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# Josiah Royce's Absolute Semiotics: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Error

JOSEPH DILLABOUGH



## **Abstract**

Scholars often argue that Charles Sanders Peirce was responsible for Josiah Royce's semiotic turn in *The Problem of Christianity* of 1913. Thus scholars tend to assume that a *Roycean* approach to semiotics was a later development and derives almost entirely from Peirce's semiotics. Far from a later development, Royce probably read Peirce much earlier. Indeed, even before Royce had read Peirce, the kernel of a Roycean approach to semiotics is found in the dissertation of 1878. Thus the present essay will prove that a Roycean approach to semiotics did not have a basis in Peirce's semiotics, whether early or later, but rather grew out of Royce's earliest writings. The first part will reconstruct the early pragmatism in the dissertation of 1878 and find that the kernel of a Roycean approach to semiotics was the idea of a *mediating third*. The second part will show how the dissertation's pragmatism develops into a phenomenology of time that contains Royce's earliest semiotic insights. The third part will explain how the early pragmatism and phenomenology come together in the argument on the possibility of error from Royce's *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* of 1885. The possibility of error is Royce's original argument for absolute idealism, so the essay will conclude that a Roycean approach to semiotics entails a semiotics of the absolute.

*Keywords: Josiah Royce, American Philosophy, Semiotics, Pragmatism, Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Absolute Idealism*

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Scholars often compare the classical pragmatists.<sup>1</sup> Most agree the classical pragmatists inherit the traditions of Europe, but adapt European ideas to American conditions.<sup>2</sup> Many note the legacy of English Puritanism, the influence of Lockean empiricism and Scottish realism, or the impact that German Idealism and Romanticism had on American philosophy via Transcendentalism. In this context, scholars tend to argue that the classical pragmatists sought to naturalize Kant and/or Hegel by adapting their *a priori* philosophies into a philosophical experimentalism that conforms to modern science and appreciates Darwinian evolution. While also staying sensitive to questions of value, responsible to social concerns, and answerable to practical needs. This familiar story of American philosophy lends a host of terms to compare the classical pragmatists. Scholars tend to focus on how far the classical pragmatists are critical or empirical, naturalist or historicist, realist or idealist, absolutist or instrumentalist. These terms are useful, but have not yet been helpful in explaining the *semiotic* dimensions of classical pragmatism and even American philosophy.

Scholars have written about ideas and themes in the classical pragmatists that are relevant to semiotics.<sup>3</sup> Very few, however, contend that the writings of the classical pragmatists may entail their own approaches to semiotics.<sup>4</sup> Scholars seem to believe that the semiotic insights of the classical pragmatists derive from Charles S. Peirce and are secondary to his semiotics.<sup>5</sup> This is plausible because Peirce has a science of semiotics, but the other pragmatists do not.<sup>6</sup> The underlying assumption is that semiotic insights began to spread in America only after the others began to adopt Peirce's pragmatism.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is no need to affirm this assumption, since Josiah Royce constructs an early pragmatism of his own and finds semiotic insights that are *independent* of Peirce's influence. At least *one* of the classical pragmatists did not derive any semiotic insights from Peirce, so there is no reason to assume that the semiotic insights of *all* the classical pragmatists derive from and are secondary to Peirce's semiotics. Thus scholars ought to explore whether the writings of the classical pragmatists entail their own approaches to semiotics rather than assume their secondary and derivative status. Consequently, scholars may become more able to explain the semiotic dimensions in classical pragmatism and even American philosophy.

