armenians which took place in 1915-17. However these events may be viewed today, Royce at the time recognized the earlier incident as a distinctive kind of violation, aggression that constitutes what he would later call “a crime against humanity at large” (*Philosophy of Loyalty*, 95). Finally, as an American (and a Californian) he had to be aware at some level of the destruction of Native American peoples and their cultures, which occurred under United States government policy during his lifetime.

the God that Alyosha worships, Ivan relates two cases of the suffering of innocent children (he describes himself as a collector of reports of terrible transgressions and suffering: Ivan is thus something of an aspiring Absolute Mind, but trapped in the finitude of time and in full rebellion). The first relates the suffering of a five-year-old girl tortured by her parents, locked in a freezing privy overnight, who prayed to her “dear, kind God” to protect her. The second tells of an eight-year-old boy, a serf, who injured the favorite hound of the general who owned him as part of a “property of two thousand souls.” In retribution the general set the boy to run in the hunting field and, while all watched—including the boy's mother—he let his dogs tear the boy to pieces.

The last of the three theodicies Ivan considers and rejects in light of these cases is this: from the Absolute perspective at the end of time, all will be revealed to be just. “[W]hen everything in heaven and earth blends into one hymn of praise and everything that lives and has lived cries aloud: 'Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed.' . . . then, of course, the crown of knowledge will be reached and all will be made clear” (Dostoyevsky 238).

This variety of idealism is of course the target of William James's famous criticism of Royce: if we are assured that all is justified in the end, no matter how it may appear to us here and now, we may take the long view and enjoy a “moral holiday” with respect to any wrongs we witness. Ivan Karamazov's words concur with James:

It's not worth the tears of that one tortured child.... It's not worth it, because those tears are unatoned for. They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how?.... I don't want harmony.... I would rather be left with unavenged suffering. I

would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, *even if I were wrong*. (Dostoyevsky 238)

Far better for our humanity if we accept responsibility for the wrongs we perceive, and do our best to address them even in our limited, perhaps misguided state. As for that ultimate harmony, well, as James is alleged to have exclaimed, “damn the Absolute!”

Roycean Idealism: The Will to Truth and Justice

But of course Royce's idealism was not of this naïve stripe: he had certainly internalized Dostoevsky's point every bit as well as James had. He proposed an account of the reconciliation of ideas in the Absolute that places a great responsibility on us finite, temporal souls. No wrong, no bit of suffering can ever be erased. Having occurred, it is a real fact for all time—this is what Royce calls “*the hell of the irrevocable*” (*Problem of Christianity* 162). It can only be taken up, recognized, honored, and willfully acted upon by the wronged community in light of a higher ideal. In short, Royce insists that we must perform the very atonement that Ivan calls for, if we can: atonement is a creative act of community-making, or re-making, to more closely approach the ideals of connection and love. Atonement is not restitution or retribution, or any other form of punitive action. It is “not so much a mere compensation for what has been lost, as a transfiguration of the very loss into a gain that, without this very loss, could never have been won” (*Problem of Christianity* 181). A transgression *may* be reconciled in the end, the hoped-for harmony *may* be attained, but only if those who were wronged can find a way to create a reconciliation among themselves and with the transgressor.

Remarkably, Royce goes further to assert that the human community has, as “the

central postulate of its highest spirituality,” the following assurance regarding the possibility of atonement: “*No baseness or cruelty of treason so deep or so tragic shall enter our human world, but that loyal love shall be able in due time to oppose to just that deed of treason its fitting deed of atonement*” (*Problem of Christianity* 186). While this postulate, as a postulate, “cannot be proved,” it must be asserted as “the basis of all the best and most practical spirituality” (*Problem of Christianity* 186). We must will to believe that atonement is always possible. The question, then, is whether this is a plausible position.

2. Atonement and the Impossibility of Forgiveness

We will approach the question whether atonement is indeed always possible by way of a signature discussion of the unforgivability of “radical evil.” Hannah Arendt learned of the atrocities at Auschwitz in 1943. Twenty-one years later, she reflected on her response to that appalling discovery in an interview:

But this was different. It was really as if an abyss had opened. Because we had the idea that amends could somehow be made for everything else, as amends can be made for just about everything at some point in politics. But not for this. *This ought not to have happened*. And I don't mean just the number of victims. I mean the method. . . . Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can. . . . This was something completely different. Personally I could accept everything else. (“What Remains?” 13-14)

Arendt elsewhere explained that “radical evil” comprises those acts which can be neither forgiven nor punished; “they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make

their appearance” (*Human Condition*, 241). After reporting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt did reconsider the nature of such actions, arguing instead that they are characterized by the sheer banality of the details, logistics, and mindset required for their perpetration.³ This change in perspective did not, however, affect her view that such acts are unforgivable.

