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The Absolute as a Heuristic Device: Josiah Royce and Sri Aurobindo

Robert A. McDermott

This essay is concerned with the concept of Brahman, or the Absolute, as a heuristic device, particularly as it affects the value of the self in the world, or community, in the philosophies of Josiah Royce and Sri Aurobindo. Royce (1885-1916), a Christian philosopher in the American idealist tradition, and Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), an Indian political activist, yogi, poet and philosopher, are each committed to social and historical progress within an idealist metaphysical framework.

This essay on the Roycean and Aurobindonian theories of the Absolute includes:

(1) an account of Royce and Aurobindo from the perspective of comparative philosophy, particularly in terms of their use of materials outside their own respective philosophical traditions; (2) an exposition of Royce’s theory of the concrete or social Absolute and its implications for his theory of community; (3) an exposition of Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysics, realistic or integral advaita, with particular emphasis on its implications for physical and historical evolution; (4) the concluding section is a relatively

1 Although the idealist tradition continues to generate comparative studies, particularly between religious metaphysicians of India and the West, thus far there has been no comparative study of Royce and Sri Aurobindo. For studies comparing Royce or Aurobindo with other philosophers see: Kurt Leidecker, Josiah Royce and Indian Thought (New York: Kallash Press, 1931); Bhagavan B. Singh, The Self and the World in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1971); S. K. Maitra, The Meeting of the East and the West in Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1956); S. P. Singh, Sri Aurobindo and Whitehead on the Nature of God (Allghar: Vigyan Prakashan, 1972); A. C. Bhattacharya, Sri Aurobindo and Bergson: A Synthetic Study (Banaras: Jagabandhu Prakashan, 1973); Rhoda Le Doq, Sri Aurobindo and Heidegger (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1972). Both Royce and Aurobindo provide ample material for an evaluation of their respective uses of each other’s philosophical tradition: for Royce’s use of Indian philosophy, see Josiah Royce, The World and the Individual (Glifford Lectures 1899), Vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 156-75. For Royce’s study of Indian texts, in both Sanskrit and translation, see Bhagavan Singh, The Self and the World in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce, pp. 147-71. Sri Aurobindo’s treatment of Western philosophy is less easily isolated: The Life Divine, his major philosophical work, makes no explicit references to any Western philosophers but the informed interpreter of Western philosophy will find its pages replete with affirmations and critiques of such philosophers as Hegel, Bradley, and Bergson.
novel attempt to outline an ontology based on Royce’s and Aurobindo’s theories of the self, the community, and the Absolute, and argues for the positive relation between the social or integral Absolute and the ideal of an ever enlarging, increasingly spiritual, community.

Royce’s commitment to the community, dating from his childhood in a California mining town, unquestionably exercised a profound effect on his conception of the Absolute. In loyalty to the ideal of the community, Royce continued to qualify and concretize the concept of the Absolute throughout his philosophic career; in his last works, particularly in *The Problem of Christianity* (1913), the Absolute may be viewed as a functional concept within his more fundamental commitment to the Beloved Community. Sri Aurobindo’s thought also represents a fascinating interplay of metaphysics, spiritual experience, and historical vision: the blending of philosophical insight and spiritual experience in his major work, *The Life Divine* (1914-21; 1938), followed upon a brief but brilliant career as a radical leader of the Indian Nationalist Movement, and in turn generated a world-wide movement for spiritual discipline and social utopianism. Thus, both of these twentieth century thinkers exhibit an uncommon commitment to social and ethical as well as to religious and metaphysical problems. Each insists that his metaphysics is not only compatible with the practical concerns of more empirical thinkers, but that these concerns are better served by idealism than by any other metaphysical system.

In his major metaphysical work, *The World and the Individual* (1901), Royce argues forcefully and at length that mysticism and monism, as metaphysical theories, fail to account for the concrete reality of such particulars as self and historical events. This determination to separate his position from a metaphysics based on an unqualified Absolute characterized Royce’s entire philosophical effort. Less vigorously, but to a significant extent, the same effort characterizes what Sri Aurobindo calls his “realistic Vedanta” system. In *The Life Divine* Aurobindo emphatically rejects a mystical monism as being even more destructive than the materialist denial of spirit: “The Refusal of the Ascetic” (which is the polar opposite of “The Materialist Denial”) tends to “stress too much the unreality of the objective world,” thereby arriving “by a different road” at a position which treats the individual ego as a fiction, denies the reality of human existence and embraces “Non-Being or the relationless Absolute as the sole rational escape from the meaningless tangle of phenomenal life.”

It might seem strange at first glance that these religiously motivated idealist philosophers should be understood as much for their ethical, social and historical insights as for their metaphysical conceptions of the Absolute. As W. H. Walsh, in his *Metaphysics*, correctly notes, however, Plato and Spinoza are only two obvious cases of the many philosophers who hold that beliefs

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about the world can and do influence conduct. To a remarkable degree, Royce and Aurobindo exemplify the reciprocity of conduct and philosophy. As conduct generates the possibility of philosophy, so does philosophy create the conditions for novel modes of conduct. This paper argues that the beliefs about existence held by Royce and Aurobindo positively influence the conduct of thoughtful individuals who are seeking for a larger and more ordered framework by which to interpret and enhance human experience in the contemporary world. In this respect, the Absolute or Brahman is treated in the present context as a heuristic concept—a metaphysical construct which is used as a way of revealing dimensions of existence and experience which might otherwise remain hidden and undervalued.

I. ROYCE, AUROBINDO AND COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Comparative Approach

Although biographical and cultural factors are not irrelevant for this study, our concern is primarily metaphysical. We are particularly concerned with the concepts of the Absolute, the community, and the relationship between them. More specifically, this paper compares the respective ways in which Royce and Aurobindo modified a traditionally established conception of the Absolute in order to treat more positively the personal and socio-historical aspects of experience.

Since “comparative” is a much overused and ambiguous term, its meaning with reference to this essay warrants an explanation: From one point of view, this essay can be considered comparative in that the two philosophers with whom it is concerned represent two separate cultural traditions. This meaning of comparative, however, is primarily of cultural significance; this essay seeks to be comparative philosophically in that it is concerned with comparable philosophic solutions offered to approximately the same problem. Further, these philosophers share approximately the same metaphysical framework. In this sense, Royce and Aurobindo are comparable in the large and small components of their philosophies. From a purely philosophical point of view, Royce and Aurobindo have more in common with each other as socially and historically committed idealists than they have with philosophers in their own respective cultural traditions who share neither their idealism nor their social commitments.

Among major philosophers since Schopenhauer, Royce in the West and Aurobindo in India are almost unique in their creative use of more than one tradition. Aurobindo has written incisively on the relationship between Indian and Western religious and philosophical systems. Royce has written knowledgeably concerning classic Indian philosophical texts—more knowledgeably, in fact, than any Western philosopher until the present generation.

While Royce and Aurobindo share the distinction of being conversant with
the philosophical traditions of both India and the West, they use this facility and their own respective traditions in markedly different ways. Royce is the quintessential Western philosopher, inquiring and fostering inquiry with an intensity and perseverance rivalled by only a handful of towering philosophical personalities.\textsuperscript{4} Aurobindo, by contrast, was not trained as a philosopher, nor particularly interested in the philosophical pursuit as such. He studied Western philosophy as a student at Cambridge and he seems to have read widely in Western as well as Indian philosophy during his years of yoga practice (1910-50), but he insisted throughout his life that the philosophy expounded in his writings, particularly in his one thousand page metaphysical essay, \textit{The Life Divine}, was entirely the result of his yoga practice.\textsuperscript{5} The contrast between Royce and Aurobindo in this regard could not be more telling: How characteristic of Royce that in a letter to James written several years before leaving California for Harvard, he expressed some skepticism concerning a particular theory which he had been teaching, and lamented that “in this wilderness with nobody to talk with about it, I have not the least idea whether it is true or not.”\textsuperscript{6} Aurobindo, on the other hand, was so ill-disposed to a community of inquiry as a means to discovering the truth that his entire life was an effort to prove that true knowledge can come only “in the inner silence of the mind.”\textsuperscript{7}

This dramatic contrast of philosophical style—or, more accurately, philosophical source and intent—does not significantly reduce the substantive similarities between Royce’s and Aurobindo’s philosophical systems, but rather emphasizes a distinctive difference between the methodologies of a Western and an Indian philosophical system which in other respects are quite similar. Obviously, neither Royce nor Aurobindo can be taken as perfectly representative of their respective philosophical traditions, but they are each sufficiently representative, at least with respect to the source of philosophical insight, that this difference is worth noting.