The present essay will focus on the early writings of Josiah Royce to argue that these early writings entail a *Roycean* approach to semiotics. While some work has been done on ideas and themes in the other pragmatists that are relevant to semiotics, there is almost no work on Royce.<sup>8</sup> What work has been done on Royce's relationship to semiotics tends to focus on *The Problem of Christianity* from 1913. Many scholars assume that Royce's references to Peirce in *The Problem of Christianity* entails that Royce's semiotics is a later development that derives from and thus is secondary to Peirce.<sup>9</sup> Others note that Royce probably read

Peirce much earlier, perhaps even in the 1880s.<sup>10</sup> However, the kernel of a Roycean approach to semiotics is found already in the dissertation of 1878.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that a Roycean approach to semiotics was not a later development and did not have a basis in Peirce's semiotics, but grew out of Royce's early writings. Thus the first part will examine the early pragmatism in Royce's dissertation of 1878 and discover the kernel of a Roycean approach to semiotics in the idea of a *mediating third*. Then the second part will show how the early pragmatism develops into a phenomenology of time that contains Royce's earliest semiotic insights.<sup>12</sup> The third part will explain how the early pragmatism and phenomenology come together in the argument on the possibility of error from Royce's 1885 *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. The possibility of error is Royce's original argument for absolute idealism, so the essay will conclude that a Roycean approach to semiotics entails a semiotics of the absolute. In the future, new essays will seek to explore how absolute semiotics might develop in *The World and the Individual*, *The Problem of Christianity*, and in Royce's later writings on the logic of order.

### ***I. Royce's Early Pragmatism***

A year before his death on the 14th of September 1916, Royce offers some autobiographical remarks in a chapter from *The Hope of the Great Community*. Royce was born in a mining town of Grass Valley, California on the 20th of November 1855. "My earliest recollections," Royce says, "include a very frequent wonder as to what my elders meant when they said that this was a new community."<sup>13</sup> The young Royce saw signs of absent people, dead trees that were an indication of life past, and the graveyard of a bygone community. How could the community have been new? Beyond the community, outward into the unknown, was also a sunset on the horizon igniting the wonder of Royce's elders. "I wondered," says Royce, "and gradually came to feel that part of my life's business was to find out what all this wonder meant."<sup>14</sup> Royce's wonder, even as a child, sought beyond the limits of private experience towards life's horizon with a desire to behold the sunset that cast light upon a world falling into darkness. Royce felt that what cast light and kept the world from falling into darkness was the idea of community. "I strongly feel that my deepest motives and problems have centered about the Idea of the Community," writes Royce, "This was what I was intensely feeling, in the days when my sisters and I looked across the Sacramento Valley, and wondered about the great world beyond our mountains."<sup>15</sup> The great world beyond the mountains that held Royce, his sisters, and all of humanity together with nature became the idea of a *divine* community with a sacred origin and a spiritual destiny.

Royce spent the rest of his life trying to work out the idea of a divine community. "I tried to work out," writes Royce, "the perfectly

real, concrete, and literal life of what we idealists call the 'spirit,' in a sense which is indeed Pauline, but not merely mystical, [or] superindividual; not merely romantic, [. . .] but perfectly capable of exact and logical statement."<sup>16</sup> A few years before, in *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce found an exact and logical statement for the life of the spirit that arose in the Church of Saint Paul. The members in Saint Paul's Church were loyal in faith to Christ Jesus and sought to interpret the Word and Wisdom of God by the Holy Spirit. In a more exact and logical statement, the Holy Spirit was the *spirit of interpretation*. While the Word and Wisdom of God was set forth in *signs* of revelation, so the Pauline Church was the paradigm for a *community of signs* that had a sacred origin and a spiritual destiny. A community of signs reveals and ultimately is the absolute, since anything can become a sign to an interpreter and thus everything is interpretable. All that exists in nature and for humanity either has, is now, or would have to eventually reveal itself in a community of signs with the spirit of interpretation. Thus this spiritual community is truly absolute by embracing all that ever was, is, or will be. A community of signs is the incarnate *Logos*, in other words, that was present with God in the origin and has the destiny to reveal God in history. Thus, late in life, Royce had an exact and logical statement of the absolute *in semiotic terms*. And yet the desire for the absolute or the idea of a divine community was with Royce from the beginning but seen "through a glass, darkly."<sup>17</sup>

