

Josiah Royce and the Renewal of the United States:

A Challenge to the Royce Community

Keynote Address

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Thank you. It is indeed a pleasure to be asked to give these brief remarks in the course of this celebratory banquet. I notice, however, that I was not asked to give a more formal paper in this very fine program of analytical papers being presented at this conference. I take no offense, however. I am not a philosopher, nor am I a student of philosophy, much less an academic scholar of philosophy as are the majority of men and women in this room.

On the hand, in my defense, fifty-plus years ago, I absorbed from my Jesuit teachers liberal doses of Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy, as refracted through Saints Augustine, Thomas, and Bonaventure, along with

the textbook Thomism that constituted the lingua franca of Catholic education in that era. The governor of California, Jerry Brown, was exposed even more exhaustively to such an education in that he spent a half-dozen years or so as a member of the Jesuit Order. And that is perhaps why, among his many philosophical pronouncements as governor past and present, Jerry – as those of us who attended St. Ignatius High School in San Francisco always called him – Jerry once remarked, rather tellingly, I believe – that philosophy was not just a system, however important system building might be – not just a subject, not just a study of knowledge and being -- philosophy was also a way of life; indeed, the practical effects of philosophy – dare one say its existential influence? – were equal to any other aspect of the discipline. We study philosophy, in short, because we want to become men and women who think philosophically. We seek in philosophy – not necessarily exclusively but in an important dimension of our way of life – a way of living, and in political terms, an intensification of citizenship.

I have expanded somewhat on Governor Brown's laconic observation that philosophy was a way of life because, having been produced by the same system, I can easily imagine the classroom discussion that ensued in those Jesuit classrooms such a long, long time ago.

Hence when I first encountered Josiah Royce as a graduate student

at Harvard in the mid-1960s at the highpoint of the American century, edging into a penultimate era, I was reasonably prepared for what happened to me. Josiah Royce – his books, which I read with some understanding as far as his social philosophy was concerned, and a lesser degree of comprehension the more Royce moved into epistemology and metaphysics – literally defined for me (I almost at this point wrote cost me) the next forty years pursuing in my own limited way as a social and cultural historian Josiah Royce as Californian and Josiah Royce on California as well as the continuing dialogue of California the place, the people, the dream, and the Hope of Great Community.

First of all, Royce encouraged me to take California seriously as an American experiment of some importance, as evident, say – although Royce did not know of this at the time – in the great California collection on the fourth floor of Widener Library endowed by Horace Davis, Class of 1849, later president of the Sperry Flour Company in San Francisco, and an early regent of the University of California. (Browsing through that collection, incidentally, led me later on to take a master of library science at UC Berkeley and to serve terms as City of Librarian of San Francisco and State Librarian for California.)

At Harvard, I enjoyed the obvious intellectual influences on me arising from readings at a sensitive time of academic development of California (1886), the Feud of Oakville Creek (1887), The Philosophy of

Loyalty: 1908 (1908), and Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems (1908 as well) – each of which influenced my search for a PhD dissertation topic and structured for me the research and writing of the next four decades. Of equal importance, I also came under the influence of Time with a capital T as I sorted through Royce’s grammar school notebooks from the Lincoln Grammar School at Fifth and Mission San Francisco where the Chronicle building now stands, notebooks from Boys High School (amalgamated in the 1890s with Girls High School, a pioneering America Institution for young women, to form Lowell High School of San Francisco, one of the great public high schools of the nation) some fugitive materials from his undergraduate years at the University of California, his passport photograph and passport of 1875 when, financed by a group of San Francisco businessmen, he left for study in Leipzig and Gottingen. (I later joined that circle of businessmen and civic leaders, which included Daniel Coit Gillman, then president of UC, later president of Johns Hopkins: namely, the Chit Chat Club, an essay over dinner club that included, in addition to Gilman, economist Henry George, naturalist John Muir, and flourishes to this day, peopled by an equal balance of academic and professionals with academic interests.)

This sense of Time resembled the sense of time Royce referred to in his 60th birthday remarks at the Wilton Hotel in Philadelphia when he pointed out that no contemporary boy of Athens, living under the shadow

of the Parthenon, would have enjoyed more of a sense of time than he did as a youngster growing up in Grass Valley, wandering its hills, encountering its abandoned mineshafts and half-collapsed cabins, each of them possessed of a sense of past effort extending backwards into time past, into history, that seemed so long ago despite the fact that this era was not even yet two decades ago. Thus Royce tells us that he encountered time in terms of human effort, human struggle, for achievement – just as he, so he tells us, encountered the majesty of the community in the schoolyard play of the Lincoln Grammar School.