There is one aspect of such actions that is particularly problematic from the standpoint of metaphysical idealism, and which in my view does warrant the adjective “radical.” Where a people, a culture, a religion, a language, a way of life are targeted for destruction, we do indeed confront “something completely different.” Here the aim is to annihilate Ideas or Forms themselves: “eidetic extinction” occurs when violence is used as a means to introduce a substitute reality. We do not know whether these Forms are eternal, but we may take comfort in doctrines that assure us they are.⁴ The thought that one's most

3 “It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical,' that it is only extreme. . . .

Thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated” (Letter to Gershom Gerhard Scholem, quoted in Kohn, 6).

4 The *eidos* (Form or Idea) is conceived more or less on the Platonic model, with the notable exception that the *eidos* is not known to be eternal or universal. There are thus Forms for plants and animals, for example, but when all the individuals in a species have died off it is uncertain that the Form's survival has any significance. There may be cases where species extinction is also eidetic extinction; further, it may be that all extinction is eidetic extinction. On the notion of cultural forms, compare the discussion of mythos, trope, and symbol in Alexander.

cherished ideals, way of life and true beliefs—not to mention the persons who constitute one's community—are not eternal, that they can be extinguished and lost forever, is an unthinkable prospect. I believe this prospect is what makes Absolute Idealism attractive. Absolute Idealism is a metaphysical guarantee against radical, absurd loss of the sort that Ivan Karamazov honored with his collection of stories; atonement is Royce's sophisticated answer to this metaphysical danger. (The parallel of this view to various doctrines of the immortality of the soul, including Royce's, is not insignificant, but space prohibits their consideration here.)

Arendt's characterization of radical evil appeals to the possibility of punishment and forgiveness. It is crucial to note, however, that forgiveness and atonement are not the same thing, and in fact there may be cases where one occurs without the other. Jacques Derrida has challenged Arendt's concept of forgiveness, arguing that it (and any other concept of “pure forgiveness”) is internally contradictory and hence *rationaly* impossible. He concludes that forgiveness may indeed be possible, but that “forgiveness is mad, and. . . it must remain a madness of the impossible” (Derrida 39). Derrida of course recognizes that people do forgive. The point is that because the source of forgiveness is in the irrational and contradictory sphere of human life, all things are equally forgivable: there is thus no such thing as an “unforgivable” act.

If we follow Derrida's insight that forgiveness is irrational, and add that it is fundamentally an individual act, and moreover that it is in many cases at least a means to *forgetting*, then the political, social, and religious value of the concept comes into serious doubt. Indeed, Royce himself observed that forgiveness was of limited relevance here: “It is

useless, then, to say that the problem of reconciliation, so far as the community is concerned, is the problem of 'forgiveness'" (*Problem of Christianity* 177).⁵ What concerns us is not after all the possibility of forgiveness of radical evil, but the requirements for and the possibility of a mediated recovery or reconstitution of community in its aftermath—that is, of atonement.⁶

3. The Metaphysical Conditions for Atonement

Is Absolute Mind then necessary for atonement? Or is atonement possible within the limitations of a strictly finite, contingent mind or community? It seems clear that atonement

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- 5 This may put Royce at odds with the Gospel, where (as Arendt notes) Jesus highlighted “the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs” (*Human Condition* 238). See Matthew 18:10: “Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'” Jesus here indicates that forgiveness is to be granted without limit, and does not call for reconciliation—or even for the transgressor's recognition of a wrong—as a part of forgiveness.
- 6 Derrida explicitly distinguishes between forgiveness as an event that “must engage two singularities: the guilty (the 'perpetrator' as they say in South Africa) and the victim,” on the one hand, and the structure of such restorative actions as amnesty, reconciliation, and reparation, where a mediating third intervenes, on the other (Derrida 42). This of course replicates Royce's distinction between dyadic situations, including forgiveness, which may be defined by “dangerous dyads,” and those like atonement where a mediating “third” is active.

is possible for actual communities with limited perspectives. Royce's own examples of atonement all (necessarily) involve such communities.