Much before, in the early 1880s, Royce began to develop semiotic terms and for the first time sought an exact and logical statement of the absolute in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* of 1885. These semiotic terms grew out of Royce's engagement with post-Kantian epistemology. After earning a bachelor's degree from the University of California in 1875, Royce went abroad to study philosophy in Germany for a year.<sup>18</sup> While at the University of Leipzig, Royce had taken classes on logic and anthropology with Wilhelm Wundt.<sup>19</sup> While at the University of Göttingen, Royce took classes on metaphysics and practical philosophy with Hermann Lotze and began a life-long study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in a class with Karl Überhorst. Wundt was an early influence, but Lotze had a greater impact by exposing Royce to problems in post-Kantianism and their solution in a system of constructive idealism. Royce would try to construct such a system at Johns Hopkins, beginning in 1876. While at Johns Hopkins, Royce returns to Kant in the spirit of Lotze but also under the influence of Schopenhauer. Royce sought to reclaim the will and tragedy from Schopenhauer's pessimism, so our tragic finitude becomes an obstacle for the will's acts to overcome and willing acts can suspend despair by creating the hope for knowledge. The hope for knowledge remains a possibility, since Kant's critical method allows Royce to dispense with any world beyond experience. The world is where knowers must act to satisfy their practical needs in

experience, so the world of experience must remain knowable if action is possible and needs are ever satisfiable. “The world is real,” Royce concludes, “because we can act in it, not because any system of metaphysics tells us what is real.”<sup>20</sup> The hope in knowledge is a need for *action* and a *practical* concern of the *will*, so Royce’s post-Kantianism transforms into an early *pragmatism*.

Royce’s early pragmatism became the basis for a system of constructive idealism in the dissertation of 1878.<sup>21</sup> Epistemologists tend to assume a prior existence that is already available to theorize. Royce argues that a prior existence is never available, since existence is a conception in a prior theory of knowledge. “Knowledge is a form of our consciousness,” writes Royce, “All, or some part, of Knowledge will be what we mean by existence.”<sup>22</sup> Anything known to exist is never independent of a knower’s consciousness, so the problem is not *why* but *how* and to what *degree* a knower can have knowledge of existence in consciousness. What exists is an object known, but knowledge occurs by willing an act of judgment in a knower’s consciousness. A willing act is an intention with a purpose, while a judgment is a relation between a pair of ideas. The purpose of a judgment is for a knower to intend an identity between a pair of ideas in consciousness. Except consciousness is a stream of moments, for Royce, but only the present moment is ever known to a knower. At each moment in the present, a knower finds a pair of ideas in consciousness that have the form of subject and predicate. For any moment that becomes present, a knower must intend to identify a predicate with a subject by an act of judgment in consciousness. Their identity is the object that consciousness knows to exist, so the object of every judgment is the act of willing an identity between subject and predicate in a knower’s consciousness.

Absent identity, there are only feelings in a knower’s consciousness. These feelings may suggest an idea of a subject and predicate, but neither a subject nor a predicate can exist outside of a judgment that intends to identify them. Thus a knower *constructs* an object in consciousness out of suggestive feelings by an act of judgment. “[Every object] asserted in a judgment is [. . .] not preexistent to the judgment, [. . . but] comes into existence for the first time in the Judgment itself,” writes Royce, “Judgments are constructive of their own subject-matter.”<sup>23</sup> A judgment is a *constructive* act, so a knower’s acts are responsible for constructing the object of knowledge. An act is always individual, separate from the rest, and happens only in the present. Thus judgments do not refer to each other, so their objects are independent of one another, but only relate to the knower in the present that judges at the moment. “Judgment is relative,” writes Royce, “to the momentary insight of the thinker.”<sup>24</sup> The knower’s insight is momentary, since the present moment must pass away and another moment always arises to become the present. Thus, from moment to moment, a

knower must constantly will an identity to have an object of knowledge in the present.

