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Pragmatist, Ethicist, Philosopher of Religion

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Christian Polke

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Hamburg/Göttingen, September 2021

Christoph Seibert
Christian Polke

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Introduction

Christoph Seibert and Christian Polke

At the turn of the 19th century Josiah Royce, alongside William James, was surely one of the most prominent figures on New England's intellectual scene. Bruce Kuklick has described these days in detail as "The Golden Age" of Cambridge, Massachusetts.[1] Perhaps the charismatic aura of both, the humanities and the sciences, which was associated almost exclusively with Harvard University, is never again to be repeated. However, the two giants, as well as their battle regarding the Absolute, suffered different fates. One of them, William James, has become one of the most popular and well-known scholars since that time; his works have never been forgotten and, moreover, they have become influential in different areas of research throughout the world. Royce was proved right when, in a memorial address just one year after James' death, he said: "Already, within a year of his death, he [sc. James; C.P.] has begun to acquire something of a classic rank and dignity. In future this rank and dignity will long increase."[2]

As one of the founders of pragmatism besides Charles S. Peirce, James soon became the giant of American philosophical, psychological, and religious thought, whereas his colleague and neighbor in Irving Street, Josiah Royce, "New England's" version of Hegel,[3] suffered a different fate. Only a decade after his death, on September 14, 1916, his writings seemed to be outdated, and his work fell into oblivion. Of course, some members of Harvard's younger generation preserved some of Royce's crucial insights and continued to work on similar issues. William Ernest Hocking looked at the question of God, and Clarence Irving Lewis researched the field of logics, to mention just two of those. Nevertheless, as the first genuine American school of thought, other figures played the leading roles during the rest of the golden years of pragmatism including, amongst others, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Sidney Hook. The fact that Dewey and Mead in particular shared the interests of social philosophy and metaphysics with Royce was relegated to the

[1] Cf. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930* (1977), Yale University Press: New Haven/London 1979.

[2] Josiah Royce, "William James and the Philosophy of Life," in: Josiah Royce, *William James and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Life*, Macmillan: New York 1911, 3–45, 7.

[3] Cf. John Kaag, "American Interpretations of Hegel. Josiah Royce's Philosophy of Loyalty," *HPQ* 26 (2009), 83–101.

background. After the analytical turn in the middle of the 20th century, there was an almost complete loss of interest in Royce. Despite this, philosophers such as John E. Smith (1921–2009), Bruce Kuklick (*1941), and John J. McDermott (1932–2018), as well as a few others, published important studies on Royce. Another 20 years passed, however, before academics became fully aware of the importance of Royce's thinking as it relates to the challenges and problems of our contemporary intellectual and social life. Who, then, was Royce?[4] And why is his thinking still important for us today? Answers to this latter question will be presented within the studies of this collection. However, some short remarks addressing the former question should also be given in this introduction.

Josiah Royce was the fourth surviving child of a poor family of "Westerners" in Grass Valley, California, born on November 20, 1855. Throughout his lifetime, he remained connected with the Pacific coast and the surrounding areas. This already distinguished him from most of the Bostonian mandarins, of whom almost all grew up in the wealthy families of the East coast. Royce studied philosophy and classics at the newly established University of California, where he received his B.A. After spending an academic year in Germany, first in Heidelberg, then in Leipzig and later on in Göttingen, where, alongside others, he attended the lectures of Hermann Lotze, he received his Ph.D. on "The Independence of the Principles of Knowledge" from Johns Hopkins University and thus became Doctor of Philosophy in 1878. Royce married Katherine Head and returned to his home university in California as a teaching assistant in English language and literature. His first well-known book, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, was published in 1885; that same year he was appointed assistant professor at Harvard University. Royce stayed in Cambridge, Massachusetts, right until his death in 1916, serving from 1892 as Professor of History of Philosophy, chairing his department for four years from 1894, and also becoming the Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy, and Civil Polity at Harvard University. During his four decades of academic study and work at this renowned campus, he wrote and published more than a dozen books, alongside many other articles including *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892), his Gifford Lectures, *The World and the Individual* (2 Vols., 1900/01), *Outlines of Psychology* (1903), *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908), *The Sources of Religious Insights* (1912), and *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). In the final decade of his life, Royce dedicated most of his intellectual work to the connections between metaphysics, social philosophy, and logics;

[4] For biographical details regarding Royce's life and his intellectual development cf. John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*. Revised and Expanded Edition, Vanderbilt University Press: Nashville/London 1999.

and as such he was also the executor of Peirce's unpublished writings, bringing them to Harvard.

