

ROYCE'S CONCEPT OF A COMMUNITY  
OF INTERPRETATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ITS  
ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE

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Presented to  
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Master of Arts

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by  
Robert L. Mitchell  
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## ABSTRACT

The ethical and religious philosophy of Josiah Royce (1855-1916) merits reëxamination by thinkers of late twentieth-century America. His work, like that of others of the idealist tradition, perhaps too facilely has been dismissed by recent analytic philosophers, despite the measure of concern shown by Royce for the precise formulation of his doctrine. This especially is true of The Problem of Christianity (1913), an intriguing study of the meaning and foundation of the philosophy, or religion, of loyalty.

The present thesis seeks to establish the central importance of the concept of community in Royce's philosophy of loyalty, as well as to draw out--in detail--its epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions, chief among which are the theory of interpretation and the doctrine of the World Community of Interpretation.

From the side of its meaning for human experience, Royce's philosophy of loyalty culminates in the ideal of one universal and beloved community of mankind. By "loyalty" Royce understands the willing, practical, and thoroughgoing devotion of a self to a cause,--the highest cause being that of the spiritual unity of all men. Inasmuch as this conception of loyalty involves a community

of loyal selves bound together by full and actively-accepted devotion to a cause which comes from "without and above," it constitutes in essence a religion, not a mere morality.

Crucial to Royce's later philosophical thought, "community" initially is defined as a well-ordered set of distinct selves who are capable of ideally extending themselves into the past and future and who together share a common event. For a more detailed treatment of the concept of community, Royce employs analyses of Charles S. Peirce, whose theory of signs and interpretation greatly assists Royce in laying the epistemological groundwork of his position.

From the side of its ontological significance, Royce's philosophy of loyalty requires a metaphysical theory of the community and of its relationship to the divine being. If the ideal of a united community of all mankind is to possess roots not merely in the sphere of human activities and interests, but in the realm of whatever is permanent in the universe, then the concept of community becomes immensely important in explaining the very nature of things. Royce elaborates a concept of community in terms of which one can understand the existence and nature of God, the relation of God to the world, as well as the origin and destiny of the human individual.

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To Mr. Henry Keller and family, Winnipeg, Manitoba, I gratefully dedicate this work.

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## CHAPTER I

### JOSIAH ROYCE AND THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY IN THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The idea of the community [is] suggested to us by the problems of human social life. . . .

-- Josiah Royce, The Problem of Christianity, Vol. II, pp. 17-18.

In this year of the American Bicentennial Celebration 1976, it seems particularly appropriate that the works of an American philosopher, Josiah Royce, the ruling category of whose thought is the idea of community, should be selected for reëxamination and reëvaluation. For the community motif is one which, in the American experience, has been repeated with a note of special urgency and significance; and Josiah Royce, both as a philosopher and as a social-religious thinker, was one peculiarly sensitive to its importance.

Indeed, the quest for community in American life has proven to be one of the most dominant and recurrent themes in the United States' two-hundred-year existence. The challenge to create and foster community life--in face of the threat of its loss--has inspired some of its leaders' most noble efforts to resolve enervating and destructive conflicts in the country's national life; however, many have felt completely overwhelmed by this challenge.

The test of e pluribus unum, motto of the United States, would seem precisely to be: to bring about a flourishing community of loyal citizens; to fashion a society in which a multitude of individuals of diverse backgrounds and interests might realize their own purposes and potentialities without negating the rights and opportunities of others to do likewise; to create a community where, through dynamic, shared activity directed toward a common end, members might lead creatively fulfilled lives; to bring about the "kingdom of God in America." Such is the American experiment.

While the concept of community is important to the American experience, there are signs of loss of community in U. S. national life. It appears that the very principle on trial in the American experience--the principle of community--is threatened by forces currently active on the American scene. The challenge to create community encounters enormous, well-nigh insurmountable obstacles in the guise of twentieth-century economic forces, repercussions of which, in turn, are felt in both the socio-religious and the political spheres.

One of the first thinkers to recognize and respond to the problem of the threatened loss of community in American life was Josiah Royce. Early in this century, Royce with penetrating insight discerned the plight of modern man in a mass technological society; more than his contemporaries, he appreciated the needs, problems and tenden-

cies of his age, making these practical concerns the starting point of his philosophy of community.

