

ABSOLUTE IDEALISM HAVING PRAGMATIC COLOUR: A CRITIQUE OF ROYCE'S APPROACH

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When idealists talked of idea or ideal as the sole reality they implied the view that all existence is mental. This led them to arrive at conclusion that ideas are nothing but static and abstract. The idealistic system of philosophy was revived by the absolutists, they argued for concrete ideas, what Bradley and Bosanquet called 'Concrete Universals'. Neither idealists not absolutists have constructed a complete system of philosophical idealism because they belittled the importance of philosophic inquiry - an inquiry that requires critical thinking. Although Kant had attempted to formulate the outline of a complete system of philosophical idealism by founding critical idealism, he failed because he had not taken interest in dealing with real concerns of human life in his philosophy. It was Josiah Royce, an American idealist who worked out elaborately a complete system of philosophical idealism. In doing so, he attempted to make traditional Philosophy a scientific enterprise.

What is pertinent to note is that the problem of how to make traditional system of philosophical idealism Scientific was one of Royce's major concerns. The purpose of this paper is to enquire into how he did solve this problem.

In order to solve this problem Royce adopted some forms of "Pragmatic theory" of meaning similar to both that of C.S. Peirce and that of William James. Royce shared with Peirce when he, like Peirce, demanded the need of Pragmatic and Scientific-oriented Philosophy to solve the concrete Problem of man; he included Pragmatic method in his idealism in the sense that pragmatic method is similar to scientific method because both are experimental. Like Peirce, his absolute idealism rules out any nominalistic interpretation. For Royce, absolute idealism

must be a search to unravel the absolute ideals and concrete ideas in experimental terms. The impact of Peirce on Royce in connection with his absolute idealism may be seen in Royce's major work "*The Problem of Christianity*"¹ where he has asserted:

I now owe much more to our great and unduly neglected American logician, Mr. Charles Pierce, when I do owe to the common tradition of recent idealism....".

But Royce was influenced very much by William James in the sense that he, like James, emphasizes the practical importance of philosophical thinking. When he agreed with James he meant to say that Philosophy is really something practical; and as such, Philosophy enables us to expound practical action or conduct through the careful use of logic. Royce believed that we can never use logic carefully unless ideas are thought of as plans of action or expressions of purpose. Hence Royce has come to the conclusion that philosophy must have function to search for dynamic and concrete ideas and practical ideas as well. Thus his absolute idealism is the Central Part of his attempt to compromise between idealism and Pragmatism. By combining idealism with pragmatism, he provided the movement of American idealism with the involvement of scientific philosophy rather than a philosophical doctrine about the makeup of the universe or/and the nature of reality.

Royce's first attempt at combining idealism with Pragmatism is found in his celebration work, "*The World and the Individual*".² Herein he held that true ideas are nothing but "a guide for all action". He argued that ideas crave for becoming real through sense experience. If one studies the tendency and purpose of his mental life, one finds that he seeks ideas as dynamic strivings for concrete and determinate reality. Such ideas are constructed by mind with the help of selected external objects in the process of perception or sense experience, and then ideas, being mental representation of things, because also concrete and dynamic. Royce expressed his view as follows: "Every idea is as much a volitional process as it is an intellectual process."³

Royce's contention was that if absolute truth is idealistically defined, then an idea is purposive activity of mind. He agreed with the pragmatists that an idea

is externally meaningful but he has said something more than the pragmatists that an idea has both internal and external meaning. When an idea has purpose to realize itself in absolute experience it is regarded as the internal meaning, and the object or application of that idea is its external meaning. To understand precisely the internal and external meaning of an idea we can take an example of "triangle". In this example triangle enclosed as a plane figure shaped by three sides would be the internal meaning of a triangle, and when the idea of triangle is applied to all triangles : right angle triangles, isosceles triangles, scaline triangles etc. would be the external meaning of triangle. the internal meaning of an idea embodies eternal meaning when it fulfils the idea's purpose.