Royce was a *pragmatist*, though a pragmatist of his own kind. It was after his serious studies on Peirce's semiotics, in particular, that he understood his own thinking to be a kind of "absolute pragmatism" with a strong voluntaristic impact. However, his theory of interpretation, which is nothing else than a theory of community, clearly demonstrates the pragmatist principles of his work. Neither perception nor conception can be the starting point for our understanding of reality and ourselves, but the active (!) "Will to Interpret" which shows that human beings are semiotic animals, only capable of acting according to reason and towards their self-determined goals as a collective. Of course, Royce never gave up his concern of reconciling the One with the Many, the Absolute and the Eternal with the Relative and the Temporal; and his solution is neither monistic nor dualistic but refers to a third kind of attitude: the will to interpret within a universal community. Therefore, community is the ultimate principle of both, his metaphysics and his philosophy of life.

Royce was always a *religious thinker*, although, after his youth, he refused to have a narrow affiliation with any church congregation. He was raised by a mother who was a truly pious person, rooted in Evangelicalism, and who educated her children in the spirit of the bible. Therefore, from very early on, Royce was trained in the reading of scripture. Maybe no other representative of the American philosophical tradition reflects more biblical heritage than does Royce, through his reference to metaphors, allusions and parables. However, as a religious thinker, he remained principally a metaphysician who repeatedly investigates *The Question of God*, which is the title of one of his most controversial pieces. From his very first publication, the quest for the Absolute that guarantees the possibility of truth and error, as well as good and evil, and which has a teleological perspective on the universe, was essential for Royce. Religion, therefore, represents man's practical and willing – as well as reasonable and critical (in the best-case scenario) – search for the ultimate meaning of his own life, as well as that of his fellows' lives.

This is why Royce was also considered to be an *ethicist*. Even at a very young age, Royce shared a weakness for Schopenhauer and Spinoza, and a kind of pessimism that was deeply concerned about the Socratic question of an 'examined life.' He was therefore initially concerned with overcoming moral skepticism, as expounded upon in *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy*. What he later wrote about James also applies to himself: that the ethical impact shaped all of his writings. In one sense, the quest for a good life and the question "Who am I?" always fit together. One's deeds are what makes one's life meaningful. Royce's intellectual development thereby reveals a shift from an all too simple position of the harmonization of different ideals towards the never-ending task of building communities within and through mankind by way of a critical spirit of true and mutual loyalty. In any case, at the end of his

life, Royce became even more convinced that, for every human being, maybe even for God, it is true that

> "[a]s a fact, your self is not an affair of this moment. Your self, like your happiness or unhappiness, like your failure or success, is a history, a drama, a life quest […] Your own true self simply does not now exist to be known. It belongs to the past and the future, as well as to the present; and your whole life is needed to embody and to live out what it means."[5]

The following studies focus on Royce's pragmatism, ethics, and his philosophy of religion, express different perspectives and try to answer the first question as to why his thinking is still important for us today. Though they certainly differ in their various approaches, textual bases, and final appraisals of his thought, all authors share a common interest: They want to discover the richness of an outstanding philosophical thinker and thus bridge the gap between continents and philosophical traditions.

