

***Royce's Philosophy of Evil, Loyalty, Sorrow, and Atonement
in Response to Probable Ecological Devastation***

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1. Personal Introduction to Royce

My relationship to Royce is unabashably personal, i.e., I admire him, I hold his sorrow, and draw inspiration from his life and thought.

This paper attempts to utilize Royce's philosophy of loyalty, sorrow, and atonement as a response to the increasing probability of ecological devastation.

Consistent with a talk on one of the foremost philosophers of community (along with John Dewey and Martin Buber, I would suggest), it would be an egregious omission not to acknowledge, at this my first appearance before the Josiah Royce Society, several colleagues, friends, and in my case, a relation, who have served the cause of Royce scholarship, no longer thought to be lost.

In 1969 I assisted my brother John when he created the double volumes *Josiah Royce: Basic Writings*.² (At that time we were both professors in New York: he was at Queens College and I was at Manhattanville College.)

I have also benefitted from the three volumes on Royce written by Frank Oppenheim whose very substantial essay, "Josiah Royce and Rudolf Steiner" I had the privilege of publishing recently in *American Philosophy and Rudolf Steiner* (Steinerbooks, 2012). I regard Frank as a loyal person.

That book is dedicated to three professor friends who are anthroposophists as well as to John McDermott and Frank Oppenheim, S.J.,
"scholars and advocates of classical American philosophy."

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² John McDermott, ed., intro., *Josiah Royce: Basic Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 2 vols.

As is evident in this paper, my Royce is Frank Oppenheim's Royce, that is to say, I share Frank's commitment to Royce's philosophic perspectives, and perhaps more revealingly, his appreciation of Royce's personal virtue and his religious, and specifically Christian sensibility.

I am also grateful to Michael Brodrick who generously guided me and this talk from my first idea of it—

“Royce and C. G. Jung on *The Book of Job*”
—to this presentation.

Although I published an essay entitled

“The Absolute as a Heuristic Device: Josiah Royce and Sri Aurobindo”
in *International Philosophical Quarterly* in 1978

I consider myself to be at the entry level of Royce scholarship.

I would like to think, however, that the task of preparing this talk, and the pleasure it has brought in anticipation of its delivery on this occasion before members of the Josiah Royce Society, might signal my emergence as a serious student of Josiah Royce.

As we all continue to experience ecological crises I will continue to look to Royce for insight and inspiration.

II. Ecological Catastrophy and Impending Sorrow

I come to ecology as a cause forced on all thinking, responsible persons at this time of unprecedented, and perhaps irremediable deterioration. My sources in the past ten years have included such core ecological writings as Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth* (1988) Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim's ten volumes on religion and ecology, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (1990), Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* (2006) Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (2006), Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest* (2007) the analyses of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the publications of World Watch and Earth Policy Institute.

I take the information and analyses in these and other works to be factual and their predictions to be as accurate as they are horrifying. Neither should we doubt that this deterioration is caused by a combination of selfishness and faulty world views of individuals and groups who have created this situation and would be in a position to effect the necessary changes.

The hundred years since the last years of Royce's life and works have been marked by two horrendous world wars, the first of which he suffered, financial depressions, and ethnic genocides, such that in the past century sorrow has been the lot of most of the human population.

In the present century, the human community, to which Royce was so inspiringly and brilliantly committed, faces the very real threat of unprecedented suffering due not to an impersonal or natural catastrophe, not to what insurance companies euphemistically call an act of God, but rather, as Rachel Carson wrote fifty years ago, due to what people have done to themselves—i.e., we have done it to ourselves.

Carson's *Silent Spring* refers to the pollution of the Connecticut River. Fifty years later, the cause of ecology includes world wide species extinction, global warming, rising sea levels, fresh water shortages, destructive weather patterns, and mass migrations.³

III. Royce on Evil and Sorrow, 1888-1908 (age 33-53)

According to Frank Oppenheim in the early years of his career Royce sought to meet evil with personal courage and endurance, and also to grasp it "by the throat and overcome it."