Royce's claim here was that internal and external meanings are inseparable on the condition that the purpose of our idea must be true and logical. If the purpose of our idea is false and illogical, although our idea has both internal and external meaning, then this purpose cannot be fulfilled. For example, we have a false idea of $2 + 2 = 7$ which must have both internal and external meaning. But this false idea ($2 + 2 = 7$) can not fulfil its purpose because both the meanings (internal and external) of the false idea ($2 + 2 = 7$) are not consistent with one another. Royce went on to say that a true idea must work practically in fulfilling its purpose that will have its own place in an infinite frame of reference. Thus he came to conclusion that any idea's being true must be consistent with the absolute truth for the fulfilment of its purpose completely. Therefore, an infinite system of ideas is required for the proof of the fulfilment of any idea's purpose completely. Thus he has identified 'absolute' with 'practical' in complete sense and has established the point that truth is *a priori* and *a posteriori* of factual as well. Hence we find that Royce stands with James maintaining that truth consists in "practical success". But he has also said something more than James. For Royce truth which is practical cannot merely happen to work but it must always work. Thus Royce insisted on the existence of a dynamic absolute which is originated from *a priori* and *a posteriori* together. Though like Royce other idealists including Kant spoke of the existence of an absolute, they denied its existence to be known or proved. Peirce and James, like other empiricists, neither admitted of the existence of an absolute, nor did they tend to accept that "an absolute can have pragmatic consequence." However, Royce stands with Peirce and James in the sense that

they have considered Philosophy as a way of life, a rational guide to all actions. Thus Royce held the view that nothing belongs to any philosophical system if philosophy is so constructed as to provide us with a way of life.

In this connection, G. Santayana⁴ pointed out that what Royce has attempted to do is to tie the various parts together in his system. That implies that he did not construct an ontological system - a philosophy that distinguishes carefully different orders or various modes of being. Santayana finds that Royce is not in favour of understanding of truth or essence being separated from existence. This may be accounted for by means of the following quotation :

"Josiah Royce who had kept a kindly but troubled watch over ray youth once said to me that the gist of my philosophy was the separation of essence from existence."⁵

No doubt, Royce has attempted to construct a complete system of philosophy through his new form of absolute idealism. Moreover of many philosophical systems, Kant's and Hegel's Philosophical systems were considered to be better ones. Royce, despite being regarded by some thinkers as a representative of the Heglian view-point attacks Hegelian system of philosophy as well as Kantian system because they did not come to see the problem of system-building in philosophy, as an elaborate and complete way. Peirce was the first American Pragmatist to make the outlines for a full-fledged system of philosophy but he failed to do this. Later, James had developed the outlines made by Peirce under the lines of metaphysics. But his effort also remained incomplete. This can be seen throughout in his Scientific Philosophy or Pragmatism where he tended to support experience as opposed to thought. Royce believed that any full-fledged Philosophical system has to function in order to unify thoughts and experience, which involves organised and even non-contradictory ideas. It seems to me obvious that Royce has broadened philosophical idealism to some extent.

His absolute idealism appears in his another celebrated work, "*The Problem of Christianity*"⁶ Herein he has made pervasive efforts to show that thoughts and perceptions have no significance or meaning unless they are interpreted. What Royce intended to say is that what the world is should be understood in terms of ideas which require interpretation. This interpretation must be uncontradictory.

He sternly stated that every philosopher must have duty to interpret all existence in order to have meaning in order to be knowable. Royce asserts.

"The principal task of the Philosophers is one, not of perception, not of conception, but of interpretation."⁷

At the outset it is important to see that Royce has recommended the importance of interpretation as an instrument of philosophy to determine the meaning of both *a priori* and *a posteriori* statements, and even to give us both theoretical and practical meaning of the absolute. Royce thus distinguishes two kinds of interpretation : Finite or limited interpretation and infinite or unlimited interpretation. Finite interpretation reveals abstract and incomplete meaning, truth or/and value of any thing, and infinite interpretation the concrete and complete meaning, truth or/and value of anything. Royce concerns himself with an infinite interpretation because when one interprets his existence in terms of his own ideas it sets forth an infinite community of interpretations. Royce argued that if a person wishes to find the meaning of his life, he discovers it by interpreting his future with his past life in the form of unified whole by reference to any infinite present idea taking altogether as a series of different interpretations. Royce termed it as an ideal interpretation. Royce believed that an ideal interpretation of a person's life is required to ascertain the true meaning of his life because this ideal interpretation involves all the parts of that person's life that is interpreted infinitely. What Royce might suggest is that when an interpreter interprets, the Part of the truth always implies the whole truth.