In his broad-based opening study, *Ludwig Nagl* sets the philosophy of Josiah Royce against the background of what he considers to be two problematic areas within contemporary philosophy: the split between continental and analytic philosophy and the strong tendency of the philosophy of religion to narrow its focus to subject matters of Christianity. Since Royce's mature philosophy is not only based on a creative reception of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics but also displays a vital interest in Asian religious thought, returning to his work may therefore offer a comprehensive alternative to these two problematic philosophical options. Nagl unfolds his argument in three main sections. In the first, he explores some of the methodological and substantial claims of Royce's so-called "semiotic turn," commenting on his readings of Peirce and distinguishing four modes of community. In the second section, he explores the European background of Royce's philosophical thinking, thereby paying special attention to the very important, but often neglected, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* from 1906. In his interpretation of these lectures, he mainly highlights four points that are of decisive importance for the intellectual development of Royce: Kant's understanding of the human self as an ethical concept, Schelling's approach to the concept of the Absolute, Hegel's dialectic compared to Peirce's semiotics and Royce's own examination of Hegel, with particular reference to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Finally, Nagl insists that Royce learns a lot from Hegel but, nevertheless, "carefully avoids becoming a Hegelian." The last section is devoted to his lifelong interest in Asian religious culture. On the one hand, Nagl compares the concept of loyalty as it appears in his later work with (Neo-)Confucianism and, on the other, he explores the ways in which Royce incorporates ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism into his own

[5] Josiah Royce, "The Self," in: Josiah Royce, *Late Writings. A Collection of Unpublished and Scattered Works*, Vol. 2, ed. and introduced by Frank M. Oppenheim, Thoemmes: Bristol (UK) 2001, 122–131, 131.

work. He concludes with far-reaching remarks about the potential of Royce's multifaceted philosophy of religion for our present globalized world.

Whereas Nagl mainly deals with the later Royce, *Christoph Seibert*'s article goes back to some of his very early but nevertheless central and abiding insights concerning the foundations of knowledge. In the introduction, Seibert explains his hermeneutical approach which is expressed by the metaphorical phrase: an "ethical nucleus of reality." He further asserts that, in some of the letters written to William James, Royce very clearly expresses the idea of "ethical philosophy" being the "highest philosophy." Thus, ethics seems to be regarded as *prima philosophia*. In the following three sections, Seibert unfolds the presuppositions and some of the consequences surrounding this idea which contain both idealistic and pragmatistic motives. He begins by paying attention to the active, relational, and temporal constitution of concrete experience within Royce's thinking, thereby emphasizing the fact that the validity of judgment about a fact of experience is not something that is given but something which needs to be actively developed by contextual (social) and temporal extension. Against this backdrop, Seibert expands his study of the structure of the foundations of knowing as he deals with the relationship between intersubjectivity and nature in the second section. After construing the experiential process of knowing as an ongoing struggle with negativity, he takes up Royce's well-known differentiation between the "world of description" and the "world of appreciation" as a methodological strategy to deal with the relationship properly. He offers a functional and pragmatic interpretation of these two perspectives. In the last section, Seibert draws some consequences from Royce's outlooks on experience and knowledge, and applies them to the question of truth as it is dealt with in *The Philosophy of Loyalty*.

Compared with Nagl and Seibert, *Douglas Anderson* is not so much interested in any particular philosophical problem or specific subject matter, rather he enquires about Royce's self-understanding as a philosopher. Perhaps one could argue that he poses a kind of meta-philosophical question about the meaning of being engaged in such an intellectual enterprise. Whilst tackling this question, he simultaneously tries to assess the present condition of contemporary philosophy in the U.S. through the lens of his interpretation of Royce. As a starting point, Anderson chooses writings in which Royce expresses himself as a philosopher who understands philosophy in a broad sense, as a democratic "way of life" that is rooted in our everyday experiences and reflections, rather than a narrow intellectual project relating to only a few people. Seen in this light, to become un-philosophical would principally mean failing to critically reflect, and therefore understand, the meaning of one's experiences. In this general sense, philosophy, for Royce, is seen as an undertaking in which almost everyone is able to participate. Unfortunately, this strongly pragmatistic – and even Socratic – motive is counterbalanced by a certain "arrogance" which – in a Platonic sense – assumes philosophers to be "above the

ordinary folks." Exploring this tension forms one line of thought within the article. Other important aspects of Anderson's interpretation include the following: First, that, given the finitude of human thinking, philosophy involves a permanent "intellectual wandering"; second, that one has to carefully reconsider the history of philosophical thought; and third, that philosophy is presented, not as a competition of individual masterminds, but rather as a social and democratic endeavor. As a consequence, Anderson concludes that philosophers must learn to discover "philosophy in its other venues – music, poetry, sports, film, literature and so on."