In 1888, Royce suffered a nervous breakdown as result of which he took a voyage to Australia, after which, according to Oppenheim, he came increasingly "to appreciate the all-Knower as also absolute Experience and Will." *RLL*, xvii

Royce first explicitly confronted the challenge of evil, suffering, and the possibility of a solution in his 1896 address on *The Book of Job*. In this address he proposes that God is not an alien being but rather one who suffers as an individual with all who suffer.

Oppenheim: "In the middle period of his career [1896-1907] Royce gained conscious union with the immanent divine Absolute who strengthens human sufferers. Their co-suffering Companion leads them to the highest moral perfection which requires human selves to embrace, detest, and subordinate evil to their own genuine loyalty to universal loyalty." It is this attitude, at once philosophical (specifically idealist and realist) and religious (specifically Christian, both Pauline and Johanine) to which I am looking for a way to lift without denying or being defeated by our present situation.

³ See Lester R. Brown, *World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse* (NY: Earth Policy Institute/W. W. Norton, 2011), vix.

IV. Royce, a Loyal and Virtuous Virtue Ethicist

Throughout his entire career, and particularly beginning in 1908 with the publication of *Philosophy of Loyalty* through his last major work, *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce considered every ideal to have an individual as well as a communal context and meaning.

He saw every thought and decision surrounded by concentric circles of significance and influence.

The ever evolving yet ever unified community of ideals includes the efforts of individuals to serve their uniquely worthy causes, including, and perhaps especially, causes that seem lost.

Royce urges each individual to think and act in harmony with the community of ideals, the Beloved Community.

For Royce, a community is beloved to the extent that it is comprised of free, loving, individuals committed to the good of the whole, including a willingness to carry faithfully, or loyally, the pain and suffering of individuals in the entire community.

Virtue ethics, which has developed steadily since mid-20th century, is intended to shift the focus of ethics away from both deontological (or rule-based) ethics and consequentialist (or utilitarian) ethics, though I think that the way I am interpreting Royce as a virtue ethicist is not necessarily, or strictly, opposed to either Kant or Mill:

- with Kant Royce sees the need to universalize one's motive when making a moral decision, and trying to be a moral, virtuous person;
- with Mill Royce sees the need to keep one's eye on the need of the community, not strictly the greatest good for the greatest number but surely in an effort to serve that number loyally.

Because it focuses on the development of the moral character of the agent and the community of free individuals, virtue ethics would seem especially helpful in the present, and no doubt continuing, challenge.

Admittedly, we are in a circle, and perhaps an impasse, the very one that Aristotle admitted in the *Nichomachean Ethics*: When asked for criteria for the virtue of a particular action, Aristotle replied, "the reason of the prudent man,"

the “man of right reason.”⁴ He recognized that it takes a person who has become practiced in wisdom and goodness to make right decisions.

I admit the circle and forthrightly offer Royce as a virtuous person whose eye for virtue is to be trusted.

This is still a circle but it is one in which the person counts decisively. It is the individual person who, by many disciplines and revealing experiences, must develop a virtuous, i.e., a loyal character.

V. Royce’s Sources of Religious Insight, 1911

In his *Sources of Religious Insight*,⁵ Royce urges each individual to hold in tension the completely individual and the largest intelligible purposes.

Sources of Religious Insight includes seven sources, each of which is available for an aid to the battle with evil, suffering, and sorrow, all components of the evolving ecological situation.

Here, briefly, are the seven sources with an eye to the present situation:

1. Individual devotion

Royce the champion of the community, never loses sight of the free, participating, loyal individual as a source of community.

The great need of the present is for devotion of each individual to the task of saving the Earth.

2. Society or community: In the case of ecological devastation, the focus must be on the community of all sentient beings. committed to the good of the whole.

Each ideal participates in larger ideals, in the personal character of the ultimate ideal reality, the Logos-spirit, the source and goal of the Beloved Community.

3. Reason: knowledge(s).

Royce exemplified careful thinking, exactly the kind that is needed in the present ecological situation.

⁴ Don Hanlon Johnson, *Body, Spirit, and Democracy* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1994), p. 62.

