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Royce on Freedom: Reply to Robert Burch

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In his carefully crafted and detailed paper, Robert Burch exhibits the conceptual strategies invoked by Royce to outflank the twin charges of pantheism and determinism brought against his 1885 work, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. In his 1895 lecture at Berkeley University and in his subsequent essay on the Absolute and the Individual, Royce insists that his understanding of the Absolute Self does not entail the elimination of finite freedom any more than it denies the principle of individuation. Responding to Howison's charge that he has not properly shown how finite minds are contained in the Universal Mind, Royce defends a notion of inclusion which supports both the freedom of the Absolute and the freedom of all finite minds. Rejecting traditional models of individuation which rely on the principles of matter, space, time, or sense experience, Royce takes the bold move to make Will, both that of the Absolute and that of finite minds, the source of genuine individuality. This Will is most radically fulfilled in the principle of loyalty which ensures that all individuals are granted their full standing in reality and within the internal life of the Absolute.

By way of reinforcing Burch's insights into the so-called early Royce, I wish to frame the discussion both in terms of *The Conception of God* and in terms of Royce's middle and late periods. Throughout, the focus will be on how Royce struggled to find a more satisfactory articulation of the intimate correlation between finite and infinite reality. Implied in this reworking is a deepened understanding of the role of finite freedom in enriching the life of the Universal Mind.

As an idealist, Royce maintains that experience is the only exhaustive avenue to reality and that nothing which is in principle outside of some experience can exist. To affirm a reality outside of experience is to become involved in self contradiction. While it is obvious that a great deal lies outside of finite experience, it does not follow that such realities are not part of an atemporal Absolute experience. Insofar as our experience is fragmented, it points to a beyond. In his "Supplementary Essay" Royce states:

That our consciousness, as it comes, means more than it presents, and somehow implies a *beyond* for which it insistently seeks, — this indeed is a central characteristic of our experience, and one upon which all insight and all philosophy depend.¹

This beyond is not limited to the sum total of all other finite selves but lies in the internal life of the Universal Mind for which no experience or reality is external

or alien. While we are bound to a time process and constrained by the general structures of finitude, the Absolute is without limitation.

Freedom is held to be preserved in the parallelism between my metaphysical Ego, with its ideals of a future consummation, and the Highest Good chosen by the Absolute. Burch correctly points out that there is a tension in the early Royce between the unified Will of the Absolute and its necessary fulfillment in countless, and potentially divergent, finite wills. Royce seems to be arguing that finite freedom is merely the freedom to parallel or imitate the freedom of the Absolute. This isomorphic relation does not allow for radical discontinuity between the depth dimension of the self (a dimension Royce contrasts with the mere empirical self of social contrasts) and the Will of the free Absolute. One is tempted to ask if Royce's Absolute can be genuinely surprised by the willful choices of finite minds. It seems that his defense of a principle of individuation based on the reality of the Will is stronger and more effective than his defense of the full reality of finite freedom. In the early period, he is at his best when he gives priority to the moral dimension of the self rather than to the perceptual or merely cognitive dimensions.

The early Royce employs a triadic schema exhibiting the relation between thought, experience, and will. Thoughts and experiences are internally related through the principle of will which needs free individuals for its fulfillment. Like James, he insists that attention is more fundamental than sheer inventiveness. The relation between my mind and that of the Absolute is sustained by those acts of attention which are in harmony with the primary act of creation of the divine will. Without the power of the will, my finite thoughts and experiences could not attain internal unity any more than they could find validation outside of my internal mental life. Unity and truth are dependent upon my will.