It should also be noted, however, that these two philosophical procedures—one committed to exclusively intellectual, critical speculation within a community of inquiry, and the other committed to a systematic expression of

\textsuperscript{4} As John Jay Chapman observed, “Royce was the John L. Sullivan of philosophy… He was extraordinary and knew everything and was a bumble-bee—a benevolent monster of pure intelligence, zigzagging, ranging and uncatchable.” See “Introduction,” John J. McDermott, ed., \textit{The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce} (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), 17 [hereafter cited as \textit{Basic Writings}].


\textsuperscript{7} Sri Aurobindo, \textit{Letters on Yoga}, BCL, 23: 653. In the same place Aurobindo writes: “For the ordinary activity of the mind only creates surface ideas and representations which are not true knowledge.”
highly personal spiritual experience—do not radically differ in the result. It may be argued that Royce does not exhibit the limitations of an exclusively intellectual inquiry and Aurobindo does not exhibit the limitations of an exclusively spiritual experience precisely because each strengthened their respective efforts by blending intellectual and spiritual resources. Royce leavened the intellectual pursuit by a generous dose of spiritual insight, and Sri Aurobindo pressed his spiritual experience into the confines of language and argumentation.

Thus, in their use of each other’s philosophical and religious traditions, Royce granted the positive role of spiritual experience, but rejected both spiritual experiences and theories which ran counter to certain of his philosophical commitments; similarly, Aurobindo borrowed Western modes of expression and argumentation, but insisted that a true metaphysics must spring from a spiritual source and is not subject to revision by intellectual argumentation.

**Royce’s Response to Indian Philosophy**

Although he made an important contribution to the Western, particularly American, understanding of Indian religious thought, Royce did not positively integrate Indian ideas into his own philosophical system. Rather, he used Indian philosophy as a way of clarifying and justifying his own position. More specifically, Royce sought to determine the areas of contact between his conception of the concrete infinite and the Indian Buddhist and Vedantist systems, particularly their blend of spiritual experience and philosophical articulation. By the time Royce wrote *The World and the Individual* in 1899, which was his first substantial account of Indian philosophy, he was no longer committed to a view of the Absolute compatible with the Upanishadic or Advaita (non-dual) Vedantist view. Consequently, Royce uses the Vedanta system, or the theories of the Brahman and the self contained in the Upanishads, as an example of a world-negating Absolute. Thus, he writes:

> When we speak of the Absolute, all our words must be: “Neti, Neti,” “it is not thus; it is not thus.” So the sage Yajnavalkya himself, more than once in these legends, teaches: To us it is as if the Absolute, in its immediacy were identical with Nothing. But once more, is the Absolute verily a mere nothing?

The Hindu’s answer to this last question is in one sense precise enough. The Absolute is the very opposite of a mere nothing. For it is fulfillment, attainment, peace, the goal of life, the object of desire, the end of knowledge. Why then does it stubbornly appear as indistinguishable from mere nothing? The answer is: That is a part of our very illusion itself. The light above the light is, to our deluded vision, darkness. It is our finite realm that is the falsity, the mere nothing. The Absolute is all Truth.°

The Upanishadic theory here presented by Royce rests on a reductio ad absurdum: either the phenomenal realm or the one qualityless Absolute. But it is precisely in order to reconcile these seemingly exclusive alternatives that they each developed a concept of a qualified Absolute—or what Royce refers to as the social or concrete Absolute and Aurobindo as the Integral Absolute.

In response to the philosophical mystic, whether Christian or Hindu, Royce insists that "the absolute meaning does not ignore, but so far recognizes as real, even by virtue of the contrast, our present imperfect meaning." In accepting as real "imperfect meaning," whether an imperfect will, idea or self, Royce does not by that fact reject the Absolute; on the contrary, in and through the concrete he finds the absolute meaning of which the finite is an entirely real and meaningful representation. His objection to the Upanishadic view is not that it admits of the Absolute, but that it so exaggerates the gap between infinite and finite that the finite appears as the merest nothing and the Absolute is so far beyond intelligibility that it might as well be nothing. In this scheme,

The Absolute home appears empty, just because, wherever definite content is to be found, the Hindu feels not at home, but finite, striving, and deluded into a search for something beyond. 10

To the extent that he reconciles the infinite and the finite, or absolute and concrete, in his theory of the absolute as a self-representative system, Royce discredits the position of the Upanishads, Advaita Vedanta, F. H. Bradley, and others who hold to a radical continuity in Being. 11

Despite the almost exclusively negative terms in which Royce couches his treatment of the Advaita view, this presentation serves several useful purposes: first, it advances a perceptive critique of mystical monism. Both Christian and Hindu mysticism, as well as monistic ontologies such as Bradley’s, are at one with the Upanishads in their "reductio ad absurdum of Realism." Whereas the realist recognizes only the external meaning of ideas, the mystic recognizes only the internal meaning of ideas, but then rejects such internal meanings

9 Ibid., 1, 183, Royce's attempt to reconcile positive theories of the individual and the Absolute was first articulated in his "Supplementary Essay" to The Conception of God (New York: Macmillan, 1897). This essay was written as a response to the critical essay by G. H. Howison, "The City of God, and the True God as Its Head" (published in the same volume, pp. 81-132). Howison's critique marks a critical juncture in the development of Royce's thought; as Kuklick remarks, it is here that Royce introduces "a voluntarist element into his notion of the Absolute" (Bruce Kuklick, Josiah Royce: An Intellectual Biography, New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972, p. 41). Kuklick continues: "As he writes to Howison, who arranged the California meeting, the interpretation of the Absolute is 'more obviously teleological' [Clendenning, ed., Letters of Josiah Royce, p. 326]. By this definition Royce hoped to make a place for finite individuals, to defend himself from the imputation of pantheism. He also wants to assert the freedom of these individuals and of the Absolute" (p. 43).

10 The World and the Individual, 1, 171.
because of their finitude. Royce criticizes the mystic for this inveighing "against the sharp outlines of the world of Independent Being, against the fallacies of all finite ideas, and against the possibility of worldly satisfaction." 12 Secondly, Royce's critique of the Advaitist position presupposes, and indirectly affirms, the positive features of the mystical quest; although mysticism, and the monistic philosophy in which it usually results, devalues the particularity to which Royce is so fervently committed, he rightly sees in the mystic impulse a loyalty which can transcend and ultimately transform the empirical self. This loyalty to the Universal Self is akin to Royce's hope for the Beloved Community. Thirdly, in both his affirmative and negative evaluation of the Advaitist view, Royce anticipates and indirectly supports the revision of Advaita Vedanta as developed by Sri Aurobindo in the decade immediately following Royce's death. 13

Sri Aurobindo's Use of Western Philosophy

Although the influence of western thought on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is pervasive, one looks in vain for references to specific Western philosophers, works, schools, or concepts. When Aurobindo does evaluate Western philosophy, he concentrates on its general characteristics rather than on the validity of its particular claims. Thus, he finds Western philosophy, at least in its modern contemporary forms, to be removed from spiritual experience, whereas he claims that Indian philosophy has generally followed from an individual or collective spiritual development. Aurobindo explains that whenever there has arisen in India "a considerable spiritual development, there has arisen from it a philosophy justifying it to the intellect. The method was at first an intuitive seeing and an intuitive expression, as in the fathomless thought and profound language of the Upanishads, but afterwards there was developed a critical method, a firm system of dialectics, a logical organization." 14 Aurobindo then offers a characterization of Western philosophy, and his own account of the relationship between spiritual experience and philosophy, which is worth quoting in full:

In the West where the syncretic tendency of the consciousness was replaced by the analytic and separative, the spiritual urge and the intellectual reason parted company almost at the outset; philosophy took from the first a turn towards a purely intellectual and rationalist explanation of things. Nevertheless, there were systems like the Pythagorean, Stoic, and Epicurean, which were dynamic not only for thought but for conduct of life and developed a discipline, an effort at inner perfection of the being; this reached a higher spiritual plane of knowledge in later

13 Royce died in 1916; all of Sri Aurobindo's major works except Savitri were written from 1914-21. The Life Divine was written in monthly installments during these years but was extensively revised throughout the '30s and '40s.
14 The Life Divine, BCL, 19:879.
Christian or Neo-pagan thought-structures where East and West met together. But later on the intellectualization became complete and the connection of philosophy with life and its energies, or spirit and its dynamism, was either cut or confined to the little that the metaphysical idea can impress on life and action by an abstract and secondary influence. Religion has supported itself in the West not by philosophy but by credal theology; sometimes a spiritual philosophy emerges by sheer force of individual genius, but it has not been as in the East a necessary adjunct to every considerable line of spiritual experience and endeavor. It is true that a philosophic development of spiritual thought is not entirely indispensable; for the truths of spirit can be reached more directly and completely by intuition and by a concrete inner contact. It must also be said that the critical control of the intellect over spiritual experience can be hampering and unreliable, for it is an inferior light turned upon a field of higher illumination; the true controlling power is an inner discrimination, a psychic sense and tact, a superior intervention of guidance from above or an innate and luminous inner guidance. But still this line of development too is necessary, because there must be a bridge between the spirit and the intellectual reason; the light of a spiritual or at least a spiritualized intelligence is necessary for the fullness of our total inner evolution, and without it, if another deeper guidance is lacking, the inner movement may be erratic and undisciplined, turbid and mixed with unspiritual elements or one-sided or incomplete in its catholicity.  

As this passage indicates, Aurobindo is committed to a synthesis of spiritual experience characteristic of Indian rishis (seers) and yogis and the analytic clarity present in Indian philosophy but more highly prized in Western philosophy. Since he views most Western philosophy as falling short of life-transforming insight, he has little need to confront Western claims directly; rather, he remains aloof from the battles between schools and simply chooses from Western sources those ideas which add clarity or precision to the generally less communicable spiritual experience characteristic of the Indian tradition.

As Charles A. Moore correctly observes, Aurobindo’s philosophical writings reveal “many ideas or attitudes which Westerners recognize, which appeal to Westerners, and which therefore make them see in Sri Aurobindo’s thought a synthesis of their Western points of view with the Eastern, specifically Indian.”  16 Moore also notes, again correctly, that none of these ideas or attitudes can be safely traced to a specific Western source. Indeed, Moore suggests that the influence of Western philosophy on Sri Aurobindo may be like another intriguing puzzle in the history of philosophy: Where in the Dialogues does Socrates stop and Plato begin? Perhaps the answer is that both Plato and Aurobindo themselves would find it difficult to sort out the strands in their own extraordinarily rich philosophical speculation.

15 Ibid., 879-80.
17 Ibid., pp. 83-84.
We can, however, answer the more pressing question as to whether Sri Aurobindo offers a model for comparative philosophy. Again quoting Moore, the answer to this question would seem to be strongly affirmative:

Sri Aurobindo does not reject the West's interest in the physical, the vital, the mental, but it is necessary to go beyond these to the spiritual in order to provide an adequate explanation of the world we know. He does not reject the West's interest in and use of the intellect, reason, logic and science, but he does insist that these cannot reach integral knowledge or the truth; it being necessary to supplement them by intuition, insight, direct experience... We must for the truth go beyond matter, life, and mind (the intellectual, mental), beyond Nature and the terrestrial, beyond mind to supermind, beyond mind to soul, beyond mind to yoga to the deeper recesses of the subliminal mind, beyond God to Supermind, beyond the individual to the One and whole, beyond the differentiated many to the undifferentiated One, beyond man and humanity to Divinity, beyond reason, beyond intellect, science, and ordinary logic, to intuition, beyond metaphysics to integral being, etc. In this sense, the West is not wrong but is merely inadequate in its search for truth. But it is mandatory to reach higher and deeper. This inadequacy and limitation the West must recognize—at least as worthy of or requiring most serious consideration. The necessity to go beyond the limits of the restricted Western points of view does not set East and West over against each other, does not constitute a rejection of the West, but provides a means both for a synthesis of East and West and also for a better mutual understanding between them.10

It is of course equally significant that Royce strove to move beyond the usual restraints of the Western philosophical tradition in order to reach a spiritual source of insight. By revising their respective religious and philosophical traditions, Royce and Aurobindo each offer a philosophical system closer to each other than to many other systems in their own cultural tradition, and closer to each other than either of them would have thought possible. The structure and some of the key ideas of these systems are expounded in the next two sections.

II. ROYCE

Theories of Being

In the first volume of his most systematic metaphysical work, *The World and the Individual* (1899), Royce prefaces an exposition of his idealist theory of being by a critical review of three other ontological positions: realism, mysticism or monism, and critical rationalism (or critical idealism). Royce's evaluation of these alternative theories is revealing for an understanding of his own theory of being.

(1) *Realism.* In general, the realist position is the polar antithesis of the idealist metaphysics expounded by Royce, Radhakrishnan, and Aurobindo.

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What Royce here calls realism (and what Aurobindo calls the "cosmic or terrestrial" theory of being) amounts to a rather uncritical acceptance of the world as presented to common sense as though independent of the knowing process. Royce's primary opposition, however, is not an ontology of independent existents; from the perspective of idealism, such a position so totally fails to account for the unity and coherence of being that it scarcely warrants a rebuttal. Royce's foil is much closer to his own position: a theory of being which emphasizes unity even at the expense of multiplicity. This position, referred to alternately as monism and mysticism, demands Royce's attention throughout *The World and the Individual*, and generated the "Supplementary Essay" wherein he attempts to separate his own position from the theory of the Absolute ingeniously developed in Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893).

2) *Monism.* On the one hand, Royce uses the monist theory as a critique of realism; on the other hand, he rejects a claim for the absolute unity of being because it fails to account for the particularity so central to the realist position. Aurobindo uses the Upanishadic conception of Brahman as a framework by which to discredit the metaphysical systems not committed to the unity of all existents; so Royce's first metaphysical move is to define as his metaphysical task the definition of Being so as to include God, the world, and the individual. Essential to this task is a definition of Being (or the Absolute or Brahman) which avoids the flaws of both realism and monism—the same narrow ridge hazarded by virtually every significant metaphysician since Plato. Royce's solution affirms both the reality of existents (cast in terms of will or purpose rather than as separable entities), and the unity by which individual purposes are fulfilled and intelligible.

3) *Critical Rationalism.* This awkward label, for which Royce cites no examples, refers to the position which defines being in terms of the true, valid, and genuine—or the opposite of false, invalid or illusory. Royce grants the legitimacy of this position but regards it as insufficient because it lacks the concreteness or actuality which is an essential characteristic of all experience. Thus, Royce argues that Critical Rationalism is really a half-way idealism, an illegitimate resting place on the road to absolute idealism.

In response to the Critical Realist, then, Royce is eager to establish that the Absolute is not a mere abstract conception, but an infinite which is experienced in its concrete immediacy. Like the Absolute, furthermore, logic and mathematics are also grounded in a particular present as actual as that of common sense experience:

The valid, then, even the eternally valid, enters our human consciousness through the narrow portals of the instant's experience. Reasoning is an empirical process, whatever else it also is. One who observes the nature of a realm of abstractly possible

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19 *The World and the Individual*, 1, 11-12.
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experience, does so by reading off the structure of a presented experience. Necessity comes home to us men through a medium of a given fact. 21

Royce accepts that the concept of Being (or, as he will later argue, the relationship between Idea and Being) exhibits its own validity. Being is also the array of purposes which give meaning to all experience. Such a theory of purpose or will is central to his theory of Being.