I think that Royce has brought out the fact that absolute idealism which involves a new Philosophical System rather than a Philosophical doctrine is a logical necessity in the sense that it meets essentially with the need of system of ideal interpretation in respect of knowing the absolute truth. Hence the main claim of Royce is that the proper task of Philosophy is to throw light on the ideal interpretation of all existence and of the absolute truth. By ideal interpretation Royce meant that an absolute truth does not depend certainly on any empirical verification or any one's private consciousness or opinion or judgement. In this sense, the absolute truth is what Royce has said supernatural or superhuman. Absolute idealism is logical necessity also in the sense that it is only absolute

idealism which interprets the whole truth about the Universe, meaning thereby that the absolute truth about the universe is known by absolute mind because the absolute truth about the universe exists in a mind.

According to Royce, this type of absolute truth is found in mathematics where every system concerns neither with private opinion/judgement nor with empirical verification. For example $3 + 4 = 7$ or the area of a circle is $P r^2$ concerns neither with private opinion or judgement nor with empirical verification. $3 + 4 = 7$ or $P r^2$ (the area of a circle) is certainly objective and rationally intelligible; and thus we have certainty of knowledge about $3 + 4 = 7$ or that every circle's area is valued as $P r^2$. Royce claims that when we have certain ($P r^2$) it implies an absolute series of such relations that are well-ordered and organized. What he indicated is that every mathematical truth contains infinite truths in the sense that all the whole numbers can be put into a one-to-one correspondence with a constituent (proper) part of all the whole numbers that lead to constitute an infinite system. Royce has taken the illustration of Dedekind's Positive definition of the infinite as the best example of infinite truth in mathematics. He quotes it as follows :

"A system S is called 'infinite' when it is similar to a constituent (or proper) part of itself; in the contrary case S is called a 'finite' system."⁸

Royce believed that similar thing is found in the whole of idealistic conception of reality conceived as system of thoughts i.e. "the totality S of all things that can be the objects of my thought, is infinite." Idealism is nothing but an infinite system to deal with the world which is conceived as a complete system of finite facts or individual thoughts, each of which leads to infinity. This infinity forms a community of interpretations each one of them being a rational interpretation which is beyond conflict and controversy. He went to the great extent of saying that rational interpretation is a logical and individual method of solving the basic problems of life which are also the philosophic problems. Thus he has drawn the conclusion that the function of philosophy is to adopt rational interpretation in order to solve the problem of ultimate reality and of the world, and to determine the nature of knowledge.

He has, no doubt, recognised the importance of rational interpretation, and has made an attempt to combine the pervasiveness of absolute idealism with

rational interpretation. Rational interpretation which Royce termed as dialectical reason is *a priori* in its method in the sense that it provides always a unity or an order among those individual thoughts or facts in which there is disparity, and brings consistency in those individual thoughts or facts that appear contradictory. In the History of Philosophy idealists have made use of dialectical method from pre-Platonic period, but they have not been able to make use of this method wisely because they have not been able to present a community of mutual enlightenments. That is why Royce regarded all forms of idealism as incomplete and unsatisfactory systems of philosophy.

We find that Royce does not agree with Pragmatists because Pragmatists take for granted that there is no absolute truth; they have not made use of dialectical reason to deal with all meaningful problems. The Pragmatists flatly condemned dialectical reason as universal method, and thereby they followed fallibilism in the sense that empirical evidence is never certain. Royce castigated Pragmatists by saying that there can be no position of fallibilism unless there is absolute truth. What Royce wanted to say is that when we talk of fallibilism it itself depends on the existence of absolute truth. The Pragmatism was in this sense a failure to provide a complete system of philosophy. However Pragmatism is, says Royce, in fact, better than the older forms of idealism in the sense that Pragmatism has brought truth to empirical test in order to have practical meaning. Royce's contention is that infinite truth has rational or *a priori* character; as such this rational characteristic of absolute truth cannot be independent of absolute mind, meaning thereby that what facts are consistent with absolute truth must be absolutely knowable.

