

Josiah Royce on Families and Communities

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Abstract

In this paper I will outline the general lines of his philosophical thought: Royce's metaphysics of idealism, Royce's ethics of loyalty and Royce's pragmatist epistemology of interpretation, these are intimately connected and offer us a novel and very philosophically interesting view of self and community. I will consequently explore some of his core ideas on self and community focused in the process of integration that only family can mediate, i.e., a process of interpretation, and introduce these related to the understanding of how communities work. Finally my aim is to explain how these ideas can have a positive impact in the conception of family as the key integration of self and community in the spirit of the philosophy of Royce.

Keywords: Josiah Royce, family, community, self, semiotics and community.

Resumen

En este artículo esbozaré las líneas generales de su pensamiento filosófico: la metafísica del idealismo de Royce, la ética de la lealtad de Royce y la epistemología pragmática de la interpretación de Royce, están íntimamente conectadas y nos ofrecen una visión novedosa y filosóficamente muy interesante del yo y la comunidad. En consecuencia, exploraré algunas de sus ideas centrales sobre el yo y la comunidad enfocadas en el proceso de integración que sólo la familia puede mediar, es decir, un proceso de interpretación, e introduciré estas relacionadas con la comprensión de cómo funcionan las comunidades. Finalmente, mi objetivo es explicar cómo estas ideas pueden tener un impacto positivo en la concepción de la familia como la integración clave del yo y la comunidad en el espíritu de la filosofía de Royce.

Palabras clave: Josiah Royce, familia, comunidad, yo, semiótica y comunidad

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) was an American Philosopher born in California. Although in his own time he was a noted and public thinker, little is known of his work today outside the studies of American philosophical thought. Royce explored many areas of philosophy and humanities in general, and had his share of research in mathematics and logic, he is probably the one philosopher who recognized the genius of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and applied his theory of signs (Semiotics) in his own ideas. Royce was a professor at Harvard University and from there made a reputation for himself as an idealist and a pragmatist. It is also interesting to note that Royce was one of the few people who chaired both the American Philosophical Association as well as the American Psychological Association. All these aspects make us wonder how such a plural polymath could contribute to the reflection on community, and the kind of community that family is.

The thought of Josiah Royce is versatile: he was a philosopher that concerned amply as to how to explicate in an adequate manner the notions of 'self' and 'community'; these in interdependence and across the different philosophical disciplines. Josiah Royce is well known as an idealist philosopher and as a pragmatist, but little has been done to develop his seminal ideas on self and community beyond what is related to the historical approaches to American Philosophy, his semiotics, for example, is still virtually unexplored. In these lines I will outline the general strands of his philosophical thought, then I will explore some of his core ideas on self and community, and introduce these related to the understanding of how communities work, finally my main aim is to explain how these ideas can have a positive impact in the conception of family and community.

Once I introduced the framework of his semiotic theory of community, I move on to explain what I think that Royce would have said about individuals and communities shedding light on the concept of family, or family being a key concept to understand the overlapping of both self and community, I will also explore a personal conviction related to my interpretation of Josiah Royce: I believe Royce to be a genuine pragmatist philosopher in many ways, one of these being his ability to overcome false dichotomies. One academic dichotomy that Royce sublated was the distinction between practical and theoretical philosophy. For Royce, practical and theoretical philosophy have to endorse each other's concepts, and hence the concepts of 'self' and 'community' were deeply explored by him in the metaphysical

and epistemological fields and then used to propose models of social thought that were in harmony with them. This strength seems to me much needed today. In our day -I am afraid to state, many writers that approach social issues consciously avoid the metaphysical and epistemological theories, while writers who explore metaphysical topics feel all too afraid to touch social issues. Royce's approach to the social cannot be separated from what he thinks about the essence of the community and the individual, and it necessarily presupposes certain critique of the dichotomies that reduce concepts like these. Why is this important can become apparent when one considers that many traditions of thought such as 'scholastic philosophy' necessarily involve the interplay between metaphysical concepts with social ones in order to be rightly understood. The same premise happens in Royce's thought, we need a holistic approach to his thought in order to rightfully place his insightful contributions. The concept of family is such kind of concept that, explored using the ideas of Josiah Royce, can benefit from an integrated account that not only analyses such concept as a social construct, neither only as an anthropological phenomenon nor an institution. Royce provides us a substantive account that endorses the concept of family in such a way that renders even a metaphysic, ontological, and epistemological theories of it. In other words, it provides us a substantiated theory of family. In this article I restrain myself only to a brief presentation of how this concept is discovered in the dynamics of self and community. I will, therefore, offer an outline of Royce's conceptions of 'self' and 'community' and venture from there to offer an interpretation of these that produces the insight of a substantive theory of community and family in particular.