And that brings us to a new point of my encounter, which is to say, with the psychology of Josiah Royce. One wonders how well this undersized and large-headed youngster coped in the rough-and-tumble playground of the Lincoln Grammar School: this boy inheriting a strong strain of nervous instability from his father, who supported his family pedaling fruit from a fruit cart, or his strong-willed mother, who tied his left hand behind his back so as to force this naturally left-handed boy to write with his right hand. This nervous instability in Royce precipitated a kind of breakdown in 1888, necessitating a therapeutic voyage to Australia. And it reappeared in his granddaughter, Kathleen Royce: an eerily exact look-a-like to her grandfather, who used to come and visit me in my office when I was serving as City Librarian to discuss with me her own breakdowns and recoveries.

All this spoke to me in a most powerful way: Royce's sense of coming of age in a society that, despite its newness, was touched by time and mystery; the suppressed traumas of his childhood, suppressed and transcended as far as their public dimension was concerned by the philosophical concept of the majesty of the community; the sense of California as a backwater, a province, as set forth in his "Meditation Before the Gate" (meaning the Golden Gate, as seen from the Berkeley Hills) with a mixture of embattlement resignation and defiance because, as he wrote, he was a Californian, destined at the time (Harvard had not yet called) to struggle with the great issues of philosophy that were, simultaneously, so evidently applicable to the society in which he had come of age and yet so disregarded by that society as well in a California Royce described as a philosophical wilderness.

Thus on one level, one can – that is, if philosophy can ever be reduced completely, or even fairly, to the psychology of an individual philosopher, one can see in Royce, as I was tempted to do nearly fifty years ago as a callow graduate student, an all-dominant process of reverse compensation. The boy who refused to attend church in Grass Valley, sitting outside in the sunshine during the sermon, kibitzing perhaps with the village atheist, commits himself to a philosophical inquiry into religion as a form of knowledge as early as his The Religious Aspects of Philosophy (1885), the first installment on a series of inquiries – The

Conception of God (1889), Studies of Good and Evil (1898), The Conception of Immortality (1900), The Sources of Religious Insight (1912), The Problem of Christianity (1913) – which, especially The Problems of Christianity – constitute a high point of religion-related philosophical inquiry possessed of a cumulative grandeur of insight, analysis, and literary force that placed Royce alongside Jonathan Edwards, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Bernard Lonergan, and Charles Taylor as the great and grand masters of religious inquiry in North America. The skinny neurasthenic lad, who very well might have been bullied in the school yard at Lincoln Grammar School, extols the majesty of the community. The poor boy in ragged clothes gets a chance to attend high school at a time when very few young Californians had this privilege. (A skinny Jewish immigrant kid from Germany, Albert Michelson, who grew up on a Nevada ranch, was also at the Lincoln Grammar School and Boys High School with Royce. Michelson went on to the Naval Academy, to which he returned as a professor, becoming in 1907 the first American to win the Nobel Prize.) The young man who grew up in near poverty in the crowded South of Market district of San Francisco wins scholarships of one sort or another to Berkeley, Germany, and Johns Hopkins, followed by an assistant professorship at his undergraduate alma mater and marries the socially prominent daughter, Katharine Head, of a leading judge, then, two years later, joins the faculty at Harvard as instructor in philosophy and remains there for the rest of his

career in what now is known as a Golden Age in that department, dominated by Royce, William James, and George Santayana.

Leaving American California, in which he believed himself to be languishing as a philosopher, he chronicles its original sins in a history that, paradoxically, remains to this day the single greatest testimony to the possibilities of California as an achieved instance of American civilization, concepts Royce later developed in his studies of loyalty and the higher provincialism. Josiah Royce, former Californian, becomes like Henry George, former Californian, now resident in New York, in terms of their intellectual contribution to the state – not just their celebrity but their analysis of California as a society – the two most formidable thinkers of the 19th and early 20th century, with Lord James Bryce running a distant third.

Such tropes of reverse compensation, of course, can take us only so far. They are true in a way, but only in a way. They are not the complete story. That larger story as far as Josiah Royce is concerned – and I am speaking here as a mere reporter, however speculative, with minimal (if any) qualifications to speculate, if the truth be told – that larger story belongs to the history of philosophy, the history of Harvard, the history of the philosophy department at Harvard, and the intellectual/philosophical needs of the American people in an era of continental consolidation within and imperial expansion abroad.

