
We are clearly in the midst of a renascence of Royce’s philosophy. A recent Royce conference at Vanderbilt University in the spring of 2005 and the reissuing of The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce (Edited by John J. McDermott) by Fordham University Press provide just a few examples. Frank Oppenheim’s book Reverence for the Relations of Life: Re-imagining Pragmatism via Josiah Royce’s Interactions with Peirce, James and Dewey also makes a significant contribution to this renascence by offering a wide-ranging examination of Royce’s thought. It also confirms Oppenheim’s position as the leading authority on Royce.

The book operates on multiple levels. Thematically speaking, the book is divided into three major sections in which Oppenheim “dramatiz[es] Royce in his relations (xv)” both personally and professionally to Peirce, James, and Dewey. It concludes with an epilogue in which four major topics are recapitulated: community and its spirit, reality and truth, the God-question, and re-imagining pragmatism. At a meta-thematic level, the book takes the Roycean phrase “reverence for the relations of life” and applies it in three ways. The first application concerns the importance of relations of life in Royce’s thought. The second has to do with Royce’s reverence for relations as it is exhibited in his various relationships with Peirce, Dewey, and James. Unlike the approach taken in his previous books on Royce, Oppenheim’s intent here is to examine Royce “in a wiser way—through his relations of life (x).”

The third, and perhaps most problematic, application concerns the intellectual and social context within which we exist today and how we might use the Roycean notion of “reverence for the relations of life” to make sense of, and possibly ameliorate, much of the climate that has been generated by “communities of hate” in contemporary life. As Oppenheim says:

Why focus back on these people of a century ago when today we whirl around in terrorism and wars set a-swirling by ethnic clashes, global finance, isolating media and the
World Wide Web? Because from just these people have largely arisen the forms of thought and cultural ethos we live by today. Since the distinctive American culture which Americans claim as their own arose largely from these thinkers, Americans’ intellectual health largely depends upon returning responsibly and critically to these roots (ix).

Regarding Royce’s relationship with Peirce, Oppenheim introduces us to a Royce who was captivated by the study of logic throughout and stimulated by Peirce’s novel logical investigations. This resulted in Royce having a “Peircean insight” in early 1912 in which “thanks to the infinity that operates in the logic of relatives, he saw the infinite ranges in which the triadic logic of interpretation opens up to thought (184).” According to Oppenheim:

Through this properly metaphysical method, Royce found the insight (abduction) that allowed him to move beyond these three historical conceptions of Being... He seems to have insighted or “abducted” his “fourth and final interpretation of Being” in the following way. His unique meaning of Being had to refer not only to the temporal-spatial existents in the flux of reality, but also to the real minds interacting by signs within the universe of interpretation... (200)

Here we see a Royce that was influenced by Peirce to adopt more of a realist position than Royce is typically given credit for. Royce has been typically viewed as an American Hegel - a dyed-in-the-wool idealist. But, as Oppenheim points out, Royce definitively stated that “the whole intention with which we approach our idealism is the intention to be as realistic as we can (127).” What came as somewhat of a surprise to this reviewer was that after Peirce’s death, it was Royce who, viewing himself as Peirce’s intellectual “son,” turned to the role of “saving and assaying Peirce’s papers (34).” One comes away from these chapters largely convinced of Oppenheim’s depiction of the “Peirceanization” of Royce.

The section on the relationship between Royce and James traces their pre-Harvard and Harvard relationship through six phases and goes into some detail over their famous “battle” over the Absolute. Attention is also paid to their differences in philosophical temperament. But,
like all stereotypes, Oppenheim shows how labels can obfuscate more than they illuminate. We are familiar with how "James in several ways emphasize[d] subjectivity more than Royce did (126)." But Oppenheim acquaints us with a Royce who also was committed to the integrity of experience - "a Roycean sensibility [that] creates an openness to whatever impinges on the bodily and moral senses... His docility creates a path of submission to evidence coming in from the natural or social other (124-125)." Here, not surprisingly, we begin to see the tension between the individualistic bent of James's thought and the social, community based approach of Royce. It was this seeming neglect of the social dimension of experience on the part of James that caused Royce to view "James's theory of truth no so much false as woefully inadequate for a philosophy of life (118)."