⁵ Josiah Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight* (

4. Will, striving toward virtue. It takes great will to face the reality of a planet apparently heading toward destruction.

5. Loyalty to loyalty:

Royce sees loyalty to loyalty as the core value, the *sine qua non* of virtue. The present need is for loyalty to Earth, to the only planet known to sustain life.

6. Sorrow a necessary step on the way to love.

Surely the contemplation of all that has been lost, and all that is likely to be lost in coming decades, can only intensify the love with which must respond to its Earthly body.

7. Atonement, is the highest virtue in Royce's ethics and religious thought.

Atonement will have to become a widely shared experience.

These seven sources issue from and are characterized by a Christian (specifically Pauline) conception of love, a metaphysics which is idealist but no longer particularly Hegelian, a Peircean realist epistemology and logic, and a distinctive version of virtue ethics, though not identified as such, significantly in both theory and practice.

VI. Royce's Problem of Christianity

On September 13, 1910, on disembarking from a voyage from Dutch Guiana, Royce was informed of the death of William James, his mentor and friend.

Royce found himself unable to describe this loss or to compose an obituary.

Eight days later, Royce's son Christopher died of typhoid fever.

Royce entered what he later called "the hell of the irrevocable."⁶

He was acquainted with grief.

This double, unbearable loss, definitely challenged Royce's conviction that God enters into evil and suffering as a way of lifting them

to love and to a greater complexity in unity.

In 1912, after suffering a stroke, Royce read Christian theologians and scrutinized Peirce's theory of signs and method of interpretation.

Oppenheim: "Thus prepared, Royce employs a new philosophical medium, method, and message with depth and ease when drafting his lectures on Christianity." (*RRL*, xviii)

⁶ John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought and Josiah Royce* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

In *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce's *magnum opus*, which was published one hundred years ago, he "recommended idealizing life's suffering into sorrows so that one can discern life's higher realms.

When so enlightened, one may identify with those who are willing to suffer vicariously, to give their lives as a ransom for many since these tell us what atonement means." (PC, 182-84)

As Frank Oppenheim has shown, in the last several years of his tragic life, 1914-16, Royce attained a greater-depth of philosophical perspective and affect. "Royce came to see within atoning deeds that reconciling function which a mediating interpreter creates....

Oppenheim continues:
A mediator "meets evil by creating and inserting a mediating third idea even while placing one's trust in the far wider and deeper wisdom of the Interpreter Spirit of the Universal Community."

VII. Atonement in Response to Ecological Devastation

All of Royce's thought aspires to,
and I believe achieves,
the depth and universality necessary to mitigate
the bewilderment and sorrow which will almost certainly
be visited upon humanity
and all earthly species in coming decades.

Royce's conception and practice of loyalty reaches to the cosmos:
"I can be genuinely in love with the community only in case
I have somehow fallen in love with the universe."⁷

Royce's commitment to the path of loyalty and sorrow,
and more remarkably, the ideal of atonement,
did not lead him to simplify the task
of responding to life's conflicting responsibilities:
each individual, inextricably in the context of complex,
competing communities,
is called up by the distant and uncertain goal of ideal unity.

In the present, and no doubt continuing,
challenge of ecological devastation,
the whole of humanity faces an inevitable cause of horrific sorrow.

⁷ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 269

As a wise and virtuous person Royce would surely see and face ecological devastation.

As a loyal person he would immediately and heroically react to the needs of Earth. He would be compelled to do so because he had so developed loyalty to universal loyalty as the defining quality of his character.⁸

Royce maintains that every act of disloyalty, no matter how deep, must be asserted as “the basis of all the best and most practical spirituality.”⁹ [Kelly Parker]

As the perfect storm of radical weather and species extinction, exacerbated by human fear and greed, will increasingly cause an extent and depth of sorrow the entire human community, and, I believe all living species, will need philosophical and spiritual as well as practical wisdom.

Royce provides all three. We know from Royce’s courses in ethics, particularly his course at Boston University in 1915, that he was trying to join his spiritual vision with actual ethical conflicts.