Like the Great White Fleet sent around the world by Theodore

Roosevelt in 1907-1908, the Harvard philosophers – Josiah Royce, William James, and George Santayana -- launched themselves into vast seas of thought on behalf of the American enterprise. From this perspective, their quest ran parallel to that of Woodrow Wilson of Princeton into constitutional history, Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin into the effects of the frontier on the American experience, Alfred Thayer Mahan of the Naval War College into role of sea power in the past, present and future of the Republic, and Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois into the possibilities of a biracial American future.

In this effort, George Santayana – half Spaniard as a Santayana, born in Avila, Spain; half Yankee as a Sturgis of Boston, his mother a member of the great Boston trading family of Bryant & Sturgis, on whose ship Pilgrim Richard Henry Dana, Jr., author of Two Years Before the Mast –(1840), came to California in the 1830s – in this effort Santayana was the least engaged either personally or philosophically or combinations thereof. Although raised in Boston as an adolescent and young adult, Santayana remained European in his outlook, rarely moving beyond the confines of Boston – indeed, living in rooms at Harvard until taking early retirement – this made possible by money invested in real estate on his behalf by his thoroughly Americanized brother – and expatriating himself to Europe with the statement, so it is alleged, “I have a rendezvous with spring.” Philosophically, and I warn you that I have no claim to any expertise in this

matter, it seems to me that two apparently contradictory philosophical tracks – an avowed materialism and a kind of crypto-Platonism – run continuously through Santayana’s thought. The Platonism is apparent in Santayana’s The Sense of Beauty (1896) as well as in his early poetry and aesthetic writings. It is also present in Santayana’s vestigial Catholicism: this in a young man who attended mass religiously (literally!) in his youth at the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception in Boston and who was seriously thinking at the time of becoming an ecclesiastical architect, or was reputed to have quipped in later life, “There is no God, and Mary is His mother,” and who spent the final years of his life living in the Convent of the Blue Nuns in Rome. Yet, philosophically, Santayana declared himself a materialist and tended to write in the borderlands of things seen and unseen, which made him such an acute observer of the passing scene and, in one dramatic instance, The Last Puritan (1935) an accomplished novelist, and in his later years – the Catholic Platonic side perhaps prevailing – produced The Realm of Truth (1937), The Realm of Spirit (1940), and The Idea of Christ in the Gospels (1946). Truly, this was not a robustly useful American thinker and, realizing this, Santayana departed for the Catholic Mediterranean.

That left William James and Josiah Royce, and in the interaction between the two, personal and philosophical, is one of the grand dramas of academic philosophy in this nation: the interaction between the skeptical

doctor of medicine turned philosopher, James, vestigially alert to the intuitions and breakthroughs nurtured in his youth by his Swedenborgian father; and the Idealists, Josiah Royce, committed to the Absolute and to the mental realities of Idealism – with all that this involved in epistemological theory – yet nurturing all the while a social philosophy that, while anchored in Idealism, served, so he hoped, the pragmatic necessities, as William James would describe them, of American life and habits of thought.

For a while, or so it seems, the congruence between James and America and Royce and America –the applicability and acceptability of their thought – seemed to run neck and neck, should their efforts be characterized as a horse race. Indeed, Royce would seem to be out in the lead, given his higher rate of productivity. Each of these philosophers were superb writers. James has long since been acknowledged as a literary master, his works now enshrined in the Library of America series. But one must acknowledge as well what Yale historian Sydney Ahlstrom once described to me in a personal discussion as the “rich Rembrandtesque resonance” of Royce’s writing style – a description that has remained with me for a lifetime, as I eagerly await the launching of the Royce Papers project.

The story goes that James and Royce were sitting on a stone fence on a field outside of James’ summer home in New Hampshire, a

photographer standing near by. Just as the photographer raised his camera to capture the two luminaries, James, who could be jovial and boisterous when he wasn't depressed, is reputed to have called out: "Royce, damn the Absolute!" In any event, the photograph of the two survives as does the look of astonishment on Royce's face. In humor, James might very well have been speaking for the American people, for Idealism, so Germanic in its vitality, was already on the wane in American circles, if indeed, it had ever really gotten a start. Such an avowedly religious nation, after all, as was then the case, so formed by the Judeo-Christian tradition, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, already possessed prior conceptions of the Absolute requiring no philosophical annotation, and even Josiah Royce was haunted by the notion that the Something with a capital S might very well be a Someone equally capitalized: a suspicion, an inclination, an intuition, a struggle that makes of the Roycean canon emerging from these later years a yet to be acknowledged anti-chamber to the possibilities of belief in the 20th century, themes soon to be taken up by high theology in the 20th century in Christian and Jewish circles.