Although the report of the threatened loss of community in American life, perhaps, sounds platitudinous to our late twentieth-century ears, nevertheless it rang with a fresh, critical significance when Royce first made his observations. That his original diagnosis has become commonplace among us, indeed, is a mark of the acuity and fundamental correctness of Royce's vision.

In his later writings Royce specifically and at some length recognizes and treats of those factors affecting the American challenge to create community. He observes in The Problem of Christianity:

In our modern days of the dreary complexity of mechanical labor . . . when social coöperation both uses and is so largely dominated by the industrial arts, . . . the more complex the social order grows, the more all this coöperation must tend to appear to the individual as a mere process of nature, and not as his own work,--as a mechanism and not as an ideal extension of himself.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in the sphere of social-religious considerations, Royce remarks:

Some of the conditions of our civilization tend with great masses of our population to a new interpretation of family ties [;] in our present American life the family tie has been weakened, and yet no substitute has been found. . . . Since [our] society is so vast as to be no longer easily intelligible, . . . its social powers appear to the individual in [an] estranged and arbitrary fashion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Josiah Royce, The Problem of Christianity, Vol. II (New York: Macmillan Co., 1913), pp. 83, 87, 90-91.

<sup>2</sup>Josiah Royce, The Philosophy of Loyalty (New York: Macmillan Co., 1908), pp. 220, 223, 240.

In attending to the problem of the loss of community in the realm of political government, Royce notes in The Philosophy of Loyalty:

Our nation has entered in these days into the realm . . . where the distant and irresistible national government, however welcome its authority may be, is at best rather a guarantee of safety, an object for political contest, and a force with which everybody must reckon, than the opportunity for such loyalty, as our distinctly provincial fathers used to feel and express in their early utterances of the national spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Royce's philosophy of community may be viewed as a contribution toward the solution of certain practical problems confronting twentieth-century America. Royce's ethical theory, indeed, is addressed to just that predicament of U. S. society traced above. Furthermore, his metaphysics--far from being remote from life--attempts to make explicit what is implied about man's place in the real universe by his ethical theory.

Royce sought to explain the fact that modern man patently has failed to create community; he tried to account for modern man's sense of economic bewilderment, his feelings of spiritual alienation and political discontent. According to Royce's analysis, the chief interests of human nature radically are divided. The need for building and maintaining stable social relationships frequently conflicts with an equally primitive need for effectively asserting and expressing one's own individuality; the latter, of course, in many instances can lead to

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

the wholesale disruption and ultimate destruction of social bonds. On the other hand, if the former need for mutual social ties totally takes precedence over the need for vigorous self-assertion, then self-abasing subservience results, i. e., the relinquishing of moral autonomy is at hand.

It is not an accident that the twentieth-century American is perplexed, that the moral, religious, and political communities are in decline. For, as Royce is able to conclude by means of this analysis, modern man himself --through his scientific and technological progress--has brought about a state of societal affairs in which the realization of his own highest good is seriously jeopardized.

What shape then, roughly, does Royce's own proposed remedy to this problem eventually assume? Royce urged that the answer lies in loyalty to a universal community of all the loyal: we loyally should serve the cause of this community. Implementation of this prescription would tend to offset the deleterious effects shown to be associated with a highly advanced technological civilization. It would allow ethical and religious values to be sustained, the community to be rebuilt:

When love of the community, nourished by common memories and common hope, both exists and expresses itself in devoted individual lives, it can constantly tend, despite the complexity of the present social order, to keep the consciousness of the community alive. And when this takes place, the identification of the loyal individual self with the life of the community will tend, both in ideal and in feeling, to

identify each self not only with the distant past and future of the community, but with the present activities of the whole social body.<sup>4</sup>

Loyalty thus fully engages the individual self in an actively chosen, yet socially significant cause.

It would appear, then, that Royce's doctrine of community is worthy of restudy for the following reasons. First, Royce's later philosophy takes its beginning as well as seeks its end in the practical problems of creation, formation, and preservation of a community, problems interesting and important enough in their own right. Secondly, the concept of community itself enters Royce's ethical theory in a crucial way, serving as the keystone of the philosophy of loyalty. Moreover, Royce's metaphysical doctrine incorporates the notion of an absolute universal Community of Interpretation, the model in ideal for all finite, earth-bound communities as well as the guarantor of significance and truth in our ordinary, practical lives.