The momentary insight of a knower entails that knowledge is always in the present and is only answerable to the needs of the present, since knowledge never extends beyond the present. The needs of the present require a knower to complete an act of judgment by intending to will an identity between a subject and predicate in a moment of consciousness. Thus only a complete act of judgment, what fulfills a knower's intention or satisfies the will's purposes, can ever answer to the needs of the present in the moment. "And here is the final basis of certitude, [. . .] A judgment is at once a thing willed and a thing done [and] what is done cannot be undone," writes Royce, "Attempt to undo it, and you simply resist the doing of something now attempted."<sup>25</sup> Any act is forever done at the moment of completion and irrevocable, so any attempt to resist is only a resistance toward an act that is seeking to find completion in another moment. No act is in error if complete, though, since whatever a knower intends to judge in the present thereby becomes an object of knowledge for the present. All objects are acts of knowledge that are forever done and thus irrevocably known. The objects that exist in a knower's consciousness are, in other words, a knower's own irrevocable acts or a consciousness of acts seeking their irrevocable completion in a present moment of knowledge. "Our result," Royce writes, "may be called Idealism [because] we find no concept of Being which admits of Being separate from consciousness."<sup>26</sup> What exists and is known are ultimately identical, but now no error is possible. And yet many people often err about what exists and accuse one another of erroneous judgments, so how is error possible?

A complete judgment never errs, since the object is always an act of knowledge that must fulfill a knower's intentions or satisfy the will's purposes by identifying a subject and predicate. If a subject and predicate are incompatible, then there is neither an identity nor an object, so the judgment is not erroneous but rather an incomplete act. The judgment remains incomplete, since incompatibility entails a direct opposition to the will that obstructs a knower from intending to complete an identity in the present moment. A judgment is also an individual act, separate from the rest, so judgments cannot directly oppose or err with respect to each other. If not direct, then error must arise in judgments by their indirect oppositions. A judgment can indirectly oppose any other by a direct opposition among their consequences, so error is when the consequences clash for a knower or between knowers. No act of judgment errs by itself, so error is the experience of *strife* in a will that conflicts with itself or wills that conflict with each other, since a clash among consequences thwarts intentions and obstructs actions. Error is strife, while strife is "obstructed Intention or Purpose."<sup>27</sup> If error is strife, but knowers must act to satisfy their needs in the present

moment, then knowers must find a means to end strife and overcome error. To end strife and thus overcome error, knowers have to discover the indirect oppositions that are causing their wills to clash. "Indirect opposition between finished judgments is discovered and in fact created," writes Royce, "by the suppositions and assumptions of Reasoned Discourse."<sup>28</sup> Discourse is the process of reasoning that discovers the indirect oppositions among judgments. The sole justification for the suppositions and assumptions of reasoning is to overcome error by ending strife, so that knowers can fulfill their intentions and satisfy the will's purposes by acting alone or together.

A process of reasoning begins by a direct opposition to the will from the clash among consequences, which obstructs a knower's intention to complete an act. Now the present need of a knower is to overcome opposition, so the will can strive toward the goal of identity and finish an act of judgment without obstruction. An identity is reasoning's conclusion, so a knower has to suppose some premises to help complete an act that intends an identity. Thus the assumptions of discourse allow a knower to infer a conclusion from premises and overcome error by ending any strife. An assumption that helps discourse is reasoning with consistency: from similar premises, a knower ought to infer a similar conclusion. Thus consistency is a principle of knowledge, since reasoning with consistency helps a knower complete the acts of knowledge. "[A principle of knowledge] enables us to unite," writes Royce, "individual acts into Wholes."<sup>29</sup> Many individual acts become a whole, since discourse overcomes opposition by substituting one act of judgment for many with consequences that clash. This happens by a comparison. A knower can compare a thwarted or obstructed and thus incomplete judgment with a similar but complete judgment, then try to complete the former with the latter on the basis of their similarity. Since a similarity among judgments entails a similarity between their ideas, there is another principle of knowledge. "[If judgments] have one Idea in common," writes Royce, "the truth of one follows from the truth of the other through the *mediation of a third* [that] reduces the first to a likeness with the second."<sup>30</sup> A comparison between judgments, in other words, reduces to a similarity between their ideas by the mediation of a third idea. Thus a judgment with a mediating third is substitutable for any set of judgments with consequences that clash, so consistency and similarity can overcome error by ending strife with the mediation of a third idea. The mediation of a third is an idea that knowers can have *in common*, since their judgments will become consistent by having similar rather than conflicting consequences, so knowers can harmonize their wills and act together to realize their purposes in a *community* by a mediating third. Even if error is never completely overcome, since there is always the possibility for strife, knowers may hope in community by searching for ideas to have in common by a third that mediates between them.