In his article, *Dwayne A. Tunstall* is concerned with a very elementary insight into Royce's ethics which has been systematically developed in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and later in *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. From Tunstall's introductory remarks, it seems obvious that this ethical insight is of a paradoxical structure since it obligates us to regard ourselves as actors who are striving to act morally and fight evil in the world, and, at the same time, he reminds us that, in so doing, we will necessarily fail and are therefore in need of a "superhuman deliverer." Thus, ethics finally refers to religion. After outlining the problem, Tunstall deals with it in two main stages. Firstly, he shows more closely how Royce's thesis, that humans are essentially moral failures, is located within the argument of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and also how it is linked to his philosophy of religion. Religious faith encourages us to continually pursue the moral project "knowing that our efforts are, at best, partial actualizations of the divine." Secondly, he addresses two well-known critics of Royce's ethics of loyalty, namely Simon Keller and Peter Fuss. He carefully unfolds their arguments and discusses the various grounds on which their critique is based. In so doing, he pays particular attention to the "art of loyalty" and the institutions of moral education or training. Finally, Tunstall concludes that, despite some theoretical shortcomings in Royce's ethics, both prominent critiques make the same foundational mistake: they completely overlook the fact that, according to Royce, human beings cannot help but fail morally. The critical standard of "loyalty to loyalty" must therefore be understood against this anthropological, or even ontological, background.

Alexander Filiopović continues the discourse about Royce's moral theory by comparing it to George Herbert Mead's way of construing ethics. Even in his introduction, Filipović makes clear that he is interested in the potential of a genuine pragmatistic way of doing ethics and that his discussion of Royce and Mead serves this general interest. He convincingly selects three aspects which, on the one hand, are relevant for both philosophers whilst, on the other, they are modeled (at least in part) in different ways. First of all, Filipović introduces the psychological concept of imitation which is surely of decisive importance to Royce since, according to the philosopher, self-consciousness evolves through processes of resistance and imitation. Thus, Royce ascribes a moral dimension to imitation *per se*; an idea that is severely criticized by Mead

who points out that imitation, as a moral category, already presupposes a meaningful symbolic interaction. According to Filipović's reading, the mentioned difference might be helpful in carefully distinguishing between two approaches to moral theory; which, in the case of Royce, is a more "dialectical" and "voluntaristic" theory of moral identity embedded within an idealistic theoretical framework; and, in the case of Mead, is a more "pragmatic theory of interaction" and moral identity. Since the consequences of these different approaches to ethics present themselves in other aspects that are central to any moral theory, the next two sections deal with the problem of moral order from the perspectives of idealism and naturalism and, finally, alongside the universal claims within Royce's and Mead's theories. Concerning this last point, Filipović stresses the obvious similarity between the "community of interpretation" and the "generalized other." He concludes with remarks about the potential of a pragmatistic-orientated moral theory, in particular for applied ethics.

Magnus Schlette's interest in Royce's moral theory is centered around the concept of self-realization. This is an interesting move in the discourse about Royce because it allows an interpretation of his philosophy in terms of a critical theory of modern individualism. Schlette is well aware of the fact that, in the effort to develop normative schemes to assess the various understandings of self-realization, one often encounters a peculiar philosophical inarticulacy. In order to offer an alternative to this unpleasant situation and its undifferentiated charges against the idea of self-realization, as that which fosters narcissism or hedonism, he draws upon Georg Simmel's famous essay "Das individuelle Gesetz" ("The Law of the Individual") and Josiah Royce's ethics of loyalty. Both concepts are understood against the common backdrop of Kant's practical philosophy, which Schlette interprets via Hegel's critical appraisal of Kant. Seen in this light, self-realization is far from being either narcissism or hedonism; and in very general terms, it can be taken to mean "self-dedication of an individual to a law." In the following, Schlette unfolds and deepens the meaning of this central idea, firstly by referring to Simmel's socio-hermeneutical reconstruction of Kant's categorical imperative as "individual law." Accordingly, Royce's philosophy of loyalty is then understood as being a theoretical supplement to Simmel, which provides a socio-ontological foundation to his hermeneutical approach. He highlights the importance of Royce's concept of "second-order-loyalty" (loyalty to loyalty) as a normative methodological device for mediating between the individual cause and social interests. Schlette concludes that to take account of the insights of both thinkers "might be a first step in the direction of an ethics of self-realization that is aware of major moral phenomena in our contemporary western world."