It is the purpose of this thesis to reëxamine Royce's concept of community (establishing the role and importance of the concept in Royce's ethical thought) and to reëvaluate the metaphysical utility of the concept of community (assessing the novel views of God and of the real world which this concept makes possible). We shall argue that, while perhaps theoretically speaking the idea of an

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<sup>4</sup>Royce, The Problem of Christianity, Vol. II, p.

Absolute is rendered obsolete by the introduction of the notion of a Community of Interpretation, yet practically speaking it is not. We shall demonstrate that, on the contrary, given the eminently practical orientation of Royce's thought--his overarching concern with the question "How should one bear himself towards the problem of life?--retention of the concept of a sole and supreme reality, an Absolute, is mandatory. Royce's philosophy of Community represents a refinement, not an abandonment, of his earlier philosophy of the Absolute.

We shall attempt in this study to distill a coherent line of argument out of the later lectures of Royce. Certainly one of the difficulties in studying Royce is that his philosophy receives a statement whose form largely is determined through the circumstance of its having been addressed to a live audience. That Royce's doctrine of community forms, indeed, a consistent whole we shall strive to show.

The interpretation of Royce which shall emerge in the course of our study is not one upon which there is universal agreement. Of several fine, recent contributions to Royce scholarship, Peter Fuss's volume, The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce, not only intimates that Royce shunted the Absolute in his final years, but also suggests that the philosophy of community would gain in "concreteness and intelligibility," if the notion of the unlimited Community of Interpretation were reduced to the "much more appealing"

conception of kinds of limited communities.<sup>5</sup> We shall maintain in this thesis that, for Royce, loyalty to the unlimited Community is fundamental and that this--practically--involves the idea of God, or of a sole and supreme reality.

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<sup>5</sup>Peter Fuss, The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 255-256.

## CHAPTER II

### LOYALTY AND COMMUNITY

All the loyal are brethren.

-- Josiah Royce, The Philosophy of Loyalty, p. 158.

The concept of an all-embracing universal community (later technically to be labelled "the Community of Interpretation") occupies a focal position in Royce's ethical thought. In order fully to grasp the role of this concept in the philosophy, or religion, of loyalty, one first must understand how, beginning from analyses of human psychological and sociological experience, Royce was led to formulate his principle of loyalty; for only then can the significance of the ideal community of all mankind be appreciated as an ultimate object of loyal devotion. The need to elaborate a theory of community thus becomes plainly evident.

Royce's thorough acquaintance with the conditions and needs of modern life made it possible for him intelligently and perceptively to investigate the nature of human consciousness and the achievement of moral autonomy--all with a view to developing an ethical theory (together with justifying metaphysical foundation), the insights of which, then, might be applied later to the solution of problems

of practical life.

In the normal course of life in society with others, an individual person quickly and quite naturally discovers himself to be facing problems that properly may be characterized as being moral problems. Typically, he finds himself wondering, in a given situation: "What ought I to do?" Thus, the first in a series of questions concerning the possibility (even) of moral experience is raised: How, or by what procedure, do we as moral agents determine which actions are right?

[ See FIGURE 1. ]

Three points should be borne in mind as one works his way through this "ethical flow chart": (1) Royce marshals logical, psychological-epistemological, as well as normative arguments as evidence closing branches along the way to his final conclusion; (2) hence, when alternatives are bracketed off, this may be not because they represent logical impossibilities, but because they fail to realize the goal or norm that Royce sets before himself and us; (3) to a certain extent, the ethical and psychological considerations being raised here are both an account of human moral development and a description of the way a mature agent is, i. e., an analysis of the moral experience of an adult moral self. It, perhaps, is more convenient for our present purposes to regard Royce's argument as a rehearsal of the social factors and processes that have

How do we determine which actions are right?

We consult our own will. We appeal to some external authority.

[ But we cannot do this, for there is no external authority that can compel moral assent. ]

How do we discover what our will is?

We look within ourselves. We look outside ourselves, i. e., we must learn what our will is.