Of course atonement by actual communities would be possible if they are in fact fragments of the absolute, if they are acting under the pull of, and as temporal instantiations of, the ideal Universal Community (*Problem of Christianity* 387). So our question really is whether there is reason to regard them as essentially or primarily finite, whether we may or should put the absolute perspective out of mind. Royce's Harvard colleague William Ernest Hocking made an observation about the practical reality of eidetic extinction that suggests this is so: "Any experience dropped by us is dropped absolutely. Even though the One may attend to what we let go, our letting go is one of the absolute facts; a stitch dropped by ourselves is dropped by the World, irrevocably dropped" (Hocking 180). The absolute perspective is not *impossible*, in Hocking's view, but it is *irrelevant* in light of temporal communities' inevitable effect on the constitution of reality that this perspective will encompass.

Perhaps an example will help illustrate the point. Václav Havel observed that ideology imposed by violence (i.e. a totalitarian system supported by propaganda, aimed at eidetic extinction) "becomes a reality itself, albeit a reality altogether self-contained, one that on certain levels (chiefly inside the power structure) may have even greater weight than reality as such" (Havel 47). In such a system the best response of the politically powerless is "living in truth," to insist on the true account of what is happening, of what has happened, even when there is no apparent practical hope that the truth will ever be known or that it

will result in changes in the public order.⁷ As practical and cautious as it is, Havel exhibits a hope or faith that the forms can thus be preserved through the will of the community, and that as long as this work is done by even a few, it might—but will not necessarily—“actually affect society” (Havel 104).

What are the prospects for this happening in the face of a well-organized totalitarian program of eidetic extinction? In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) Arendt had discussed “holes of oblivion” into which persons disappeared (along with their ideals, beliefs, truths, all that they as persons symbolically carried forward in time). She later expressed the more optimistic view that no regime is practically capable of completing the work of eidetic extinction. In a letter she wrote: “I speak at length in the 'Totalitarianism' about the 'holes of oblivion.' On page 212 of the Eichmann book I say 'The holes of oblivion do not exist. Nothing human is that perfect, and there are simply too many people in the world to make oblivion possible. One man will always be left alive to tell the story’” (“Holes of Oblivion,” 389). This suggests that complete loss is only possible if that “one man's story” is forgotten *by the community*. As Hocking says, our letting go in that case is irrevocable, it completes the work of eidetic extinction.

Is the guidance and influence of the Absolute necessary for the community to remember, and to then perform the work of atonement? Royce insists that the community must be informed by a superhuman perspective, by a guiding spirit of loyalty in order to accomplish this work. One wonders whether a more limited perspective and wisdom might

7 Royce is eloquent on just such “lost causes,” which often inspire the highest degree of loyalty (*Philosophy of Loyalty* 129-133).

suffice. Arendt, again considering the requirements for forgiveness, observes that indeed “Nobody can forgive himself.” Contrary to traditional Christian views (including Royce’s), though, she asserts that the “unworldly” force of love is not needed for forgiveness—*respect*, the public counterpart of love, “is quite sufficient to prompt forgiving of what a person did, for the sake of the person” (*Human Condition*, 243). Perhaps such respect for persons can exist in a contingent, limited community, and perhaps such a community is sufficient to carry out the work of atonement.

Here we come to the metaphysical bedrock beneath these matters. If the absolute is real, it guarantees the possibility of atonement in every case. But if the only perspective on reality is that available to actual limited communities of mind, then atonement is possible only in those cases where the community possesses the requisite qualities (respect, loyalty to truth, the will to “live in truth”) and acts to bring it about. Rather than requiring Absolute Mind, then, it appears that we need only a Sufficient Mind—that of a loyal actual community of memory, acting under the guidance of its perhaps merely local spirit of loyalty—to accomplish the work of atonement.

