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JOSIAH ROYCE AND THE SIGN COMMUNITY

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The American Idealist Josiah Royce (1855-1916) developed a comprehensive metaphysics which attempted to define the complex interrelations between the realms of the finite and the realm of the infinite. In his early writings he separated the world of the Absolute from the particulars which constituted nature and history. The movement from the finite to the infinite could only be articulated in analogies or metaphors which served to show how the a-temporal life of the Absolute somehow contained or absorbed the temporally distinct complexes of the finite kingdom. He argued that so-called external objects could best be understood as conceptual moments within the internal life of an Absolute which has no genuine other or opposite.

By the turn of the century, Royce was forced to re-think the problem of how the finite and the infinite could be linked in more specific and concrete ways. His reflections on the mathematical theories of Cantor and Dedekind provided him with further conceptual refinements. Both thinkers defended some notion of an actual infinite series in which any given member contains a full representation or image of every other member of the series. At the very least, any given member could be reconstructed through standard methods to generate the series to which it belonged. Hence, the finite member of a number series imaged or mirrored the series as a whole. Royce grafted this mathematical notion of an actual infinite series onto his earlier model of self-consciousness to create the notion of a fully self-represented series. In such a series, each member contains an internal map of the series as a whole. In representing itself, the individual images, through a self-conscious radiation, all the others. In

a sense, the finite particular becomes a monad with windows which envisions the full series in its a-temporal perfection.

Royce remained content with this solution of the problem of the relation of the finite and the infinite until 1912 when he reread some of Peirce's papers from the 1860's. [1] Peirce convinced him to take concrete particulars more seriously and to use a triadic logic to articulate the movement from one interpretation to another. The time process became more central to Royce as he struggled to show how the Many could be sequentially related to the One. The combination of a triadic logic and a deeper sense of temporality produced a serial process which did not have its terminus in an a-temporal Absolute Self. Rather, such a series became part of a living community of sign interpreters who manipulated each sign through the triadic logic of sign translation and comparison.

The fruits of this conceptual realignment appeared in his 1913 work, The Problem of Christianity, where he takes on the task of developing a general theory of sign translation as it functions within what he calls the "community of interpretation". In the process of rediscovering Peirce, he was forced to rethink his own understanding of the nature and role of the Absolute Self as the guarantor of our knowledge claims. The model of an interpretive and semiotic community freed him to take time more seriously and to bring the Absolute closer to the actual process whereby the finite becomes open to and exhibitivive of the Absolute Life.

Royce locates Peirce's early reflections on semiotic within his own conception of the interpretive community. The individual self is not possible without contrast to and with other selves in a community of interpretive structures and hoped for consummations. The individual self cannot be understood as a mere datum or as a conceptual construct. The self must be discovered through a process of interpretation which cannot be reduced to the dyadic tension between perception and conception. Interpretation is a "third" which unites the members of the dyad into a stable sign or sign series. Each interpretation becomes embodied in an expressed or expressible sign which enters into a larger triadic movement of validation. The first triad is that between perception, conception, and interpretation. This can be called the hermeneutic triad. The second triad is that between an interpreter, the sign to be interpreted, and the interpretee for whom the interpretation is made. This can be called the semiotic triad.

The hermeneutic triad is 'internal' to any given interpretation while the semiotic triad is the logic of the social process of communication and validation. The finite self, in an act of inner conversation, utilizes both triadic structures in its movement toward self-understanding. Referring to Peirce, Royce argues (1913: 285) that so-called direct intuition is inadequate as a road to self-awareness:

At such times we are impressed with the fact that there is no royal road to self-knowledge. Charles Peirce, in the earliest of the essays to which I am calling your attention, maintained (quite rightly, I think) that there is no direct intuition or perception of the self. Reflection, as Peirce there pointed out, [2] involves what is, in its essence, an interior conversation, in which one discovers one's own mind through a process of inference analogous to the very modes of inference which guide us in a social effort to interpret our neighbors' minds.

The self is a microcosmic community with a temporal and social spread. The hermeneutic triad is operative in overcoming the chaos of mere perception and the barrenness of conception. The semiotic triad works to hold past, present, and futures selves together in one serial movement of interpretation. As the self holds an internal conversation, it unifies its potential partselves into one stable identity.

The self is thus governed by the two triads which order communal life as a whole. The conversation between 'external' selves functions through the general triadic logic to move individuals toward that convergence which is preserved in common deeds and memories. The "community of memory" preserves dominant signs from the past life of the social order and provides a unified cluster of interpretations for the signs of origin. The "community of hope" functions as the eschatological lure which measures any future hermeneutic or semiotic acts such that they serve the evolving needs of the interpretive life.