In this regard, we may point out that Royce did not believe in realists' contention that whatever is real is unknowable in any way. In fact, reality no longer exists in unknowable fact. Thus Royce laid foundation of a new system of philosophy that would justify an absolute interpretation of existence, having application to experience, thereby it would uncover the meaning of the absolute in a practical way. In this way Royce has taken for granted that each and every person has philosophy of action that determines his way of life; he (Royce) recommended that a Philosophy is nothing but a rational guide for human action.

Thus Royce, like James, emphasized the practical importance of philosophy. Here we may call him a defender of Practical Philosophy. That is why he has been named Pragmatic idealist; and his concept of dynamic absolute truth is known as absolute Pragmatism. However, it may be pointed out that Royce was mistaken in his view that truth is a logical necessity, what he conceived of truth as logically necessary it implies that truth can be logically deduced. In logical deduction we pass from premises to conclusion. In doing so, we have to depend on memory. If truth be logically deduced, it has to depend on memory; and memory, as we know, is not trustworthy.

Again, if truth be logically deduced, false ideas can also be logically consistent with one another because deduction or logic does not judge the truth value of our ideas, it only informs us about the implications of our discourse. Truth value of any idea can be measured only through reference to existence or actual fact; and no fact is found to be logically necessary. This error lead Royce to treat truth as something which exists in fact. Truth is, according to Santyana, simply a system or set of essences which enables us to characterise existence.

Royce's approval to the Pragmatic outlook in his absolute idealism can be confirmed from his another major work. "*The Philosophy of Loyalty*"⁹. Herein he has made it clear that the concept of loyalty is a good example of absolute Pragmatism in the sense that loyalty is a universal principle - something absolute, concrete and practical. Every person is loyal to his own cause. For example, the student is loyal to his teacher, the parents are loyal to their family, the soldier is loyal to his country. The loyal person has power of self-control and of sacrificing his desires in order to serve a cause. Royce believed that an individual cannot be loyal forcibly, a person becomes loyal voluntarily. Loyalty, in fact, exists in the inner part of man. If a person wants to become loyal, he requires devotion to absolute truth that leads him to arrive at good or universal cause. I think that Royce, in this sense, can be compared and likened to Radha Krishnan, an Indian idealist thinker because Radha Krishnan, like Royce, advocated that every person is more or less, loyal to truth as one sees it."¹⁰

Nevertheless, Royce stands with Radha Krishnan in the sense that both of them claimed that loyalty is really a practical one. It is such social and moral

principle that "if one is a loyal servant of cause, one has at least possible fellow-servants". Therefore, loyalty is logically necessary to determine conduct and to guide all action.

Royce added that of all forms of loyalty justic, honesty and coutage are the supreme or universal and absolute moral principle what he called loyalty to loyalty that leads all loyalties to correspond with one another, and that also leads us to the devotion of an infinite community of individuals united in a single and common cause. Therefore, he demanded that loyalty to loyalty must be taken into account carefully if whole of reality is conceived idealistically.

It is often seen that a person who is wholly and morally responsible for his action and free will is loyal to lead cause because loyalties do conflict with one another. When loyalties do conflict with one another it implies that they are incomplete loyalties. Threrfore, conflicting loutalties must be overcome, and for that the Principle of loyalty to loyalty is needed because this is the only principle of morality that can detect bad causes; and correct them morally thereafter. Nevertheless, this principle itself can make all loyalties consistent with one another. Thus Royce has drawn conclusion that man, a moral and religious being, can solve the problem of morality after he adopts the principle of loyalty to loyalty in his social and practical life. Royce has taken for granted that the principle of loyalty to loyalty". which "enters into all other forms of loyalty". The problem throws light on the absolute moral truth only under the hand of absolute idealism. What Royce might suggest is that absolute idealism which upholds absolute truth is the guideline of the Principle of loyalty ot loyalty Royce here opposed James' charge that philosophical idealism, what James called tender-minded philosophy, throws light on merely tender-minded moral values. Royce, on the contrary, asserted that idealism gives us moral outlook together an infinite moral insight. For him, this infinite moral insight can be interpreted neither by pragmatism, nor by empiricism, nor by naturalism and realism because none of them are consistent with rational method. As a matter of fact, they are essentially non-dialectical in character.