## II. Royce's Phenomenology of Time

The dissertation is evidence of an early pragmatism that arose from Royce's engagement with the problems in post-Kantian epistemology, rather than from taking Peirce's pragmatism over for himself. Hidden in the dissertation is also the kernel for a Roycean approach to semiotics. The mediating third comes to define the signs and symbols central to Royce's semiotic insights, once the early pragmatism develops into a phenomenology of time around the early 1880s. This is remarkable, since Royce's idea of a meditating third approximates the central insight of Peirce's semiotics, but seems to have been found *independently of* Peirce. For Peirce, a sign is a third that mediates between an object and an interpretant. Royce similarly claims, but with a few subtle differences, that a sign or symbol is a third that mediates between an object and a willing agent. The key difference is between an *interpretant* and a *willing agent*. An interpretant is more general and does not necessarily entail a human interpreter, while the latter seems to restrict to agents with a will of some kind. There is another difference of importance. Peirce's semiotics is a science that divides the fundamental types of sign into icons, indices, and symbols by distinct relations of signification that are at work in the logic of illation because of the categories.<sup>31</sup> Royce does not have a science of semiotics, did not classify the fundamental types of sign or distinct relations of signification, and had not yet sought to derive any categories. While there is clearly a concern for reasoning, Royce's early writings do not investigate the logic of illation either. Rather 'sign,' 'symbol,' and 'significance' are interchangeable for Royce, since each refers to a mediating third that expresses the *purposes* of a willing agent who intends to signify or symbolize an object *in time*. Thus a Roycean approach to semiotics differs from but may contribute to Peirce's semiotics by focusing instead on purposive action, temporality, as well as the moral and religious worth that signs and symbols have for willing agents. Thus, for willing agents, signs and symbols have moral and religious worth by revealing a divine community that is absolutely and eternally significant.

Tensions in the dissertation cause Royce's early pragmatism to transform around the early 1880s into a phenomenology of time. First, the dissertation claims that judgments by themselves do not err, so error is only the clash of their consequences and a conflict of wills that arises from strife. And yet strife alone cannot explain the possibility of error. No conflict is necessary, since consequences may clash or not, but judgments by themselves still seem to fall into error. Second, the dissertation claims that judgments have no direct relations to each other, but only indirect relations by a meditating third. And yet a mediating third is a judgment, or an idea common to judgments, which relates to other judgments by substituting for them. Thus there is no reason

to deny that judgments can directly relate by mediating each other and substituting for one another. The reason why Royce denies their direct relation concerns the last claim. Third, the dissertation claims that only the present moment is ever known. An act of judgment is individual, separate from the rest, since the judgment can directly relate to only a present moment. Anything beyond the present is an indirect relation to moments neither present nor known, so judgments cannot directly relate to each other. And yet time includes more than a moment in the present, since the present also seems to involve a relation to the past and future. If the present can relate to the past and future, moreover, then the present is a *third* that *mediates* between the past and future. Thus, even in the dissertation, there is no reason to suppose that only the present moment is known, since the idea of a mediating third can already explain how moments in the past and future are known in and through the present moment.