No interpretation can remove itself from the semiotic triad which hands interpretations over to further interpreters in an endless process of validation and articulation. While this process of sign translation is unending, it does not follow that it must be expressive of an a-temporal and static infinite. Royce argues (1913: 289-90):

First, interpretation is a conversation, and not a lonely enterprise. There is someone, in the realm of psychological happenings, who addresses some one. The one who addresses interprets some object to the one addressed. In the second place, the interpreted object is itself something which has the nature of a mental expression. Peirce uses the term "sign" to name this mental object which is interpreted. Thirdly, since the interpretation is a mental act, and is an act which is expressed, the interpretation itself is, in its turn, a Sign. This new sign calls for further interpretation. For the interpretation is addressed to somebody. And so,--at least in ideal,--the social process is endless.

While Royce was content to speak of an infinite self-representative series in 1900, he later came to locate the endless quality of sign articulation in a living interpretive community which functions across time and place. Peirce placed his emphasis on the internal structure of the sign per se. In Royce's 1913 reflections, he shifted the emphasis to the problem of sign linkage, to what happens to a sign once it emerges from an interpretation and takes on its public role. Both the microcosmic internal community and the macrocosmic social order partake of the temporally extended process of sign translation. Only personal or social death can interrupt the process of semiotic ramification.

World history functions in the same temporal and semiotic way as social history. Royce links the interpretive process to a general metaphysics of nature which serves to show how the orders of the world stand as the seed bed for the generation of signs. Cosmic and biological evolution are themselves interpretive processes through and through. Royce states (1913: 289):

In sum, if we view the world as everywhere and always recording its own history, by processes of aging and weathering, or of evolution, or of stellar and nebular clusterings and streamings, we can simply define the time order, and its three regions,--past, present, future,--as an order of possible interpretation. That is, we can define the present as, potentially, the interpretation of the past to the future. The triadic

structure of our interpretations is strictly analogous, both to the psychological and to the metaphysical structures of the world of time. And each of these structures can be stated in terms of the other.

In this telling passage, Royce outflanks the more narrowly conceived idealism which would locate all signs in the realm of human utterance or judgment. Signs and interpretations are embedded in natural and evolutionary structures which are at the very least analogous to human and communal forms. We can go even further and assert that nature itself is the ever protean source for the interpretations which become conscious and communal. Any 'slice' of world history contains its antecedents and its leadings. Further, such a sign section will exhibit the deeper teleological presence of a lure which promises convergence and transparency in the ideal future. Nature is thus a mute community which only needs conscious interpreters for its embodied utterance.

Absolute pragmatism is triadic in structure and tied to a metaphysics of nature which refuses to let sign series spin off into an empty realm of semiotic free play. Rather, such signs are produced by and illuminative of a world not of the community's own making. A dyadic structure can only exhibit the exchange of one bare concept for another. Royce takes James' pragmatism to task for failing to show how we move from the clash of concepts to the mediating third which will govern the scope and applicability of a given concept. Dyadic pragmatism cannot overcome an inherent subjectivism and radical pluralism which lets concepts hover over a nature which is itself too rich to be contained in any conceptual structure. Royce argues that James was never able to show how concepts and percepts converge in a reliable way. Absolute pragmatism, as triadic, shows how interpretations can function as leading ideas (as predictions) and evolve in an endless series which is itself something akin to an Absolute-in-time. The human and extra-human worlds embody the triadic structures which serve interpretation.

Throughout, an ethical dimension appears in Royce's understanding of the interpretive process. Self-control is the key to the life of endless sign ramification. Royce states (1913: 305):

First, I repeat, the new or third idea shows us ourselves, as we are. Next, it also enriches our world of self-consciousness. It at once broadens our outlook and gives our

mental realm definiteness and self-control. It teaches one of our ideas what another of our ideas means. It tells us how to know our right hand from the left; how to connect what comes to us in fragments; how to live as if life had some coherent aim.

Self-consciousness remains stable and coherent because of the governing thirds which internalize control. Comparisons can be secured and a deeper sense of place can emerge. The over-arching telos of our life is preserved against internal bifurcation and diremption by the self-control which keeps signs bound to previously articulated part-selves and their internal and external communities. The Many converge around a future hoped-for consummation which promises both identity and plenitude.

The sum of all internal sign series imposes a felt convergence on the individual. To interpret is to drive toward self-control in which the leadings of sign series point toward an integral and whole self. Once an individual becomes ethically aware he or she works toward a general semiotic convergence which preserves the dominant mythological signs of origin and coaxes all present signs into a leading which points toward infinite self-knowledge for the selves constitutive of the community.