In sum, Royce's critiques of these three alternate theories of Being issue from (or presuppose) his own absolute idealism. The realist and mystical theories were both rejected "because neither of them sufficiently took account of the fact that our ideas of Being and the Being of which we have ideas, must occupy essentially the same ontological position:

If, as Realism had said, Being is real independently of ideas, we say that then ideas are themselves realities independent of Being. And if, as Mysticism had said, ideas are unreal, we saw that the Absolute, which Mysticism undertook to seek, must be unreal in the same sense in which the ideas about it are unreal. 22

The Critical Realist's definition of being in terms of validity results in a similar separation of being and idea:

In our concrete experience, the validity of an idea, once seen tested, presented, gets what we regard as an individual life and meaning, since it appears in our individual experience. But in the realm of Being in general this same validity appears universal, formal—a mere general law. Now can this view be final? Can there be two sorts of Being, both known to us as valid, but the one individual, the other universal, the one empirical, the other merely ideal, the one life, the other a pure form? Is not the world real in the same general sense in which our life in the world is real? Can Critical Rationalism escape the test already applied to its rivals? And if the test is applied, must not all Being prove to be pulsating with the same life of concrete experience? 23

The reconciliation of this conflict between real and ideal is the intent of Royce's own conception of being. Gabriel Marcel describes this theory of being as an attempt to develop a synthesis which "will end the conflict between fact and idea, between immediate and mediation, which seems to be of the essence of finite thought just because finite thought is perpetually attracted by a beyond, by Another, which eternally escapes it." 24 Marcel's reference to "Another" which both beckons and eludes finite thought is, of course, Royce's concept of the Absolute, or the synthesis of being and thought through purposive will.

21 Ibid., I, 257.
22 Ibid., I, 260-261.
23 Ibid., 1, 260.
Royce’s Fourth Conception of Being: Absolute Idealism

The conception of being, or of the real, which summarizes The World and the Individual, and to which all of Royce’s early work had pointed, is defined as follows: “What is, or what is real, is as such the complete embodiment, in individual form and in final fulfillment, of the eternal meaning of finite ideas.” 25 All of the terms in this definition are significant for Royce’s mature metaphysical position. When understood in terms of Royce’s full system, ideas are seen to include three terms: the object of interpretation, the interpreter, and the interpretation itself. Ideas are necessarily limited or finite, but are part of a system or community which is Absolutely real, determinate, and complete. In more systematic terms, the real is defined by Royce’s two-fold doctrine of the social (or concrete) Absolute and the internal meaning of ideas. Each of these terms and theories requires further explanation.

Royce defines the internal meaning of an idea as its subjective purpose, intent or will: “‘purpose embodied in the idea,’ and ‘internal meaning of the idea,’ represent the same subject matter viewed in two aspects.” 26 By contrast, the external meaning of an idea is its more public, objective, describable meaning. In effect, this contrast is the same as that between Idea and Being. Royce’s proposed solution to the question of Being is thus to argue that reality is constituted by ideas—which ideas are identical to their being whenever the internal meaning or purpose of the idea is realized. Being is the external meaning of an idea’s purpose.

Not all ideas are fulfilled, but when they are, they are true, genuine, and real. Both the human and the absolute wills define themselves by attempting to realize or fulfill their ideas or purposes. But no external meaning, no objective ideas, can be genuinely meaningful or true, can be, except as “the adequate expression and development of the internal meaning of the idea itself.” 27

Royce’s theory of the internal meaning of ideas is thus an attempt to solve the basic metaphysical “world-knot,” the relationship between Being and Idea. His solution is two-fold: (1) Being and Idea are rendered identical by the internal meaning of idea, and (2) all reality and meaning is founded on the way in which the real is the embodiment of the will. So, in answer to the question, “What is it to be?” Royce offers the following definition:

To be means simply to express, to embody the complete internal meaning of a certain absolute system of ideas—a system, moreover, which is genuinely implied in the true internal meaning or purpose of every finite idea however fragmentary. 28

While the human will expresses but a fragment of the total will of “the Individual Whole,” each will is linked in one unified system called the

25 The World and the Individual, 1, 339.
26 ibid., 1, 125.
27 ibid., 1, 133.
28 ibid., 1, 36.
Absolute. This Absolute will, which is expressed through every individual will, is at once the ground of ethics, the God of religion, and the metaphysical solution to the mystery of Being.

The Absolute as a Self-Representative System

In the “Supplementary Essay,” Royce criticizes “Bradley’s general view regarding the mystery of unity in variety”—namely, the two-fold view according to which Bradley maintained, on the one hand, “that real identity is never ‘simple,’ or abstract, but involves real differences,” and, on the other hand, “that the true ground of this union of identity and difference is always, to us, and to ‘thought,’ something not manifest, but only presupposed as ‘beyond thought.’”

As here summarized, Bradley’s thesis poses a direct challenge to Royce’s attempt to reconcile, within the limits of thought, the plurality of conflicting wills with the unity of the Absolute Will. This reconciliation is based on the internal meaning of ideas (or individual purposiveness) and the Absolute as a unified infinite system of finite individual wills. The one and the many are reconciled in the clever use of Dedekind’s self-representative system. According to Dedekind, “A System S is called ‘infinite’ when it is similar to a constituent (or proper) part of itself.” Royce offers the following example of a self-representative, or concrete infinite, system: a map of England traced on the land of England itself would have as part of its purpose (meaning, function) the representation of itself as a part of the object (England) it represents. This and other examples seek to establish the principle, which Royce applies to the Absolute, of a complete, infinite and determinate series, or “an endless series of parts within parts.”

The Absolute, then, is neither the undifferentiated One of mysticism and of Bradley’s Appearance and Reality, nor is it simply the accumulation of finite existents (e.g., Whitehead’s theory of the consequent nature of God). Rather, the Absolute as a self-representative system, is “a totum simul, a single endlessly wealthy experience.” Over against Bradley’s carefully argued thesis that all relations and all individuals, including God and the world, are an

29 Ibid., 1, 489-90.
30 Ibid., 1, 510-11; see also, Kuklick, Josiah Royce, 139-40.
31 Ibid., 1, 119.
32 Ibid., 1, 546.
appearance of the One Ineffable Reality, Royce contends that each individual is an entirely real expression of the one complete system of concrete parts, each of which expresses, without exhausting and without being obliterated by, that system. The system itself, and each of its parts, are best understood as an infinite yet complete and concrete orchestration of finite purposes:

We shall find these purposes to be the only ones whose expression enables us to explain how unity and diversity are harmonized at all, or how Being gets its individuality and finality, or how anything whatever exists. 39

As this text indicates, Royce attributes to finite purposes an impressive problem-solving capability. If, as Royce believed, finite purposes can be enlarged in such a way as to reconcile individual freedom and an Absolute will, such attribution would seem to be warranted. The means for this reconciliation between the Absolute and individual purposes is the ideal of the community, and the community, in turn, is possible because of loyalty.

Royce’s concern for the community is characteristically motivated by both theoretical and practical ends. Theoretically, the ideal of the community is the key element in Royce’s attempted reconciliation between the finite purposes—the actual attention which individual selves give to particular objects or ideals—and the Divine Will which simultaneously attends to precisely those purposes expressed by each individual. Practically, the ideal of the community is the medium by which both the Absolute and individual wills help to create increasingly creative lives. When individual wills are enlarged or perfected so as to take into account the purposes of other individuals, they more fully express the divine will; such expression deserves to be called loyalty. So, as the community is the locus or context of the ideal harmony between the Absolute and the individual, it is loyalty which enables the Absolute and the individual to meet in the community. In the background, of course, Royce is mindful of the Christian Church which is for him the most perfect instance of a community generated and sustained by loyalty. The following section further articulates the relationship between Royce’s theories of loyalty and community.