Royce thus admitted of the existence of the absolute moral truth that cannot be obtained without struggle with bad cause, better said, the problem of evil. The

Problem of evil which is both moral and religious arises when we are unable to understand the difference between what is moral loyalty or absolute truth and what is conflicting loyalty. Evil must exist in the world because good and bad or evil are correlative terms in as much as truth and error are correlative terms, and as such can not be intelligible without the other. Altogether, he claimed that nothing would be said to have meaning unless evil can be completely overcome. What he might suggest is that evil must be overcome after man's complete victory by way of rational justification of what is morally good, which is part and parcel of the whole or absolute truth.

The essence of Royce's moral philosophy is to show that morality or moral insight are impossible without loyalty. As morality and religion are inseparable, religion or religious insight is also impossible without loyalty because man needs salvation in an absolute way. This absolute salvation is both practical and social in the sense that it harmonizes man's religious, political, legal, economic and intellectual life. He expressed his view by saying :

"However far you go in loyalty, you will never regard your loyalty as a mere loyalty. It will also be in essence a religion."¹¹

When whole community of men realizes Salvation through loyalty, there will be 'The Invisible Church.'¹²

It is pertinent to note that what he admitted as absolute truth in ethics and religion implies theoretical and Practical sides of morality and religion in his system. He, like Pragmatists, held that religious beliefs and moral values must be practical, but he went beyond Pragmatism and stated that real morality and truth of religious beliefs must not only be practical but be of absolute value. Pragmatism failed to explain what truth really is, but only how truth is arrived at, it only considers how morality and religious belief is pragmatically justified. Royce explicated what truth really is, and claimed to have proved that morality is true. Again Royce did not agree with William James that moral and religious insights are rooted in mystical experience in the sense that mystical experience is miraculous in character. For Royce, moral and religious insight are rooted in absolute experience which consists in rational thinking or interpretation. Thus James did not care for social experience but Royce admitted of social experience and interpreted religious and moral side in

the interest of salvation of infinite community of individuals. What is here important to note is that Royce's social and rational interpretation of religion and morality gives, says Santayana, more considerate account than James' psychological and volitional approach, but his system that is essentially metaphysical and religious is however impure.

Santayana¹³ remarks that Royce made attempt to define traditional system of philosophical idealism and religious philosophy by harmonizing it into a perfect logical system, however the proofs he had for the existence of absolute truth is false; and as such his entire system is a misguided on the ground that he, on the one hand, sought to ascertain the knowledge of absolute truth with the help of a perfect logical system, but, on the other hand, he tried to determine it on moral and religious grounds. He tried to show that absolute truth is not only logically necessary but also morally or religious good. He never seemed to turn up something new, but he always was fond of expressing some old insoluble problems. For example, the existence of evil was an important problem for Royce, which could neither be explained nor did show it as something good. As a matter of fact, Royce could not solve the Problem of evil on the basis of a search for intellectual clarification.

Now we are in position to observe Royce's absolute Pragmatism; that for him, whole of truth must be ideal. This ideal dimension of valuation of truth is selective and purposive activity of mind. Since idea is volitional as well as intellectual process, his dynamic concept of absolute truth seems to integrate the intellectual and volitional depth of the human strivings. But we cannot exclude truth context from the psychological complex of feeling and interest as operating in the process in the situation of truth referring to inner elements. The abstract, vague and indeterminate ideas trying to become real, more concrete and determinate in the pursuit of truth cannot be isolated from the nature and depth of the person pursuing in the context of self, other selves and the reality complex.

Establishment of absolute truth implies that it concerns a system. What he means to say is that an infinite truth must belong to a system. Where there is infinite truth, there is system; and where system is lacking, the whole of truth is also not to be found. The whole of truth has been rightly estimated by Royce to be

not something apart from its systematic comprehension.