Nature and human community are semiotic in their internal constitution and external expression. Social relations are fundamental to all complexes, whether conscious or not. Royce refuses to separate the pre-human and the human (1913: 344):

The universe, if my thesis is right, is a realm which is through and through dominated by social categories. Time, for instance, expresses a system of essentially social relations . . . Not the Self, not the Logos, not the One, and not the Many, but the Community will be the ruling category of such a philosophy.

The community is constituted by the innumerable concrete universals which stand as the crystallized manifestations of sign series. The success of a given community of interpretation is determined by its ability to mirror the communal structures of nature and history. Interpreters unite to assimilate the signs of the world and to free them of interpretive distortion and bias. Royce firmly rejects that kind of radical

skepticism which would deny the very possibility of semiotic validation. The 'truth' of a given sign series is established by the finite but unbounded community of interpreters who sift and sort interpretive candidates according to the hermeneutic and semiotic triads which govern all sign transactions.

Since both nature and human community are permeated by social categories, it should not be a surprise to see that Royce extends these traits to the divine itself (1913: 318):

And, if, in ideal, we aim to conceive the divine nature, how better can we conceive it than in the form of the Community of Interpretation, and above all in the form of the Interpreter, who interprets all to all, and each individual to the world, and the world of spirits to each individual.

The Absolute is no longer an a-temporal realm of pure appreciation but has now become a part of the evolving life of concrete communities. In his reflections on the origin of the Christian religion, Royce gives priority to the Spirit as the power which operates through history to make Christ actual as the body of the community. In so far as he retains anything like a traditional view of God, he envisions the divine as the Interpretive Spirit which provides the opening power for semiotic expansion and validation. The Spirit Interpreter coaxes all sign series into an overcoming and expansion which frees the community from ideological concretion and semiotic stagnation.

No given interpretation could be real or actual outside of a concrete community. As Royce states (*ibid.*: 339), "But an interpretation is real only if the appropriate community is real, and is true only if that community reaches its goal." The reality of a community is only insured in a teleological process which reaches into the infinite future. Internal to a community of interpretation is the Beloved Community which emerges whenever an interpretive community becomes infused with grace. The grace-filled Beloved Community is itself underway toward that Universal Community which will bring all interpreters into hermeneutic and semiotic convergence. As we probe into the internal constitution of a realized community of interpretation we find these deeper layers which emerge whenever the Spirit becomes the power behind each interpretive act.

Royce insists that no self can function outside of a community which provides the basic hermeneutic and

semiotic triads. To be is to be underway toward the community of interpretation (1913: 332):

In all other cases, just as in our ordinary social dealings with one another, we aim towards the goal of the community of interpretation. Our will is the "will to interpret". We do not reach the goal in any one moment, so long as we are dealing with other human beings. Yet we interpret the goal. For the goal of the community is always precisely that luminous knowledge which we do, in a limited but in a perfectly definite form, possess, within the range of our own individual life whenever our comparisons of distinct ideas are made with clearness.

The internal and referential wealth of sign series make it impossible for any individual to interpret nature and history adequately. The innumerable actual and possible signs, as embodied interpretations, dwarf the powers of the finite self. Only the community of interpretation has the necessary spatial and temporal scope for working with the vast wealth of signs. Further, the hermeneutic and semiotic triads can only function in a setting in which more than one self is prevalent. The semiotic triad is more obviously communal but the hermeneutic triad as well requires social contrast in order to arrive at the mediating "thirds" which will link percepts and concepts. Royce would consider the notion of a private interpretation a sheer contradiction in terms.

The community has as its embodiment the innumerable sign series which mark its outward life. Each interpretation becomes incarnate in the media of communication and becomes a sign for at least two individuals. The power of the triadic logic lies in its drive to move signs further into the internal and external lives of the members of the interpretive community. No sign can long remain free from the felt pressure of other signs and of other interpreters. It belongs to one or more sign series and it lives as a complex within the awareness of two or more selves. A sign must be social in this dual sense.

The spirit of loyalty animates the members of a genuine community and insures that sign translation occurs in an orderly and yet open fashion. Loyalty is not directed to the brute preservation of past signs but opens the interpretive process to the Spirit which is both the lure and the goad to the hermeneutic process. When grace enters the community, signs attain

that unique transparency which lets the power of the divine life emerge in the loyal interpreters who preserve the semiotic wealth of the social orders. For Royce, signs remain the outer clothing of an Absolute which can only show itself within the triadic logic of a community of interpreters.

NOTES:

[1] Royce cites the following Peirce papers as having determined his later view of the community of interpretation: "On a New List of Categories" (1867), "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" (1868-69), "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868-69), "Grounds for the Validity of the Laws of Logic; Further Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868-69), and "Sign".

[2] Royce is referring to Peirce's 1867 paper, "On a New List of Categories".

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