Loyalty and the Beloved Community

At a dinner in his honor less than a year before he died, Royce acknowledged that the idea of the Community had long occupied the central place in his thought:

My recollections include a very frequent wonder as to what my elders meant when they said that this was a new community . . . When I review this whole process [his education in California, Germany and the Johns Hopkins University], I strongly feel

39 Ibid., I, 501.
that my deepest motives and problems have centered about the Idea of the Community, although this idea has only come gradually to my clear consciousness. 34

Royce proceeds by relating that the Idea of the Community was the central factor in his thoughts and feelings, successes and failures, in California, in Germany, and all throughout his years at Harvard. He explains that even though there was much in his spirit which naturally opposed the spirit of the community, “there has always stood the interest which has taught me what I nowadays try to express by teaching that we are saved through the community.” 35 The development of Royce’s thought, when traced through the three decades separating his first major work, The Religious Aspect of Philosophy (1885) and The Hope of the Great Community (1916), consistently reveals his belief that the individual, whether conceived in metaphysical, ethical, or religious terms, depends on a relation to the social context of which it is necessarily a part. In this sense, Perry is correct to claim that “Royce’s moral philosophy, his theory of religion, and even his metaphysics, is an apotheosis of society.” 36

Significantly, Royce claims that loyalty has its own metaphysics:

This metaphysics is expressed in a view of things which conceives our experience as bound up on a real unity with all experience,—a unity which is essentially good, and in which all our ideas possess their real fulfillment and success. Such a view is true, simply because if you deny its truth you reaffirm that very truth under a new form.

Truth, meanwhile means, as pragmatism asserts, the fulfillment of a need. But we all need the superhuman, the city out of sight, the union with all life,—the essentially eternal. 37

The debate over Royce’s brand of pragmatism is a complex one, and one with which we need not be involved except to note the way in which the human search for truth is both an individual and a social enterprise. This same tension which pervades every aspect of Royce’s philosophy makes the cause of truth, just as it makes the cause of loyalty, a function of and the guarantee of, the community. Thus, Royce writes:

My life is an effort to manifest such eternal truth, as well as I can, in a series of temporal needs . . . My every human deed may involve a blunder. My mortal life may seem one long series of failures. But I know that my cause liveth. My true life is hid with the cause and belongs to the eternal. 38

34 Josiah Royce, “Words of Professor Royce at the Walton Hotel at Philadelphia, December 29, 1915,” in Basic Writings, 31 and 34.
35 Ibid., p. 35.
38 Ibid., p. 348.
Further, loyalty expresses the unity which is sought by the logical as much as by the ethical impulse:

Whoever seeks any truth is loyal, for he is determining his life by reference to a life which transcends his own . . . The loyal, then, are the truth-seekers; and the truth seekers are loyal . . . Our view of the truth, therefore, meets at once an ethical and a logical need . . . The universe as a whole possesses that unity which loyalty to loyalty seeks to express in its service of the whole of life. 39

Royce is here offering his philosophy of loyalty as a solution to the metaphysical and ethical question which has plagued Christian thought since Augustine. In metaphysical terms, the problem is the one and the many; in ethical terms, it is that of the individual will in relation to some universal cause.

While the idea of the community is the logical consequence of Royce’s philosophy of loyalty, the will is its premise. The principle of loyalty, or the cause which enlists the support of the loyal, is possible only because of a more fundamental principle:

If you want to find out, then, what is right and what is good for you, bring your own will to do insofar as you clearly discover who you are, and what your place in the world is. This is, indeed, a first principle of all ethical inquiry. 40

Such is Royce’s first principle. But note that the theory of self-assertion necessarily involves a knowledge of the context in which the individual must choose his cause. Royce explains that this second principle is “equally inevitable and equally important.” 41 The discovery of one’s duty—and the ensuing unity of the self with the community—then, involves the inner role of conscience and the outer role of the social order. Loyalty, finally, is precisely this “one happy sort of union (which) takes place between my social world and myself, between my natural waywardness and the ways of my fellows.” 42

Thus, loyalty, viewed merely as a personal attitude, solves the paradox of our ordinary existence, by showing us outside of ourselves the cause which is to be served and inside of ourselves the will which is not thwarted but enriched and expressed in such service. 43

The notion of service to a cause, or loyalty, has a religious and metaphysical as well as an ethical significance. Ultimately, the metaphysical, religious, and ethical meanings of loyalty merge in the ideal of the community, the most perfect manifestation of loyalty.

39 Ibid., 376.
40 Ibid., 27.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p. 37.
43 Ibid., p. 42.
The centrality of the community and the ideal of loyalty are exhibited by Royce's view of Christianity as a religious community based on loyalty. Royce explains in its "Preface" that The Problem of Christianity is but the application of the principles laid down in The Philosophy of Loyalty "to the special case of Christianity." The real importance of Royce's study of Christianity, then, lies in the opportunity it affords him to oppose James' conception of religion as founded solely in individual religious experience, in favor of his own thesis that all experience must be social as well as individual. Royce's position is so succinctly stated that it deserves to be quoted in full:

All experience must be at least individual experience; but unless it is also social experience, and unless the whole religious community which is in question unites to share it, this experience is but as sounding brass . . .

If, indeed I myself cry 'out of the depths' before the light can come to me, it must be my Community that, in the end, saves me. To assert this and to live this doctrine constitute the very core of Christian experience, and of the 'Religion of Loyalty.' 44

The principle for which this Christian experience is an application was stated in The Philosophy of Loyalty. The social aspect of loyalty insisted upon in this earlier work laid the foundation for the theory of the Beloved Community proposed in The Problem of Christianity. In the chapter "Training for Loyalty," Royce explains that his "insistence upon the social aspect of the loyal life" implies two assertions:

The first assertion is that all such lonely enterprises (as the martyr or the geometer) have moral value only when they are indeed a part of one's service of the cause of humanity . . . (Secondly), the Christian's devotion to God is inseparably bound up with his loyalty to the mystic union of the faithful in the church. 45

The notion of the cause of humanity, when translated into Christian terms, is simply what is referred to in The Problem of Christianity as the "Church Universal" or the "invisible community of all the faithful." The example of the martyr and the ideal of service are pertinent both to Royce's philosophy of loyalty and to his theory of the Beloved Community in that the individual self is enlarged by participation in the ideal order; the members of the genuine or Great Community sacrifice their lives in order to realize them more fully in the universal purpose of the community. The metaphysical and religious significance of Royce's idea of the community has been well described by John E. Smith:

Wherever two or three are gathered together . . . for the purpose of pursuing a goal, a community exists and individual life has added a new dimension to it. In devoting themselves to the cause, the members willingly agree . . . to refrain from willful self-

45 Philosophy of Loyalty, pp. 255-56.
assertion as would harm the cause. They lose their lives in order to find them in a purpose for life. The Eternal is the sustaining force of all community and the condition for true selfhood at the same time. 46

The last quoted sentence could stand as the final description of the Eternal as it functions in Royce’s thought. The community must be eternal since its every manifestation presupposes the unity of existence under one cause; secondly, the self realizes its deepest potentialities only through participation in the universal community. By relating its will to an Eternal and Infinite purpose, the self goes beyond its natural limitations and actually participates in divine life.

III. SRI AUROBINDO

A Realistic Advaita

In the opening pages of The Life Divine, Sri Aurobindo constructs a reductio ad absurdum similar to that developed in the first chapter of Royce’s The World and the Individual: what Royce refers to as the realist and mystical theories of being, Sri Aurobindo terms respectively the materialist and ascetic or spiritualist theories. Like Royce, Aurobindo finds both positions inadequate yet seeks to preserve in limited form the sound but exaggerated values on each side of the polarity. Aurobindo rejects the world-negation of the ascetic as much as the spiritual-negation of the materialist; or, within his metaphysics, he affirms the value of both matter and spirit without the denials which usually accompany these affirmations. It is the reality and value of both matter and spirit, and the terms of their interpretation, which lie at the core of Aurobindo’s metaphysical system.

As Royce argues that realism and mysticism can only be judged by means of the dialectic, 47 Aurobindo argues that the apparent conflict between matter and spirit constitutes the progressive (dialectical) evolution of matter, life and mind through the impulse provided by spirit. Each stage of evolution is possible because of involution. Aurobindo’s theory of involution and evolution is comparable to Royce’s theory of the self-representative system in that each spatial and temporal component of the evolutionary process is here regarded as a concrete, finite manifestation of an infinite, complete system. Each part contains the purpose of Spirit, the single impulse for the entire evolutionary process. Every particular, as much as the unified array of all particulars, ideally manifests the delight (ananda) which is the sole purpose of the universe.