Eidetic extinction does occur. Perhaps at some level such perishing is even a constant fact of life, though not because of the actions of a totalitarian regime. But so also is the continual creation of new forms: as James insists, the mind is a creative and fecund part of the world. So truth and its forms may not be eternal, but neither are they after all so rare. In practical and political terms, atonement is then a powerful type of world-making that lies within the power of actual communities to accomplish in real time. Eidetic extinction is real, and, as Whitehead observes, our awareness of the reality of such loss is at the heart of

tragedy (Whitehead 286). Through atonement, though, it is *possible* to constitute new forms that take up and transform the past.⁸

4. The Limits of Atonement

Finally, we come to the hardest question: Is atonement always possible? Royce asserts that it is, but as we have seen this may be a metaphysician's technical point rather than one that can necessarily offer real hope to an actual community. Atonement that is realized only in the the Absolute would be the naïve and morally repugnant ideal that Ivan Karamazov rejects. This may be enough for a mere metaphysician, but it seems inadequate to support our real ethical, political, and religious needs (needs that Royce himself recognized—I hasten to add that *he* was no “mere metaphysician”). Worse, such atonement may not even be possible, as events are defined and the outcomes diminished by the forgetfulness of actual communities, in the way that Hocking identifies. So the question is whether atonement is always possible for actual communities, or whether there are cases where radical evil, programs of eidetic extinction, are *essentially* bound to succeed in spite of the loyal efforts of the community.

8 Consider the case of contemporary Native American communities, whose history, beliefs, and cultural practices were systematically disrupted to the point where living members of these communities have relatively little direct connection to pre-contact forms of life. Nonetheless, the concerted effort to reconstitute a distinctive Native culture from the remnants (especially since the 1970's) has had some success. The reconstitution of a culture after eidetic extinction is of course extremely long, difficult and sorrow-filled work.

This would be the case if forgetting were in some way ensured, if forgetting itself were an inevitable result of the totalitarian program. As we have seen, there is reason to believe such perfect destruction of memory is not possible. Forgetfulness may everywhere reign, to paraphrase Heidegger, but there seems to be no way to ensure the complete extinction of any particular form. Extermination of a people, of their forms of life, may be devastating beyond comprehension, but it is apparently never metaphysically complete—even within the stream of time. This is an empirical and historical observation—certainly countless people (victims and perpetrators alike) have believed that complete destruction of memory is possible. That it is apparently not, calls for some explanation.

I can only sketch such an explanation here. It would to some extent follow the lead of Dwayne Tunstall, who turns to Immanuel Levinas to correct what he sees as an error in Royce's ethics.⁹ Royce finds the absolute via metaphysics, and via his logical/mathematical account of the relation of the individual to an infinite totality. Levinas begins with the phenomenology of that relation, and finds that the fundamental ethical insight occurs in the direct encounter with the face of the other: where the other presents his face he can “oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze. . . . Here is established a relationship not with a very great resistance, but with the absolutely other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance” (“Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” 55). Levinas continues, with an argument that

9 Tunstall calls this Royce's “egological error.”

interestingly parallels Royce's own "argument from error":¹⁰

Ethical resistance (encountered in the face of the other) is the presence of infinity. . . . But then the other is not simply another freedom; to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come from a dimension of the ideal. The other must be closer to God than I. This is certainly not a philosopher's invention, but the first given of moral consciousness, which could be defined as the consciousness of the privilege the other has relative to me. Justice well ordered begins with the other.

("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 55-56)

Here in the most basic and common human encounter we have the antidote to forgetting. However distorted and damaged the rest of one's reality may be, the other is always available; through his face, we may recover the ethical realm. The face of the other is in this way the reminder that makes memory possible in any circumstances. In the encounter with this face we are quickened by the interpreting spirit, memory is awakened, and atonement may occur. Though further analysis is needed for us to be confident of this conclusion, this reminder would seem to remain available even where the persecutor shows no face (whose face is hidden by mask, hood, or the soldier's trained unseeing stare). It would seem to remain available where the victim has been objectified and dehumanized, where the victim's face is hidden, where his vision is blinded by a hood or a spotlight, even where the victim's

¹⁰ This parallel requires elaboration: just as a real, absolute perspective on truth is necessary for our awareness of error (obtained in interaction with the world) to be meaningful, so is a real, infinite perspective on justice necessary for our awareness of injustice (obtained in confrontation with the other) to be meaningful.

eyes have been gouged out (recall that Oedipus renounced his citizenship in Thebes with this act). As long as there is one left to tell the story, and one to witness that teller's face, atonement remains possible—even in a contingent, finite community. Atonement is always possible. All we need in order to begin the work of atonement is that conversation between Alyosha and Ivan in the Metropolis.

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