[ But we cannot do this, for there is no innate ideal present within us. ]

By what process do we learn what our will is?

\* (See below.) We learn what our will is by imitating the wills of others.

[ Learning is a matter of social training through imitation. ]

According to what principle shall this training proceed, i. e., whose will shall we imitate?

THE PARADOX OF  
SOCIAL TRAINING

obstreperousness

[ But self-will negates the principle of harmony. ]

submissiveness

[ But docility negates the postulate of moral autonomy. ]

How do we strike a balance between these two? i. e., what plan of life engages us fully and serves our fellows?

⇒ LOYALTY: the willing, practical, and thoroughgoing devotion to a cause.

What cause is worthy of our supreme devotion?

The ideal of universal community is the ultimate object of loyal devotion.

FIGURE 1.

gone into the production of the fully-developed moral consciousness, the mature ethical self.

In handling the initial question, "How do we determine which actions are right?", Royce directs our attention to two alternative answers which immediately suggest themselves: Either we consult our own will, or we appeal to some external authority. A little reflection soon reveals that, for reasons of logic alone, we simply cannot appeal to external authority; for, the very meaning of "moral assent" excludes the notion of merely external imposition of duty. It is impossible that any external authority should compel moral assent; therefore, as moral agents, we must consult our own reasonable will.

However, no sooner is this first query laid to rest than a second, more troublesome one springs before our path: How are we to discover what our will is? At first blush, the question would seem to admit of a simple reply, "Well, let us just look within ourselves to know our will." But this option of introspection yields a baffling array of varied aims and purposes, a "conflicting mass" of desires and impulses in our individual experience.<sup>1</sup> We cannot look within ourselves to know our will, because there is no single, inborn goal or ideal present within us. By birth, man is "a mere eddy in the turbulent stream of human passion," buffeted about by a "medley of conflicting

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<sup>1</sup>Royce, The Philosophy of Loyalty, p. 31.

interests":<sup>2</sup>

A man's self has no contents, no plans, no purposes, except those which are, in one way or another, defined for him by his social relations.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore we must look outward among our fellows in society to learn what our will is.

In our larger social experience we discover the possibility of acquiring that settled and harmonious plan of life which promises the enjoyment of "peace in active living."<sup>4</sup> We learn what our will is by imitating the wills of others--learning (according to Royce) being largely a matter of social training through imitation. Our fellows and the collective social will alike counsel us prudently to obey the laws of the land and the mores of the clan, to learn such ideas and skills as will prove helpful to us in getting along peaceably and profitably in society. The storehouse of popular wisdom abounds with maxims and precepts like those recorded in Franklin's "Poor Richard":

Praise little, dispraise less. . . . Love your Neighbor; yet don't pull down your Hedge. . . . Don't think so much of your own Cunning, as to forget other Men's: A cunning Man is overmatch'd by a cunning Man and a Half.<sup>5</sup>

However, when strung out in succession, these leave us with no single goal, no unifying ideal which might serve

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 35, 57.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin Franklin, "Poor Richard, 1754," The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. 5, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 184.

to impart meaning to our lives. It is to be hoped that, in addition to this fund of saccharine formulae, our social experience contains bona fide life plans.

In fact, a rather large number of plans of life are put forward in human social experience, any one of which we as individuals, perhaps, might decide to adopt and follow. But which of the many expressions of the social will should we choose to imitate? Whose will shall we follow? Manifestly, what is needed is a principle according to which we might choose among the plans of life offered in social experience. Such a principle would serve to determine both the form of our imitative training and the direction in which it would tend.

In this connection, Royce observed, with acute insight, something of the nature of a paradox about the results of social training: Social training tends to teach us not only the ways of other people, but also the devices for willful self-expression. It stimulates the will of the individual, heightening by contrast that "vague natural sense of the importance of having [one's] own way."<sup>6</sup>

We never merely imitate. Conformity attracts, but also wearies us. Meanwhile, even by imitation, we often learn how to possess, and then to carry out, our own self-will. For instance, we learn speech first by imitation; but henceforth we love to hear ourselves talk; and our whole plan of life gets affected accordingly. Speech has, indeed, its origin in social conformity. Yet the tongue is an unruly member, and wags rebelliously. Teach men customs, and you equip them with weapons for expressing their

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 33.