In his essay, *Christian Polke* reconstructs Royce's late position on moral, social, and political matters as a kind of spiritual communitarianism. Herein he does not mean a religiously narrow form of political philosophy but rather a way of thinking that insists on the trans-moral and trans-political dimensions

of communal life as being the very source of humankind's ability to flourish within societies. Loyalty, as the "third attitude of will," transcends both individual self-assertion and radical self-negation by transforming the quest of personal identity into the common concern of different kinds of communities, for which a critical loyalty towards the cause of these communities is essential. However, differing from Royce's own words, yet still close to his interpretation, it is "covenant" that represents the key structure of any of the true Roycean communities. Following H. Richard Niebuhr's understanding of the Christian roots of (American) democracy, it is possible to see that the idea of covenant can help clarify why, and in which way, any successful community depends upon a spirit of (critical) loyalty. In conclusion, Polke shows, by arguing with Royce for a "wise provincialism," that today we are even more in need of a communitarian ethos of citizenship; one which is not narrow-minded but which consists of forms of mutual self-engagement of people. Public responsibility can only flourish when people see the results of their common considerations and dealings; as they experience themselves to be either better or worse as a result of being co-authors of their common life. Thereby, it is shown that democracy, as well as any "great" or "beloved community," represents a telic idea which can never be fully realized within the context of earthly conditions, and, implicitly, therefore contains an intrinsic spiritual, transcending dimension.

As the previous essays have already indicated, religion is a very important theme of Royce's philosophy; one may even assume that it is the central subject, which implies that his philosophy can only be properly understood if it is regarded as philosophy of religion. In his article, *Robert Cummings Neville* applies himself to the task of critically appraising Royce as a profound philosopher of religion who is far more influenced by American pragmatism than by German Idealism. Since every critique needs a theoretical frame of reference within which it can operate, Neville begins his discussion of Royce by stating his own understanding of religion. In general, religion, as construed by Neville, means "engagement with ultimacy." After having roughly explained what "ultimacy" means, in ontological and cosmological terms, he asks which existential challenges these ultimates pose as they appear in human life. He identifies the contingency of the world, the problem of moral choice and righteousness, the problem of personal integrity or wholeness, the engagement of others and the question of the meaning of life. Thus, religion as "engagement with ultimacy" embraces all of them. Now, the decisive point of the argument consists in the fact that, in the following parts of his essay, Neville applies these five kinds of human engagement with ultimacy to Royce's philosophy of religion and, in such a way, is thus able to detect the impressive philosophical achievements, as well as the severe shortcomings, of his thinking. In the case of the latter, he criticizes, for example, the almost complete lack of an esthetic dimension of religion within Royce's work.