Oppenheim treats the reader to an interesting personality comparison between James and Royce. By emphasizing how the "eye" was the dominant organ for James, as opposed to the "ear" for Royce, we are introduced to the artistic James whose "mental eye penetrated pure experience ... his eyes be[holding] the rich diversity of the world and guid[ing] his philosophical description of a pluralistic universe (67-68)." Royce, on the other hand, "seems primarily to have been an 'ear'.... Through the clamor of other's voices Royce recognized ideas not his own, and thus felt the Other and the Community itself (68)." But Oppenheim also engages in a bit of psychoanalyzing concerning their respective orientations towards the notion of the Absolute. James is viewed as rejecting the Absolute as a kind of delayed reaction to the comprehensive, Swedenborgian vision of his father -- Henry James Senior. Royce is viewed as an embracer of the Absolute due to his need for a father figure: "Royce's obsessive 'search for a father' may have prompted this key insight as much as logic did (66)."

Here too, as in the case of his relationship with Peirce, we see a Royce deeply touched by the loss of James as a colleague and friend in 1910 and someone who continued to try to come to terms with James's philosophy. According to Oppenheim, in The Sources of Religious Insight and The Problem of Christianity "James's presence makes itself strongly felt, both through his positive contributions and his shortcomings.... It seems no exaggeration to say that
William James was even more present to Royce’s reflections after James’s death (86).”

In the Section on Royce and Dewey, Oppenheim sees Dewey as primarily affected by the thought of James and Royce as more aligned with Peirce. Dewey and Royce differ fundamentally, according to Oppenheim, in much the same way James and Royce differed. By “not starting from experienced facts but preferring to start from ideas (291-292),” Dewey saw Royce’s view as “skewed” by its idealistic bent. Dewey’s frustration with Royce manifested itself when reviewing the second volume of The World and the Individual: “[M]uch of this present volume has escaped me (292).” This tension also carried over into their respective views of logic. In contrast to an “instrumental logic,” Dewey characterized Royce’s theory of meaning as “isolated or given or static ... [and] lacking a dynamic reference (293).” As opposed to simply focusing upon the biological matrix of inquiry, Royce emphasized that “a true assertion had both eternal and temporal ingredients (296).” But, as Oppenheim points out, Dewey’s criticism is not entirely accurate: “It remains a little noticed fact that in September 1910 ... Royce broke with the non-pragmatist logicians Russell and Whitehead by insisting that a ‘mode of action’ also constitutes an ... essential element of logic (298).”

There are moments of limited rapprochement in the thought of Royce and Dewey. Both shared an appreciation of oriental culture and both were “global communitarians.” Also, there are times when Dewey will inadvertently credit Royce as, for example, in the sixth chapter of Experience and Nature when Dewey says “the later philosophy of Josiah Royce ... might properly have started out ... with ‘a community of selves’ (302).” This tension in their thought Oppenheim sees as stemming from their respective “centres of vision” to use a Jamesian term: “[We] find a metaphysician of a naturalistic faith reviewing the work of a metaphysician with a human faith in an Absolute immanent [and] yet transcendent of Nature (292).” Yet this tension is somewhat healed later when, two years before his death, Dewey paid tribute to Royce’s idea of “‘The Great Community’ ... [which] is also ‘The Continuing Community’ (305).”

As a final comment, the question must be raised as to whether Oppenheim’s project succeeds at a meta-theoretical level. More specifically, can a “re-imagining of pragmatism [by] bringing Royce to center stage (431)” help us to deal
effectively with the growing threat of terrorism, individualism, and isolationism? Royce's philosophy, with its emphasis on the tacit ingredient of mutual alterity that is implicit in the communication process, allows for this possibility. Here Royce sounds very much like Habermas when the latter speaks of "illocutionary speech acts" (see Chapter 9). But might the stubborn fact of incommensurable interpretations, when combined with the unwillingness of the various communities to work through "the creative struggle" of an arduous interpretive process, work against such a possibility? If one tends to answer in the affirmative, it is in no way a reflection on the quality of Oppenheim's book.

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The Cambridge Companion volumes are widely distributed, intending to cover in a single volume the most significant areas of interest or inquiry of notable voices in philosophy. The Americans honored by a volume are Rawls, Quine, William James, and with this volume, Peirce. The contributors are distinguished not only by their work on Peirce, but also by their academic positions and achievements. Perhaps I am too easily amused by such ironies that Emeriti and Provosts have devoted their careers to understand and honor a character like Charles Peirce.

Cheryl Misak (Toronto) edited this collection of twelve essays that seem to have a double sense. On one hand they explore themes we would expect: the pragmatic maxim, truth and reality, theory of inquiry, metaphysics, semiotics. On the other, they seem to fall into rendering either an explanation of some failure of Peirce's thought or into making an apologia for Peirce's novelty and uniqueness. Both strategies attempt to explain why Peirce has fallen outside the mainstream of philosophy. This only shows that Peirce remains an enigma due to the complexity and range of his thought, and therefore, a genuine subject of unsettled opinion.