He sought to teach wisdom and virtue concerning actual cases—Specifically, on an exam he asked his students to respond to the case of the daughter in a conflict with her mother’s stealing, and the doctor who moves from his home town as a moral decision in response to a medical crisis, If he were teaching today I picture Royce telling his ethics class that our mistreatment of the Earth will cause damage now and will endure as sin that can and must be lifted by a devotion to Earth and the Beloved Community.

In the spirit of cases of conflict that need a mediating third, and need a loyal deed to lift them to resolution or atonement, let me bring to this community of Royce scholars a case of a “lost cause” loyally served that I think Royce would appreciate.

In the mid-1950s Marjorie Spock, argued against the right of New York State to spray her Long Island farm with DDT.

⁸ For Royce’s ethics see several volumes by Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., especially *Royce’s Mature Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

⁹ Kelly A. Parker, in Kelly A. Parker and Krzysztof Piotr Skowronski, eds., “Atonement and Eidetic Extinction,” in *Josiah Royce for the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington, 2012., p. 216.

In Connecticut, Rachel Carson, unable to find anyone to write an expose of the pollution of the Connecticut River, was told of the case that Marjorie Spock was vainly arguing against New York State—clearly a lost cause.

Based on weeks in attendance in the Garden City, Long Island court, Rachel Carson wrote a series of essays for the *New Yorker*.

She expanded that essay into a full-length book, *Silent Spring*, which is widely credited with launching the ecological movement.

Their deed was saved by the same divine reality that promises love and redemption to all sinners as well as to all saints, to all endeavors both efficacious and seemingly in vain.

Royce's Job did not suffer in vain. As the text says, unlike his three friends, Job saw God face to face.

As Royce says, suffering, such as the suffering of Job, is redemptive in the big picture, on the long run, in the end.

When the righteous, the pro-Earth workers, experience suffering such as Job's, they will know that their redeemer liveth.

Oppenheim:

He gradually delved more intimately and penetratingly into the problem until he adopted the humble trusting stance of a pilgrim trusting his way amid a good world scarred with evils. This pilgrim would by creative toil make progress thanks to the ever-present and trustworthy Interpreter, the Logos-Spirit, who keeps guiding him.

“Such was Royce's most mature philosophical response to the problem of evil. He had reflected on it longer and written about it more than Peirce, James, and Dewey had done, taken all together.” (418, from *RRL*, xii-xiii; *LW*, 2:77-83)

We can detect a voluntarist, a will element, and a modesty in Royce's conviction.

It was Royce who gave James the idea for James' famous “Will to Believe” (for which James thanked Royce with typical Jamesian generosity).

The present ecological situation is urgent, we must respond, and with reference to the ultimate meaning of this process, we will continue to have less understanding than would be necessary for a confident decision.

Similarly, I am unsure of my proposal that Royce's concepts of sorrow, loyalty, and atonement might be a way to lift, and perhaps transform, the current opposition between exploiters and sustainers of Earth.

At the least we might want to try on Royce's microcosmic-macrocosmic polarity as a paradigm richer than many dominant approaches and perspectives.

As we do need a transformation and an ideal vessel for our current and forthcoming efforts, I think we do well to mine the deep insights of the philosopher from Grass Valley, to whom I give the last words in this talk:

Professor Royce's final words in response to the problem of evil, and offer them as a fitting response to the contemporary ecological situation.

The dutiful spirit leaves to what it calls God the art of making the great triumph, of solving everyman's problem [...], and of reconciling the poor individual man whose head fortune so often leaves bleeding, to the blows of chance which he is sometimes too weak merely to defy.

Now just this strange union of patient acquiescence with resolute self-expression, this harmonizing of a certain piety towards what the dutiful soul regards as divine with a kind of sharing of ... vigorous self-will, —this *unearthly confidence* that, beyond all sorrow, all shall be, for the dutiful, somehow good, despite the fact that the dutiful soul does not always feel sure about what the true solution of Everyman's problem is, all this...constitutes one very serious ground why our time has so often lost its power to understand what duty, apart from the actual winning of good fortune, really means, and how one can be high-spirited, although dutiful. (FO, RRL, 418)