The unity of Royce's thought: metaphysics, epistemology and ethics

The Roycean view on family and community must be derived from the overall balance of the holistic philosophy he defended: we will review the core ideas that are reflected in his conception of self and community from a metaphysical, epistemological and ethical stance, let us not forget that Royce is a true pragmatist, a philosopher who offer us a philosophy that is aimed to challenge assumed dichotomies, that values experience and that offers us a future-oriented thought that has to be translated into action.

Royce's Metaphysics: Idealism

Royce's philosophy is centred on the conception of the Absolute, and hence receives the title of Absolute idealism. Idealism is a metaphysical view that all aspects for reality are ultimately unified into the thought of a single all-encompassing consciousness, which is the Absolute. The Absolute is God. Royce arrived to the idea of the Absolute knower by an argument he labelled 'The Argument from error', Kegley summarises like this:

Royce's major works include *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885), *The World and the Individual* (1899-1901), *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892), *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908), and *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). In his early works, Royce presented a novel defense of idealism, the "argument from error," and arrived at the concept of an actual infinite mind, an "Absolute Knower," that encompasses all truths and possible errors.¹

For the purposes of understanding what self and community are we need to understand that the metaphysics of each being is defined by its relationship with the absolute, finite beings relate to the infinite Absolute in different ways, therefore an individual is defined as a process of relationship to itself and to the Absolute. The metaphysical nature of community follows from the capacity of a community to mediate the individual with the Absolute.

Royce's epistemology: interpretation

In 'The Problem of Christianity', Royce wrote a chapter entitled 'Perception, conception and interpretation', in which he embraced a semiotic epistemology. Under Peirce's influence Royce adopted a view in which knowledge is a mediation that allows communication. Peirce maintains that "all thinking is in signs" and therefore stresses the importance of understanding how signs operate. If we want to understand the nature of thought then we need to understand the nature of signs. The rigorous science of signs is 'Semiotics'. Interpretation is an essential feature of the sign relation – every sign requires interpretation. For Royce, Peirce's semiotics is completed

¹ KEGLEY, JACQUELINE ANNE, "Josiah Royce", *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/roycejos>, retrieved May 28th, 2021.

when we understand that all epistemology is a process not only of perception and cognition, but ‘interpretation’, the basis of community lays in the activity of being a community of interpreters, the self is a process of recognition through interpretation that needs a community. Peirce² tells us that there are three basic kinds of sign: icons, indices and symbols. Peirce distinguishes between three different kinds of sign, according to the different manners in which they signify their objects.

1. Icons: signify their objects by ‘resemblance’ or ‘likeness’
2. Indices: signify their objects by being causally related to them.
3. Symbols: signify their objects by means of convention.

With the battery of Peirce’s theory of sign, Royce was in position to understand how communities are formed by a semiotic process, but not only communities, but selves. Royce tells us in the ‘The Problem of Christianity’:

...[T]he real world is the Community of Interpretation... If the interpretation is a reality, and if it truly interprets the whole of reality, then the community reaches its goal [i.e., a complete representation of Being], and the real world includes its own interpreter (Royce 1913 [2001, 339]).