In “The Human Aspiration,” the first chapter of The Life Divine, Aurobindo briefly outlines the framework within which he seeks to reconcile not only matter and spirit, but equally the finite and infinite, the human and

47 The World and the Individual, 1, 86.
ROYCE AND AUROBINDO

divine. Evolution, as the manifestation or unfolding of the logically and ontologically prior Spirit, embodies the graded, ever progressing harmony to which both humanity and the cosmos aspire:

We speak of the evolution of Life in Matter, the evolution of Mind in Matter; but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why Life should evolve out of material elements or Mind out of Living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in Life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life a form of veiled Consciousness . . . As the impulse towards Mind ranges from the more sensitive reactions of Life in the metal and the plant up to its full organization in man, so in man himself there is the same ascending series, the preparation, if nothing more, of a higher and divine life.  

As this text clearly indicates, Aurobindo’s philosophy can be described as a “realistic advaita” only in the minimal sense that in affirming the reality of the Absolute Brahma it is also affirming the reality of all particularity within, or in relation to, Brahma.

But in its emphasis on evolution, including not only matter, life, and mind, but also a presently emerging state of evolution called supermind (or superman), Aurobindo clearly represents a radical departure from the traditional advaitic position. The fourth evolutionary stage, the supramental, will be discussed below, but is cited here in order to establish that for Aurobindo it is an integral and essential part of his metaphysical system. It is significant that the passage quoted immediately above continues with the following claim for the immanent transformation of humanity:

The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious co-operation she wills to work out the superman, the god. Or shall we not say, rather, to manifest God: For if evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, involved, it is also the overt realization of that which she secretly is. We cannot, then, bid her pause at a given stage of her evolution, nor have the right to condemn with the religiousist as perverse and presumptuous or with the rationalist as a disease or hallucination any intention she may evince or effort she may make to go beyond. If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth.  

Even if it were not sufficiently obvious from his conception of Being, this insistence on the continued evolution of humanity should establish that for Aurobindo the Absolute (whether in terms of Brahma, Satchidananda, or Being) is logically, ontologically and experientially inseparable from the history of the universe and man’s place within it.

48 The Life Divine, BCL., 18:3.
49 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
This attempt to render the Absolute or Brahman dependent on the present and future evolution of human consciousness is both opposed to the advaitist position of Sankara and more constructive than the modest revision of Sankara offered by Radhakrishnan. Like Radhakrishnan and Royce, Aurobindo takes the influence of the Buddha and Sankara’s interpretation of the Upanishads as the primary sources of the world-denying tendency in Indian thought and culture. Aurobindo falls mid-way between Radhakrishnan and Royce in affirming both the Absolute and the reality of the finite world: with Radhakrishnan he affirms the Absolute Being which transcends particulars, but he is closer to Royce in his contention that the Absolute requires the temporal process for its own tripartite nature—for its own Sat (Being), Chit (consciousness), and Ananda (Bliss; Delight). Of these three aspects, or poises, of Brahman, it is particularly Ananda which Aurobindo selects as the motive and goal of the temporal process—and it is because the early Buddhists and Sankara fail to discern the delight of existence that Aurobindo judges their philosophies to be a distorted account of reality.

Throughout his philosophical writings, Aurobindo, like Radhakrishnan, seeks to discredit “the principle of negation” which generates “the great world-negating religions and philosophies” which he traces to the influence of early Buddhism and Sankara’s interpretation of the Upanishads:

In India the philosophy of world-negation has been given formulations of supreme power and value by two of the greatest of her thinkers, Buddha and Sankara. There have been, intermediate or later in time, other philosophies of considerable importance some of them widely accepted, formulated with much acumen of thought by men of genius and spiritual insight, which disputed with more or less force and success the conclusions of these two great metaphysical systems, but none has been put forward with an equal force of presentation or drive of personality or had a similar massive effort. The spirit of these two remarkable spiritual philosophies—for Sankara in the historical process of India’s philosophical mind takes up, completes and replaces Buddha—has weighed with a tremendous power on her thought, religion and general mentality: everywhere broods its mighty shadow, everywhere is the impress of the three great formulas, the chain of Karma, escape from the wheel of rebirth, Maya. 50

In this passage Aurobindo well summarizes his determination to establish an ontology as broadly based as any mystical monism but as rich in particularity as the various empiricisms which are committed to the spatial and temporal details of experience. As Radhakrishnan sought “to interpret the doctrine of maya so as to save the world and give it a real meaning,” 51 and as Royce sought to include the realist position within his own absolute idealism, Aurobindo seeks to discredit “the conception of the great cosmic Illusion, Maya,” and to replace its conception of “an unreal or real-unreal universe

50 Ibid., pp. 415-16.
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reposing on a transcendent Reality,” by “a real universe reposing on a Reality at once universal and absolute.”

Although Aurobindo does not say so—in fact, he makes almost no references to any philosophers or philosophical texts in The Life Divine—his reference to a “real-unreal” designation of the universe clearly rejects the Vedantist thesis that the world as mâyâ (as distinct from the world as Brahman) is both sat and asat. 53 Whereas the Vedantist must ultimately admit to a discontinuity in Being, or to an unintelligible relationship between Brahman and the world, Sri Aurobindo argues for the essential continuity of Brahman and the world. Or, rather than continuity, Aurobindo more frequently refers to this relationship as integral—and the understanding of this relationship as integral knowledge, and the discipline which leads to such knowledge as integral yoga. Since the term “integral” has been stripped of its precision by overuse, the contrast between Aurobindo’s pūrṇa or integral yoga philosophy and that of the Māyāvadins (Śankara and other advocates of the theory of illusion 54) is best established by a full account of his theory of involution/evolution and his vision of a divinized humanity. At a minimum, Aurobindo’s philosophy is a critique of Śankara’s conception of the Supreme Reality as “a spaceless and timeless Absolute (Parabrahman) which is beyond all feature and quality, beyond all action or creation;” 55 at its most speculative, it guides the reader through the stages of material, vital, and mental evolution to a “consciousness which will transform and divinize human nature.” 56 Similarly, Aurobindo’s description of his philosophy as a realistic, as opposed to an illusionistic, Advaita involves virtually every major concept in his philosophy. This passage is quoted at length because it well serves as a conclusion to the foregoing discussion of Aurobindo’s “realistic advaita” and as an introduction to the distinctive features of his philosophy—involution/evolution and transformation:

The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real. The reality is the infinite and eternal Divine, infinite and eternal Being, Consciousness-Force and Bliss.

52 The Life Divine, BCL, 18:416.
53 See, for example, Radhakrishnan’s argument that “Maya is neither sat, being, nor asat, non-being.” “Introduction,” The Brahma Sutra (New York: Harper, 1970). p. 32.
54 Sri Aurobindo leaves little doubt concerning the interpretation of Śankara: “They [modern Advaitins] want to show that Śankara was not so savagely illusionist as he is represented—that he gave a certain temporary reality to the world, admitted shakti, etc. But these (supposing he made them) are concessions inconsistent with the logic of his own philosophy which is that only the Brahman exists and the rest is ignorance and illusion. The rest has only a temporary and therefore an illusory reality in Mâyâ. He further maintained that Brahman could not be reached by works. If that was not his philosophy, I should like to know what was his philosophy. At any rate, that was how his philosophy has been understood by people. Now that the general turn is away from the rigorous Illusionism, many Advaitins seem to want to hedge and make Śankara hedge with them.” Letters on Yoga, BCL, 22:54-55.
55 Letters on Yoga, BCL, 22:42.
This Divine by his power has created the world or rather manifested it in his own infinite Being. But here in the material world or at its basis he has hidden himself in what seems to be his opposites, Non-Being, Inconscience and Insentience. This is what we nowadays call the Inconscient which seems to have created the material universe by its inconscient Energy, but this is only an appearance, for we find in the end that all the dispositions of the world can only have been arranged by the working of a supreme secret Intelligence. The Being which is hidden in what seems to be an inconscient void emerges in the world first in Matter, then in Life, then in Mind and finally as the Spirit. The apparently inconscient Energy which creates is in fact the Consciousness-Force of the Divine and its aspect of consciousness, secret in Matter, begins to emerge in Life, finds something more of itself in Mind and finds its true self in a spiritual consciousness and finally a supramental Consciousness through which we become aware of the Reality, enter into it and unite ourselves with it. This is what we call evolution which is an evolution of Consciousness and an evolution of the Spirit in things and only outwardly an evolution of species. Thus also, the delight of existence emerges from the original insentience, first in the contrary forms of pleasure and pain, and then has to find itself in the bliss of the Spirit or, as it is called in the Upanishads, the bliss of the Brahman. That is the central idea in the explanation of the universe put forward in The Life Divine.\footnote{Letters on Yoga, 22:44.}

\textit{Involution, Evolution and Transformation}

Whether read from the perspective of ontology or of social history, Aurobindo defines reality in terms of this interplay between the capacity of Spirit to stimulate novel possibilities and the capacity of the various levels of evolution to actualize them. Mental life, for example, has evolved to its present level of proficiency because the material and vital stages struggled for their own development. In general terms, such a struggle was the necessary result of the compulsion within every being to realize its own growth and perfection; the particular forms realized by each being, however, are at every moment determined anew by the interplay of the myriad wills seeking self-expression. So, at the present time, some individuals who are at the forefront of physical, vital, and mental development, are now aspiring toward a mental life which is as different from the mental life of the bulk of humanity as the mental life of the first \textit{homo sapiens} was different from its non-rational animal predecessors.