The transformation of the early pragmatism into a phenomenology of time was already underway by the time Royce went back home. After earning a doctorate, Royce went back home to teach English Literature at the University of California. On the 13th of December 1878, Royce wrote an entry about the truth of memory in his Thought-Diary. “Memory [. . .] cannot appear as a reproduction of the past,” writes Royce, “Memory is a present fact.”<sup>32</sup> A memory about the past is a fact that happens in the present, but does not automatically reproduce itself, since a fact only has a presence to a consciousness with a will that *chooses* to remember a moment from the past in the present. “The Past is but one element or moment in the Present consciousness,” writes Royce, “one of the directedness of the will.”<sup>33</sup> If the will can choose a past moment to remember, then a moment from the past must have a content that belongs to a consciousness in the present, so the will can *direct* a consciousness in the present *toward* a past content to remember. And yet the will can choose a moment in the past to remember only on the assumption that there is a past. A postulation of the past is necessary, in other words, since the past itself is never a memory but any moment to remember must refer to a past that exists *for someone* in the present. “That the past has reality in reference to the present,” writes Royce, “that the past for each individual has constant relation to his present [. . .] is the formal expression of a potential memory, on purely logical grounds.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, if memory is possible, the present must relate to the past and the past must relate to the present. These relations are never moments to remember, but explain how any moment is a memory and thus are logical conditions for memory itself.

This entry never mentions the future, but another does. On the 3rd of April 1878, Royce proposes “The New Phenomenology” for the title of a book that would begin: “Every man lives in a Present and contemplates a Past and Future.”<sup>35</sup> A man’s life has a reality only in the present,

while the life of man is spent *thinking about* a past and future that are his *own*. "Past and Future are Shadows both, the Present is the only real," writes Royce, "Yet in the contemplation of the Shadows is the Real wholly occupied; and without these Shadows this Real has neither life nor value."<sup>36</sup> As sunlight casts shadows upon the earth, so too does a life in the present cast shadows onto the past and into the future by recognizing what was and anticipating what might be. As the shadows would not exist without sunlight, so too the past and future would not exist if there was no life with a reality in the present. The reality in the present is a life *for whom* the past and the future have a *meaning*, since the past and future confer a value to reality and allow the present to come alive and endure. What remains unclear is *how* a life in the present can contemplate a past and future, or the relations the present has to the past and future, and how either has a meaning. Clearly, though, the book-title indicates a shift in Royce's thinking from traditional epistemology to a "New Phenomenology" that explains the possibility of time by analyzing consciousness.

Royce returns to an analysis of consciousness in another entry. On the 19th of June 1879, Royce proposes a book on logic about systematic thought. "Systematic thought is constantly in the presence of an actuality consisting of a continuous and indefinitely varied series of states of consciousness."<sup>37</sup> A consciousness is constantly in the presence of an actuality, but now actuality is not a discrete object for an individual act of judgment, but a continuum of states in a series that has a certain variety. This variety seems to entail confusion or disorder, since thought still has to *unify* the continuum and *systematize* the states by *reasoning* about the series. "To accomplish its unifying purpose, Thought must select from this series [. . .] points of reference for the rest," writes Royce, "This is [. . .] the selective activity, whose primary motive is interest."<sup>38</sup> Actuality does not remain a disorderly variety, since consciousness has an interest in some portions of the continuum, while thought is a *purposive activity* that can guide consciousness to *select* the states that are most interesting in the series. The most interesting states in the series become *points* with a *reference* toward each other for the selecting consciousness, so thought's purposes can actively unify certain portions of the continuum by *relating* whatever points are available for selection in the series. Thus the continuum offers premises for reasoning, so reasoning unifies the continuum in the conclusion. Still unclear is *how* the points can refer to each other, or *what* does the relating, and the *means* whereby a purpose of thought expresses itself in a unifying activity.