Royce’s Ethics: loyalty to loyalty

Royce’s ethics are grounded in his metaphysics: The Absolute manifests itself in the realm of individual beings bound within the constraints of time, space, and finitude. Ethics and religion have their basis in this relation of the individual to the infinite real world, a relation Royce characterised in terms of loyalty: to be loyal is to acknowledge our true place in the community of being: finite and infinite. For Royce the moral value of actions is referred to the ‘loyalty’ that he expresses, loyalty is an unconditioned principle of love for the good, he tells us:

...a cause is good, not only for me, but for mankind, in so far as it is essentially a loyalty to loyalty, that is, an aid and a furtherance

² ATKIN, ALBERT, “Peirce’s Theory of Signs”, en: ZALTA, EDWARD N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics/>>.

of loyalty in my fellows. It is an evil cause in so far as, despite the loyalty that it arouses in me, it is destructive of loyalty in the world of my fellows.³

Royce starts to think about community from the basis of this fundamental sense of loyalty: “Groups of people often are unified in feeling, thought, and will by something that transcends any of the individuals present”.⁴ Communities are formed by the interaction of three aspects: metaphysical, epistemological and ethical, communities are realities of interpretation that are oriented by loyalty.

The self in Royce’s philosophy

As it has been said above, Royce concerns was to explicate adequately the concept of ‘self’ and ‘community’, he was also interested in demonstrating their mutual interdependence. Royce is suspicious of a number of dichotomies that have affected Western thought on the self: dichotomies on mind-body, spiritualism-materialism, freedom-determinism, egoism-altruism, etc. He proposes a view of the self that is holistic. One of the problems of the modern accounts of the self is their tendency to either collapse into individualism or fragment collectivism, on the one hand the self is reduced to an atomistic individual that ends up trying to overcome solipsism, on the other hand the individual is diluted in a society that takes precedence and ignores freedom and creativity. Royce wants to propose a conception of the self that is balanced as a result of the particular identity of the individual within a community that renders recognition: a self is not only an individual, but an individual that finds her selfhood in the community. However, Royce thinks that it is crucial to avoid a static account of the self. What is a self, then? the self is a process, not some static entity, a process and relation of public, physical, inner and public aspects. The self is developed out of a process of interaction characterised by reflective control, i.e., there is an empirical self that lives a life of its own, but the self is developed out of a process of social interaction, each self is known to herself through a communal process of interpretation. Finally, Royce tells us that what gives a self its unique identity is an act of will, an act of love.

3 ROYCE, JOSIAH, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995 [1908].

4 ROYCE, JOSIAH, *The Sources of Religious Insight*, Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1912], p. 239.

Royce presents a very calling example of how we discover the principle of individuation even in basic features of the childhood itinerary: consider a child that loves a particular toy, let's say a dolly, if a child has a favourite dolly she will not admit exchange: she wants her dolly, not another dolly even though it might be identical to the previous one... why is this so? Because she individuated that doll by her affection to the object. In other words, the principle of individuation is not only based in the epistemic differentiation of one object from another, at least not in self-conscious individuals, because the individuation comes from acts of affection and will that discover the value of the object, in the case of the doll, or the person in the case of individuals. The principle of individuation of the self does not come out of a Cartesian *Res cogitans* that is static and unchanging, when we find ourselves loved by who we are then we emerge as meaningful individuals, and the proto-community, the family, is the place where we can grow an identity that connects us to a community as genuine individuals. Knowing our worth is not the only part of the process of individuation, we also need to learn to love to discover our capacities and value, there is no room for egoism in the true formation of a person. Our connection with the Absolute is mediated by a community, this connection has cosmic bearings: it can develop to the whole community of being. The ideal communion with reality is also the connection with the Absolute, it is an ideal of love. It is then coherent that God himself choses the signs of a family to mediate his communion with us. The self, then, embodies germinally this communion with the Absolute and expresses that in its thirst for a high ideal of love, there is an inner need of realisation that makes us seek the Other, that thirst for love and being loved is developed and mediated by our first meaningful experiences in our family relationships:

The self as a partial embodiment of his own ideal directed towards the future: The true or metaphysically real Ego of a man..., is simply the totality of his experience in so far as he consciously views this experience, as, In this meaning, the struggling but never completed expression of his coherent plan in life, the changing but never completed partial embodiment of his own ideal.⁵

5 KEGLEY, JACQUELINE ANNE, "Josiah Royce on Self and Community", en: Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies, vol. 66, num. 4, 1980, Rice University: <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63436>.