In the case of humanity, the revolutionary process continues apace because of the involution of Spirit, but the particulars of this transformation are a function of individual and socio-historical choices. According to Aurobindo, the great choice for humanity at present is whether, or the extent to which, it will correctly grasp the possibilities for physical, vital, and mental transformation. He contends that a new species, a superhumanity, is now possible if humanity, led at first by a few individuals, will recognize and determine to realize this possibility. In the pragmatic sense, belief in this possibility is the
first necessary step to its realization. Aurobindo’s interpretation of the interplay between involution and evolution, or between Spirit and history, both in the overall evolution of the species and in his own manifestly advanced mental and spiritual life, leads him to predict the emergence of a spiritual age. As the present age is characterized by man’s mental life, so the next stage will be defined by man’s spiritual capacity. As the mental age emerged, and is to be transformed, gradually, so the spiritual age will be realized in a halting, uneven accumulation of spiritual advances. Aurobindo writes:

The coming of a spiritual age must be preceded by the appearance of an increasing number of individuals who are no longer satisfied with the normal intellectual, vital, and physical existence of man, but perceive that a greater evolution is the real goal of humanity and attempt to effect it in themselves, to lead others to it, and to make it the recognized goal of the race. In proportion as they succeed and to the degree to which they carry this evolution, the yet unrealized potentiality which they represent will become an actual possibility of the future. 58

For Aurobindo, then, the meaning of existence consists of this unfolding of spirit in matter, life, and mind. The value of an individual person, community or event is the same as the value attached to all aspects of the Absolute, and indeed of the Absolute itself: Ananda, joy, delight. The Delight of Existence refers to the entire process and to all aspects of the process ranging from the purely physical through the vital and mental to the spiritual.

Given this positive rendering of the spiritual and delightful capacity of the physical, vital and mental dimensions of lived experience, it is not surprising that Aurobindo, as much as Royce, eagerly separated his view from that of Advaita and early Buddhism. So far from seeing existence as dukkha (the suffering attached to transitoriness), Aurobindo views every moment and every particle as a value within the evolutionary process. This revelation of spirit in and through matter, life, and mind provides the framework and the raison d’être for individual and community effort.

Roycean loyalty and Aurobindo’s ideal of selfless dedication to the spiritualization of individual and community life both render individuals and communities more integral and more delightful ingredients of the evolutionary process. Royce sees this process as the unfolding of the Christ in history, or the making of the Beloved Community; for Aurobindo it is the making of Supernal or Gnostic Being, a community of individuals for whom all of the diverse and seemingly conflicting elements in the evolutionary process would be perfectly real, valuable, and harmonious. For the Gnostic Being, which Aurobindo envisions as the next evolutionary stage, both the individual and the historical process will be realized as part of an integral unfolding of the Absolute in time and space.

IV. THE SELF, THE COMMUNITY AND THE ABSOLUTE: TOWARD AN INTEGRAL ONTOLOGY

Plato had disassembled his metaphysical system and had endured two unsuccessful attempts to implement his social and political philosophy when he concluded in his Laws, his last, longest and most sober dialogue, that self-love is the most universal and destructive of human failings:

But of all faults of soul the gravest is one which is inborn in most men, one which all excuse in themselves and none therefore attempts to avoid—that conveyed in the maxim that ‘everyone is naturally his own friend,’ and that it is only right and proper that he should be so, whereas, in truth, this same violent attachment to self is the constant source of all manner of misdeeds in every one of us (731e).

Since they were even more painfully aware than Plato of the causal relationship between human selfishness and the ravages of history, Royce and Aurobindo subjected the concept of the self to exacting analysis and hoped for far-reaching practical implications of their philosophical constructs.

Both Royce and Aurobindo drew from religious and ethical traditions, Christianity and Hinduism respectively, which reveal significant, if frequently negative, practical implications of their metaphysical systems. In revising their respective traditions, Royce and Aurobindo were assuming that their socially or historically grounded spiritual metaphysics would have profoundly positive practical implications for these traditions. Indeed, they believed that their metaphysics would advance worthy practical ends precisely because they believed that their systems were serving the cause of truth. By attempting to solve the problem of the one and the many, for example, Royce believed that he was serving the ideal of the Beloved Community just as Aurobindo believed he was serving the ideal of the spiritual evolution. Their ontologies are presented with the intent of meeting Royce’s criterion for judging “every device, every proposed reform, every national and every local enterprise”: namely, “Does this help towards the coming universal community?”

This concluding section argues that Royce’s and Aurobindo’s theories of the Absolute, the self, and the community do now, or will, help toward the building of more genuinely evolved human communities—and to that extent should be judged to be true both practically and philosophically.

Prior to establishing particular claims for these theories, however, it is probably necessary to assert, and briefly attempt to justify, the premise on which this entire paper is based: namely, that these two philosophical systems are productive of intelligible philosophical truth and, if they were to be taken seriously, of significant personal and historical consequences. If one were to come to these systems from their practical end—e.g., from a lived experience of Royce’s ideal of loyalty or Aurobindo’s yoga teaching—it would perhaps be easier to see that these practical results presuppose a theoretical framework

59 The Problem of Christianity, p. 405.
provided by Royce’s Absolute idealism and Aurobindo’s integral metaphysics. As the following discussion attempts to show, metaphysical systems such as Royce’s and Aurobindo’s may be more rather than less viable because of their affinity to religious or spiritual experience.

In his *Metaphysics*, W. H. Walsh discusses and generally agrees with the post-Kantian critiques of transcendent metaphysical systems (such as those of Royce and Aurobindo—though Walsh uses different examples), but then concludes by offering one consideration which would seem to count against the rejection of transcendent metaphysics as “entirely baseless.” Walsh’s reason for not dismissing such systems out of hand is their positive relation to spiritual or religious experience.

When we reflect on the background and interests of the persons who produce such systems, we see that the practice of religion tends to play a very large part in their lives. It is from what they take, and rightly take, to be demanded in religious practice that they derive their basic conviction that the familiar world is not the only world.\(^60\)

Neither Walsh nor this paper argues that the prominence of religion in the lives of such philosophers offers a defense of any or all of these systems, but if we take seriously the need to account for religious and spiritual as well as other aspects of experience, then this factor would seem to give such transcendent metaphysical systems “a certain plausibility.”\(^61\)

In his excellent chapter on “True and False in Metaphysics,” Walsh makes another point which is pertinent for the present discussion of the Absolute: After arguing against intuition and the appeal to analogy as ways of justifying belief in a supersensible reality, Walsh asserts that “the only remaining possibility is to say that the ontological assertions in mixed metaphysical systems (i.e., systems which attempt to offer an overall interpretation of experience coupled with an affirmation of God as the reality of realities) cannot be taken literally, but must be interpreted in an indirect way.” He continues:

To say that God exists would amount in this view to saying that we should adopt a certain attitude to experience: the force of this seemingly existential assertion will come out in the consequences of accepting it, and God will be treated not as an actual existent but rather as a theoretical construct. And if the religious believer protests that this makes nonsense of the whole concept, the answer will be that we are concerned here with ‘God’ as a term in metaphysics, not with the God of religion.\(^62\)

This paper has followed Walsh’s lead in joining the “attitude to experience” to the theoretical constructs in the metaphysical systems of Royce and Aurobindo.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 185.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p. 186.
This paper has also extended Walsh’s thesis on two important points: (1) that the most important consequences of accepting the metaphysical constructs in question, and their attending attitudes to experience, is that they become established as true—theoretically as well as practically; (2) that the theoretical constructs are properly distinguished from, but intimately related to, practical attitudes and consequences. In relation to Royce and Aurobindo, these two points may be summarized in the following claim: That the Absolute is a theoretical construct which truly describes important dimensions of human experience, and as a practical result renders that dimension of experience more valuable and intelligible for anyone open to it. Thus, both of these metaphysical systems, particularly their conception of the Absolute as modified by their attention to social and religious ideals, spring from and in turn help to generate philosophies which have proven true for individuals and communities—some of which are prized as models for human aspirations.