Could it be that the cumulative challenge facing the academic Royce community in this nation – indeed, if there is such a thing – is nothing less than the reapplication, the reinsertion, of Roycean themes and values in American life? All of us have long since made our peace with William

James. We accept the pragmatic, open-ended epistemological universe he investigated. We are also alert to his sensitivity to higher value, including the religious impulse, despite his underlying skepticism. But however they differed philosophically, Royce and James practiced a very high level of philosophical engagement. Philosophy was for each of them, to return for a moment to Governor Brown's observation, a way of life, a mode of analytical and corrective engagement with reality, the world, whatever that might be. Unbothered by system, an inveterate phenomenologist, William James had no trouble accepting the reality of the world. It was for him, after all, all that we have, all that we know.

Oriented to Idealism as a metaphysical and noetic system, Royce returned to the world as well: not in the pointillist-realist manner of William James, perhaps – although Royce did magnificently as an historian when he turned to history and at least made one effort at a philosophical novel – but certainly in a spirit of pragmatic correction anchored in an Idealist structure. Royce's philosophy of loyalty, his hope of the Hope of the Great Community, his sense of the Higher Provincialism – while remaining concepts dependent upon Idealism – were not, in Jonathan Edwards terms, images and shadows or Kantian or Schopenhauerian refractions – they were and remain corrective categories, high ideals, capable of a broad based assent beyond the subset of the academic philosophical community, as crucial as the work of that community is.

I understood this nearly a half century ago when I first encountered Royce as a graduate student. As a fourth-generation Californian, I responded to his love/hate relationship to the possibilities of this instance of American civilization and society on the Pacific Coast. I perceived it, moreover, while I remained a graduate student from the perspective of Harvard, which is to say, outside the matrix of California, at ground zero of the New England experience, which, for better or for worse, has until recently remained a concentration point of the American effort to document the national experience, albeit too frequently as an extension of New England value. I, too, like Royce – to put myself for an audacious moment in his grand company – felt the compelling power of reverse compensation: in struggling for the ideal, that is, as a way of coping with an incomplete reality; the ambivalence, for example, that allowed Royce both to extol and condemn California in his history of the first years of the American state. But this is no debilitating contradiction. This is part of the human condition. To struggle for loyalty, to hope for the great community, to seek the higher provincialism: all this requires contradiction, ambivalence, and noir if it is not to be merely boosterism. When it came to social action, Royce himself did not focus exclusively on the Ideal, although the compelling power of the Ideal was present; he focused, rather, on the struggle for corrective action – the point of struggle, in fact, which links his thought to that of his colleague William James, even more dramatically

perhaps because James, avoiding system, was highly suspicious of intellectual constructs redolent of the Ideal.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Americans began talking about what they had in common, what the Great Community might be, how it should be hoped for and struggled for in day-to-day pragmatic action? Wouldn't it be wonderful to reinsert into American discourse a Roycean concept to loyalty – loyalty to place, region, human community? Wouldn't it helpful if we were able to humanize our local, regional, and national lives – not with these goals as tyrannical concepts, fixed identities, but as a quest for a more open-ended common ground and national identity anchored simultaneously in our Constitutionally mandated social structures and guarantees and protections of liberty, enriched by era of immigration that succeeded the colonial and constitutional era, and the global era that characterizes the present. Not a narrow common ground, mind you, but a common ground large enough to encompass our new global identity. Not unquestioning loyalty, mind you, but a search for those values affecting the conduct of life and society that at least stand a chance for general assent.

Wouldn't it be nice, finally, to reintroduce Josiah Royce to the American people, starting with our undergraduates and graduate students – and thus not to be forced to hear, yet one more time, “Royce ... Josiah Royce ... who is he?”

Well, I conclude, he was a great philosopher ... a great American.

The First World War, pitting the United States against Germany, as well as German atrocities, ended his life in sorrow. But because he wrote, because he is still with us, not defeat. Here we are tonight in his birth place, where he first roamed these hills and, like the boy in Athens in the shadow of the Parthenon to whom he would later compare himself, first felt that sense of wonder that, as Aristotle tells us, leads to philosophy.