In ‘The World and the Individual’⁶ Royce discusses four characteristics that are common to conscious and unconscious nature: irreversibility, communication, formation of habits and evolutionary growth. I have no doubt that Peirce’s Evolutionary cosmology is of interest and a powerful influence here, but for now it is important to realise that these characteristics help us recall that the self is not a process without sense: it is a conscious and growing process that is oriented to flourish. The space of that flourishing is community as a mediating reality with the Absolute of goodness that works as its final cause. In Royce’s semiotic theory of community presupposes communication and interpretation as the adequate binding activity: “Community can only exist where individual members are in communication with one another so there is, to some extent and in some relevant respect, a congruence of feeling, thought, and will among them”.⁷

Let us go back to the quote we have done already about the need of community for a genuine self: “My life means nothing, either theoretical or practical, unless I am a member of a community”.⁸

The above dramatical quote about personal meaning has to be understood in context: Royce means that my only way to reconnect with my own meaning is by reconnecting with the Absolute, but this connection is necessarily mediated by a community, but in my personal growth, the closest expression of such community is family. There are temporal dimensions of a community, in ‘The Problem of Christianity’ Royce tells us about past and future:

A community is constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts as a part of his own individual life and self the same past events that each of his fellow-members accepts, may be called a community of memory...

A community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life and self, the same expected future events that each of his fellows accepts, may be called a community of expectation or... a community of hope.⁹

⁶ ROYCE, JOSIAH, *The World and the Individual*, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976 [1899-1901].

⁷ PARKER, KELLY A. and PRATT, SCOTT, “Josiah Royce”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), ZALTA, EDWARD N. (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/royce/>>. Royce, Josiah, retrieved May 28th, 2021.

⁸ ROYCE, JOSIAH, *The Problem of Christianity*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001 [1913], p. 357.

⁹ PC 248

Royce's system is a pragmatist one, not focused in the past, but in future action. Following Peirce who shows us that the meaning of a proposition is given in the courses of action and expectation that follow from such sign. We are bound to the significance of a community through memory, so our loyalty is tuned to the community to which we belong, but the true meaning of the community is given in the hopes we can realise in a future that will be shaped by our actions of connection.

We are coming to the point in which we can develop towards a Roycean concept of 'family': family is a genuine manifestation of a community that gives the individual the experience of its true self as a loved being, a self needs to open itself in the family to be ready to understand that its metaphysical, epistemological and moral flourishing is bind to the Great Community that humanity is:

*The best world for a moral agent is one that needs him to make it better. The purely metaphysical consciousness, in vain, therefore, says of the good, it is. The moral consciousness insists upon setting higher than every such asgseriont, the resolve, Let it be. The moral consciousness declines to accept, therefore, any metaphysical finality. It rejected every static world.*¹⁰

Family is also the right mediation where love appears as an individuation principle:

The love we have for a being makes us declare it unique of its kind, irreplaceable and without any possible equivalent. If a child loves his broken toy soldier, he will not be consoled by a replacement. At the root of love is a spontaneous affirmation, namely, "There shall be no other". "The individual is primarily the object and expression of an exclusive interest, of a determinate selection".¹¹

The bonds of family are bonds of genuine individuation, they are altogether necessary to prepare the individual to be loyal, and hence to be able to integrate oneself to communities. The construction of a genuine community, with bonds and relations that help the person flourish, can only be the case if there is a foundation of that exchange in the community.

¹⁰ Royce, WI, 340

¹¹ KEGLEY, JACQUELINE ANNE, "Josiah Royce on Self and Community", p. 38.

In the same sense that community binds and mediates between genuine individuation and loyalty to the Great Community (the one to which we belong when we are loyal to loyalty), family is the binding agent, the mediating institution that connects us with the genuine loyalty through the exercise of love in our more fundamental development. Our self needs family to kickstart the process of love to our communities and to the Great Community, and it does so because family is the community that forges the fundamental connection to loyalty. Family is the crucible of flourishing of the self and the community, and its first space of mutual recognition and interpretation. We can start closing this article by noticing that, in line with Royce thought, without family a developing self is left alone either to individualism or to collectivism, both situations break the interpretative balance in which true individuation and value exist: family is necessary for a correct mediation and balance. Such balance is, in Royce's thought, loyalty, and the right mediator is family: family is the forge and crucible of loyalty to loyalty, through our integration to society from our families we are capable of building a true genuine community and to find the full meaning of our possibilities and hopes as individual selves.

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