At the core of these philosophical systems is an insistence on the ontological interdependence of the self and the community, and, in turn, their interdependence with an absolute system, will or purpose. Although both Royce and Aurobindo rightly emphasize individual choice and purpose, they also recognize that the ultimate meaning of all choices is, or should be, the largest ontological and valuational category. Individual selves have meaning through other selves, or communities, and communities have meaning through larger communities. Experientially, the Absolute is perceived in terms of individuals and communities; ontologically, the Absolute as a complete and infinite system is not the result but the condition for individuals and communities. While the relationship between the Absolute and particulars, whether conceived as individuals or communities, can be explained in metaphysical terms (e.g., by Royce’s theory of the self-representative system or by Aurobindo’s integral Absolute), this relationship can also be explained in terms much closer to the way it is experienced in daily life (e.g., in terms of loyalty, dharma or yoga). According to Royce’s theory of loyalty and Aurobindo’s integral yoga (which includes the traditional concept of dharma and the various disciplines governing its execution), each individual must be true to his or her own nature, but it is through the community that one learns one’s dharma or the causes which deserve one’s loyalty. Thus, self-consciousness, including one’s dharma and one’s mode of loyalty, can never be the achievement of an isolated individual: “it is a social affair to which other selves contribute.”

This emphasis on the mutual dependence of the social and individual dimensions of obligation is as significant for ontology as for practical affairs. The blending of the ontological and the practical is evident in the theories of the self, the community and the Absolute: the individual self is defined, is rendered real, in relation to social causes, and conversely, the individual as a social force is able, and obliged, to transform the social context which defines him. Ultimately, this same interdependence obtains between the social-indivi-

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dual purpose and the Absolute purpose; the Absolute expands both the individual and the social context in approximately the same way as the community expands, without obliterating, the individual. In the end, the true self is an individual-social-absolute self.

When conceived apart from the ideal blending of the individual and social contexts, the Absolute is properly regarded as a costly mistake: the history of thought and history of communities both attest to the ill-effects of the Absolute severed from its human or natural moorings. The only proper basis for the concept of the Absolute is a community of individuals: the two common aberrations of this norm are a) world-negating spiritualism and b) a de-personalized collectivity (including religious as well as social and political institutions and movements). Aurobindo, like Bergson and Buber, is particularly critical of religious traditions because they degenerate to dogmatism and thereby destroy previously creative expressions of the absolute purpose. Ironically, yet predictably, such a process of codification is already at work concerning Aurobindo’s own experience of the divine will.

It is of course difficult to understand, and even more difficult to implement, these ideal conceptions of the self, the community and the Absolute, but Royce’s theory of loyalty and Aurobindo’s yoga teachings are helpful in both endeavors. Royce, when taken in the spiritual tradition of Christianity, and Aurobindo both as an exponent of Indian spirituality and by his own spiritual authority, provide descriptions of these ideals and the disciplines by which they can be realized. By enabling the self to enlarge commitments, both loyalty and integral yoga bind the individual to the community and, in turn, the individual and the community to the Absolute.

Talk of the community may appear out of place in reference to the Indian tradition—Royce is not alone in viewing the Indian spiritual tradition as indifferent to social concerns—but in fact the Bhagavadgita and Aurobindo are two of many characteristically Indian sources for the social grounding of Indian spiritual discipline. The concept of dharma, after all, provides the social framework within which all duties are defined for the individual and the group; mokshadharma, or the duty to seek liberation, is temporally and spiritually subsequent to the completion of an individual’s social duties. Most critiques of Indian philosophy and religion simply ignore dharma when lamenting the negative connotations of moksha—just as most critiques of the Absolute have in mind a theory such as that of Sankara or Bradley rather than that of Royce or Aurobindo. The usual argument against Indian spirituality is that the self seeks unity with Brahman independent of and usually with disdain for other selves and the world. Arthur C. Danto, for example, in his *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy*, regards the Bhagavadgita as “characteristically Indian” in that “the heroes at last weary of life and seek salvation.” Such is the view of life associated with the...
Indian quest for union with Brahman. Dewey made approximately the same critique of the Platonic strain in Western thought: according to Dewey, the Platonic "quest for certainty" is both philosophically false and historically disastrous. Aurobindo and Royce would agree that false philosophical theories do exercise a disastrous effect historically, but they insist that the most false and disastrous theories are those which are closed to the creative interplay between the individual, the community, and some infinitely valuable purpose.

Royce and Aurobindo are at least as effective as Dewey or Danto in exposing the negative effects on self and the society of a poorly grounded mysticism, but they also contend that a self which strives to take account of the largest possible functions (whether communal, historical, or religious) is thereby fulfilled rather than diminished. When conceived in the framework of the Absolute, the individual-communal complex is extended without being weakened. Yet, their critique of mysticism is so penetrating that it is difficult to be certain whether their own systems are entirely free from its application.

The most satisfactory response to this question is probably the one which most commentators offer in response to criticism of the Gita: to the extent that the ideals articulated are realizable by the individuals or communities in question, Royce's and Aurobindo's systems, like that of the Gita, are demonstrably viable. On the other hand, it is important to note that some, perhaps most, individuals and communities are incapable of self-definition through an ideal which could be said to "help towards the coming universal community." To this extent, Royce leaves us with a criterion which is as slippery as Kant's categorical imperatives: it is as categorical as human ingenuity cares to acknowledge. The Gita is confounded by a similar problem: how does one know when to follow one's prescribed (caste) duty and when to make oneself an exception. But the Gita to some extent, and Aurobindo more dramatically, also offer powerful examples and an impressive tradition of practical advice on this very question.

Drawing on the Gita, Aurobindo contends—and Royce would presumably agree—that some individuals should define their duties or loyalties in strict observance of the established and quite limited norms, while those who are capable of doing so should define their obligations in larger terms. As the Indian spiritual tradition has maintained for centuries, and systematized by an elaborate tradition of gurus, the ontological definition of the self is limited by its own moral, religious, and spiritual capacity. The teaching of Krishna to Arjuna well summarizes the Indian spiritual discipline on this problem: Krishna tells Arjuna, the beleagured warrior, that he must remain loyal to his duties as a warrior (i.e., to his caste dharma) because he is spiritually unprepared for the more tempting (and safer) option, the life of an ascetic seeking union with Brahman. Similarly, the ideals sought by Royce and Aurobindo will undoubtedly remain out of reach for the bulk of humanity.

65 We cannot too often acknowledge the concluding sentence of Spinoza's Ethics: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."
but they serve as valid theoretical constructs and viable attitudes to experience.

By establishing philosophical concepts such as Brahman or the Absolute, the Universal Self, and the spiritual basis of human evolution, Royce and Aurobindo hope to foster the attitude to experience which will establish, or render realizable, the truth of the Absolute as they conceive it. In this respect, the theoretical and practical are more interdependent than they are ordinarily thought to be by philosophers and men of practical affairs. As this paper has attempted to show, the interdependence of the theoretical and practical continually runs in both directions: Royce's and Aurobindo's social and religious concerns substantially affected their metaphysical preferences, which preferences are then articulated in a systematic ontology; the practical implications of their ontologies, in turn, will be an increasing openness to, or commitment to, the largest practical realization of the Absolute, the Self and the Community.