Royce continues to analyze consciousness in an entry from the 9th of July 1879. Analysis begins by setting aside every assumption to reveal the sum-total of consciousness to reflect upon. "The philosophic

reflection has then [. . .] to fix on some important part whence to start,” writes Royce, “a principle to reduce the mass to order, [that] is somewhat arbitrary.”<sup>39</sup> The sum-total of consciousness is a *disorderly* mass that reflection must reduce to order by finding a principle or a point from whence to start the analysis. The starting-point is somewhat arbitrary, since analysis can only begin with what is striking to attention and interesting for reflection. And yet the aim is not proving a system of propositions from a fundamental proposition, since reflection has already set aside such assumptions, but “[the] referring of the whole content of consciousness to a chosen system of coordinates.”<sup>40</sup> The emphasis on *choice* suggests the reintroduction of the *will* into the analysis, so Royce seems to claim that willing acts are more fundamental to consciousness than a system of propositions. A disorderly mass reduces to order by acts of the will that refer the whole content of consciousness to a chosen system of coordinates from an interesting starting-point. As of now, Royce does not explain how the system of coordinates are chosen. Somehow coordinates must have a *coexistence* in a chosen system, but Royce said earlier that consciousness is a series of states. Since a series of states is a succession, the new problem is how to reconcile coexistence with succession to explain the order in consciousness. An entry on the purposes of thought from the 28th of July 1879 states Royce’s problem clearly: “To think the successive as coexistent.”<sup>41</sup>

An entry from the 21st of October 1879 tries to solve the problem, while the solution uses the semiotic terms ‘symbol’ and ‘symbolic.’ All knowledge [. . .] is symbolic,” writes Royce, “To regard one content as occupying a definite place in the world of thought or being, is to regard this content symbolically, or as a symbol of an external and objective content.”<sup>42</sup> The dissertation claims that knowledge is an act of judgment that constructs an object, so a symbol is of a content that *objectively* occupies an *external* place in the world by a *constructive* act. This is explainable by beginning, as Royce does in other entries, with a disorderly mass or a continuum of states that have a succession in consciousness. A consciousness has interest in a portion of the continuum to select the states with the most interesting content by thought’s purposes. Now thought’s purposes can express themselves in *symbolic* points of reference that *symbolically* relate by constructing objects that *coexist* and occupy an *external* place in a chosen system of coordinates. The objects are external, since the construction is different from the act that constructs and distinct symbols have different objects. The objects coexist, since all must have a reality if anyone can symbolize anything at all. A system of coordinates is chosen by acts that symbolize objects in a succession of states that refer to past, present, or future contents of consciousness; so, a continuum of states becomes a series of symbols and objects that have a succession in *time*. Thus a disorderly mass reduces to a symbolic order of knowledge about objects in time.

This reconstruction is a conjecture about how the entries might cohere, but also clarifies the entry on symbols. “[Thus] the Real is made up of an infinity of past, present and future contents of consciousness,” writes Royce, “but real eternally and *qua* timeless.”<sup>43</sup> The content in a continuum is infinite, but there is also no limit to the objects that a symbol can construct, so an object with a content can exist in consciousness at any time. The relation between past, present, and future is a relation that objects in those times have to one another. And yet the object must relate to a symbol if anything exists at those times. Thus an infinity of content may appear in a succession of time to consciousness, but only if the relations that symbols have to their objects are *timeless* and constitute an *eternal* reality. “There exists eternally among the independent and enduring contents of consciousness or truths [. . .] time-relations,” writes Royce, “an infinity of simultaneous truths.”<sup>44</sup> What appears to consciousness in the succession of past, present, future is a *timeless* relation between the past, present, and future because symbols that refer to objects at those times are coexisting truths for a reality in an *eternal* present. The mistake of consciousness is to call itself the only present and reality, since consciousness must construct a past and future for itself. “Easy it is for the present to find itself as alone the real, and look upon past and future as its own creations,” writes Royce, “They are so, [. . .] Its own reality depends upon theirs, as theirs upon itself.”<sup>45</sup> This is true for each moment in time, since the relations of time coexist in an eternal reality of symbols and objects, so only the succession was illusory.