Gesche Linde continues the enquiry into the presuppositions and implications of Royce's philosophy of religion. In her essay, she convincingly argues that his social philosophy is best understood as a "transformation […] of Christian or Reformed, if not, more specifically, Pauline, faith." And since the philosopher is one of the main protagonists in this project, thereby contributing to the establishment of the true community in which the salvation of men might occur, philosophy itself, according to Royce, becomes a "soteriological enterprise." Having provided this general thesis, Linde goes on to explore some of its technical and ontological implications, especially by comparison with Peirce's concept of interpretation and representation. Firstly, however, she traces Royce's lifelong interest in understanding the foundations of community back to his experiences with the struggles, and even the loss, of community in California. It was in this early setting that the central motives for his philosophy were born. In later years, he discovers the concept of interpretation as the crucial means by which he philosophically comes to terms with his concern about the community; and it is his contact with Peirce which guides him in this direction. However, Linde argues that one should not overlook some important differences between Peirce's and Royce's concepts of interpretation. Thus, she works out, in detail, some of the most important respects in which Royce modifies Peirce's understanding of the process of interpretation. Finally, her thorough discussion of these two models leads to the conclusion that, according to Royce, it is no longer possible to distinguish reality and interpretation; both concepts carry the same meaning. Although Linde, on the one hand, seems to consider this move to be regressive, taking a back seat behind the very complex Peircean model, on the other hand, she highlights the fact that Royce's concept of community is even "richer than that of Peirce." In the last section, she concludes that, for Royce, social consciousness is, in fact, a religion based upon an interpretation of Christian faith.

That Royce, throughout his lifetime, struggles with the problem of evil is a well-known fact. Whether he was successful in his effort is certainly a question that is still open to debate. *Heiko Schulz* poses this same question in his critical appraisal of Royce's theodicy, which he interprets as being a "full-fledged *theodicy*," and makes the strongest possible claim that it gives a sufficient answer to the so-called "problem of Job." This is why, for Royce, evil must be considered to be a necessary part of the absolute experience of the divine, both logically and ontologically. To put it in his own words: "The eternal world contains Gethsemane." Schulz carefully analyzes the different types of arguments (bottom-up/top-down) which lead Royce towards this thesis and finally concludes that his theodicy "ultimately fails" since it rests upon an "unsolvable dilemma." In actual fact, this overall assessment needs to be understood within the theoretical framework that Schulz applies to Royce's thinking of evil. In the light of a heuristic scheme, he organizes his approach, which contains possible models of addressing the problem of evil, on purely intellectual grounds.

Following this scheme, one can distinguish a theoretical option which solves the problem by simply allowing it to disappear from two reductionist models (theological/ontological reductionism), as well as from combinations between the latter. Even if Schulz sharply criticizes Augustine for being unable to pay attention to the real existence of evil, he nevertheless asserts that Royce's work must be classified as a type of ontological reductionism following Augustine. Seen in this light, the already indicated dilemma, which Royce cannot solve, amounts to the following: "Either there is no theodicy or ontological reductionism, *tertium non datur*." In the following sections of the article, Schulz discusses two major objections that could be raised against his interpretation and finally points to his own theological point of view which he characterizes as "paradoxical non-reductionism."

The volume closes with a study which, in a certain respect, is clearly connected to Nagl's opening essay since both emphasize the tradition of German Idealism as an influencing factor in Royce's philosophy. But whereas Nagl primarily follows Royce's own references to this tradition on the textual basis of his *Lectures of Modern Idealism*, *Martin Wendte* is more directly concerned with the theories of some of the most famous German philosophers. Thus, his study offers a "systematic comparison" of the "late Royce with Kant, Hegel, and, in particular, the later Schelling." The premise of this undertaking may perhaps seem risky but it surely is not without any reasonable foundation since he considers Royce's concept of the Absolute as a particular variation of a far more general understanding of the Absolute as *omnitudo realitatis*. The thesis he develops comprises of at least two parts: Firstly, Royce is taken to be a pragmatist who presupposes the irreducible facticity of experience and the primacy of praxis; secondly, he positions himself much closer to the stance of the late Schelling than that of Hegel since both differ from the latter in their skeptical attitude towards the notion of "total coherentism" and the complete "sublation of praxis into theory." Wendte argues his thesis in two parts: In the first section, he reconstructs five levels on which Royce's concept of community as reality of the Spirit is designed (the direction of the argument is developed from the historical to the metaphysical). The second section outlines some of the main features of the German debate regarding the Absolute, from Kant's regulative ideal of God as *omnitudo realitatis*, via Hegel, to the late Schelling, which are, in turn, compared to the late Royce: "Both ground idealism within the post-Hegelian/pragmatic insight that praxis proceeds theory, and both defend the idealistic insight that human beings are attuned to the world and that they search for wholeness, for the Absolute."

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