It is correct to say that infinite truth is everywhere systematic, but it is also referential and indicative of idealistic frame. As developed by Royce it does not make a very rational foundation comprehensible to the intelligent. In this regard G.W.Cunningham¹⁴ puts his comment, as follows :

"Royce's system of philosophical idealism is that possibility of intuition and imagination which leaves gap in the knowing frame of his system."

Royce has thus proposed the practical reference of truth in Pragmatic colour but this practical and pragmatic-oriented whole of truth can be objected on many grounds ; A pragmatic depth of truth seems to avoid the essential nature of absolute truth and to be ridden with difficulties. On the one hand, the absolute truth in a systematic context seems to be an approximation to the nature of truth, whereas on the other hand, the Pragmatic truth is human approximation in truth-value. The two ends may not necessarily meet together.

What Royce has characterised as an infinite truth -- supernatural and superhuman -- is bound to invite infinite speculations, imaginations and fantasies, which would simply aggravate the problem of error and illusion in a knowing truth-situation . This leads Royce not to show any drive and to indicate ontologically the human dynamic of truth apart from knowing, registering truth about a common world. This ontological explanation does not make clear the ideas of truth from the human point of view. The problem seems to remain in a fix with these idealists.

Bonsanquet¹⁵ also remarks that in a complex situation the referential, indicative and systematic character of truth cannot be necessarily comprehended by Royce's idealistic formulation. Therefore, truth can always be true within a system, but it also has a trans-systematic reference in order to make the concept of truth more and more integral and comprehensive.

Any way, for Royce there is certainly a knowledge of absolute truth if philosophy concerns itself with action and practical consequences with rational or *a priori* inquiry. He has attempted to unify our experience and thoughts. In this sense he is, it seems to me, accorded with John Dewey because Dewey also claimed that experience cannot exclude thoughts, and no thoughts can be said to

be pure unless they accorded with experience. Royce argued for a rationally and empirically built philosophy according to which all ideas and knowledge have their origin in human conduct.

Royce's absolute Pragmatism has made his close friend and colleague, William James to rethink his basic ideas. Throughout this paper, I have tried to show that Royce's philosophy of absolutism works as a rectification of the shortcomings of James' Theory of truth. It was absolute Pragmatism that provided impetus to develop system of symbolic and mathematical logic in the department of philosophy at Harvard.¹⁶

In my view, Royce may be said to be neo-Kantian Philosopher because he held that *a priori* and *a posteriori* are supplementary and important for the determination of the nature of ultimate reality; thus he seemed to lay foundations for the philosophy of constructionism by removal of the dictotomy of *a priori-a posteriori*. Nevertheless, he has left scope for the use of dialectical reason by future thinkers in their respective philosophies. I think that his absolute Pragmatism is really dynamic or creative to yield something new. I suggest that there would be no complete knowledge unless *a priori*, *a posteriori* and language unitedly are taken into account because knowledge ascertained by them unitedly consists in logical relationship of precise symbols.

NOTES

- 1 Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* Vol. I. p. XI(Prof.), New York : Macmillan and Co., 1913.
- 2 Josiah Royce, *The World and the Individual*, 2 Vols., New York : Macmillan & Co., 1900-1901.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 311.
- 4 G. Santayana, "Apologia Pro Mente Sua", in Paul Arthur Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of George Santayana*, New York : Tudor, 1940.
- 5 *Ibid*, p. 497

- 6 Josiah Royce, *op.cit.*
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 255
- 8 Josiah Royce, *The World and Individual*, *op.cit.* p. 510-511.
- 9 Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* ; New York : Macmillan & Co., 1908.
- 10 S. Radha Krishnan, *Eastern Religion and Western Thought*, 2nd ed. (London : Oxford Univ., Press, 1940), p. 338.
- 11 Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight*, (New York : Seridbner's, 1940), p. 206.
- 12 *Ibid*, p. 279-282.
- 13 G. Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States*, (New York : Anchor Books, 1956), pp. 99-101.
- 14 C. W. Cunningham, *Problem of Philosophy*, (South Cardina, ce & co., Ltd., 1943), pp. 63-76.
- 15 B. Bosanquet, *Implication and Linear Inference*, (London, 1920), pp. 1-20.
- 16 See, Gabriel Marcel, *Royce's Metaphysics*, (Chicago : H. Regnery, 1956), Preface.