By the turn of the century Royce found new strategies for linking the finite and the infinite. In his "Supplementary Essay" to *The World and the Individual*, he attacks Bradley's refusal to take relation seriously. As before, he insists that individuals are real and that they collectively mirror the internal life of the Absolute. He combines his earlier notion of self-consciousness with that of a number series in which each member images each other. The individual is thus seen to be part of a self-representative series such that it 'contains' or images the reality and plenitude of each other member of the series. He added the analogy of mirroring to that of his earlier parallelism. Instead of simply stating the logical necessity of an Absolute Mind as the guarantor of our willful and mental acts, he attempted to show how any self must mirror and reflect the range of all other selves as those selves in turn enrich and express the Absolute. Each self is a monad with windows which allows other centers of self-consciousness to become internally constitutive of its own life. Royce was aware that he had not succeeded in spelling out the specific mechanisms by and through which the finite actually comes to know of its inclusion in the infinite life of the Absolute Self. It is one thing to argue, as he did in the chapter on "The Possibility of Error", that an Absolute mind must be able to compare and contrast finite thoughts, and another thing altogether to show how a finite mind fully participates in the comparative process itself. It is as if Royce was driven to make his account of the finite/infinite correlation more directly phenomenological. It is

not clear that he made any striking advance in his understanding of finite freedom in the period between 1885 and 1900.

The major breakthrough came in the period around 1912 when Royce re-studied some of Peirce's early papers in semiotic. This, combined with his detailed studies of St. Paul and the New Testament tradition, enabled him to take the time process more seriously and to find a mechanism for giving a more adequate account of finite freedom. As in the earlier period, he used the notion of the will but grafted it onto a notion of interpretation. This hermeneutic perspective redefined the earlier triadic structure of *The Concept of God*. Two triads function in Royce's *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). The first can be called the hermeneutic triad which distinguishes between percept, concept and interpretation. Percepts become linked to concepts through the interpretive process which is embodied in a specific interpretation. This interpretation becomes a public or private sign which can then become part of another interpretive process. When a sign emerges out of an interpretation the second triadic structure is brought into play. This structure can be called the semiotic triad which distinguishes between the sign, the interpreter, and the interpretee for whom the interpretation is made. As a specific sign becomes available to the community it receives further elaborations and possible enrichments through the transaction between interpreters and interpretees.

Royce redefines the Absolute in terms of a living community of interpretation which stands as the horizon within which the infinite can become embodied and rendered transparent to finite minds. The abyss which separated the finite from the infinite in the early and middle periods is overcome as the Spirit Interpreter becomes relocated within the heart of human communities. This redefinition of the nature and role of the Absolute gave Royce the tools necessary for enriching his concept of freedom.²

In the earlier writings, Royce stressed the atemporal reality of the Absolute. Such an Absolute is a self-conscious individual which is unique and embodies one will. For the finite empirical ego, some overarching principle of unity must emerge so that its fragmented state can be overcome. The metaphysical Ego struggles toward an ideal which is parallel to the Highest Good of the Absolute. Once the self has found its ideal it can join the communion of saints and become a citizen of the City of God. Yet this account remains incomplete and inadequate. Royce's heroic attempts to combine the mathematical theories of Cantor and Dedekind with his idealist model of self-consciousness brought him no closer to the reality of finite freedom. It is only in the later period that Royce found the categorial structures which enabled him to give a phenomenologically adequate account of finite freedom. Going beyond the images of parallelism and mirroring, he redefined the finite/infinite correlation in terms of the ongoing life of interpretation. The Spirit Interpreter works within the hermeneutic and semiotic triads to assure that individuals participate more fully in the self-evolution of the Absolute. The hermeneutic self has more finite freedom to explore the infinite wealth of signs and sign systems and to thereby assure the full plenitude of the Absolute Interpreter. While the Royce of *The Conception of God* sharpened his understanding of individuation beyond its earlier formulation, it is only in the Royce of *The Problem of Christianity* that

we find the full and adequate expression of that finite freedom which sustains the life of interpretation for the hermeneutic community.

¹ Josiah Royce, *The Conception of God*, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1897), p. 148.

² For an elaboration on Royce's contributions to hermeneutics, cf., my *The Community of Interpreters*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987).