A man indeed lives in the present, but now that present is an eternal reality. A moment in the present fades into the past, while a present moment shades into the future, but only because a consciousness has to construct a past and future for itself in a succession of time. A man's past or future are now *shadows* of an eternal present and a timeless reality among symbols and objects. Still unclear is how symbols can refer to objects in the past, present, or future and how an act of construction reconciles with an eternal truth. At issue is what *mediates* these relations. An entry on the 10th of December 1879 returns to the idea of mediating third. “In every judgment,” writes Royce, “something (*i.e.*, some content of feeling) is distinguished from something else, and at the identified with yet a third thing.”<sup>46</sup> The medium or mass of consciousness is first, second is the subject that one and the same act distinguishes from the medium and identifies with a third, which is the predicate. The third mediates the relation between the subject and the medium in an act of judgment that predicates something of the subject in the medium. “Subject, Medium, and Predication are all alike present facts of consciousness,” writes Royce, “[but] predication is a present reference to a past content.”<sup>47</sup> Thus a judgment is an act with a mediating third that has a reference in the present toward a past content.

Time becomes a problem again, but Royce refocuses the problem to a question about the possibility of experience. ‘The Possibility of Experience,’ written around 1880, is about the role of memory. An experience is a series of conscious states. Each state when conscious is a moment known within the series, but experience is more than a moment known. “We mean to demand of experience a knowledge extending beyond the content of one moment,” writes Royce, “into the past or future, or into the external world itself, symbolized, it may be, by inner experience.”<sup>48</sup> A knowledge of experience depends upon symbolizing what is beyond the present moment. There are two conditions for experience. First, the possibility for a state to remember previous ones in the series. Second, the series as a whole to have sequential regularities. Memory is necessary for experience to extend beyond a present moment, while sequential regularities are necessary for an order in experience. A past moment is a previous moment of the present, but a remembered past is a past moment that someone recalls into the present. This requires a past moment to effect the present, so someone can become conscious of this effect in the present. If conscious of the effect, someone can recall a past moment in the present by psychological laws of retention, association, and recognition. The laws depend on another condition. “It is one thing to retain and to revive,” writes Royce, “another thing is to recognize the retained and revived experiences as in truth not new data, but representation of past data [. . .] and thus standing for past experience.”<sup>49</sup> If symbols are representations by standing for past data or experience, then a symbol is a mediating third that has a present reference toward a content or moment in the past. Then symbols are ultimately the condition for the possibility of the psychological laws that allow someone to remember a past moment in the present and thus have an experience beyond the present moment.

The manuscript ends before Royce can elaborate on symbols and representations, but the role of each seems the same: to explain the sequential regularities in experience by serving as the mediating third. ‘Sketch of the Infinitesimal Calculus,’ written around 1880, employs terms that are also semiotic. Royce begins again with a consciousness that has an interest in a mass of data and reduces the mass to a known point or datum. “Interest [. . .] results [. . .] in the attributing of significance to this [. . .] known datum of consciousness, writes Royce, “To attribute significance is to regard this datum [. . .] as the representative of a reality beyond itself.”<sup>50</sup> A known datum is a representative or has significance by referring a consciousness in the present toward *objects* in a past, future, or possible experience. A symbol, a representative, or an attribution of significance are all different terms for the same function of having a *reference toward* what is beyond but also knowable from within the present. “The past, future, possible can be known or conceived only in and through the present,” writes Royce, “by which

we regard the present as significant, [. . .] of a reality beyond itself.”<sup>51</sup> Now the mediating third is a symbol with a representative function or a point of reference that has significance. The symbol is a mediating third for a consciousness in the present that signifies or represents by referring to objects in the past, the future, or possible experiences. If time is a series of objects in such experiences, then the experience of time as a whole is knowable in experience by a mediating third. If the mediating third is a symbol, then the series of time as a whole is a symbolic order about objects in time.

Royce responds to the work of Shadsworth Hodgson in a letter to William James on the 7th of June 1880.<sup>52</sup> The response is an attempt to combine the central claims from Royce's early writings into a coherent vision. The past and future are once more ideal constructions that project outward from the present by an act of consciousness. The act is a postulate of an indefinite series that extends the content of consciousness in the present outward into time and toward objects in the time-series. The sole justification for the ideal construction of an indefinitely extending series of time is that consciousness can only act and satisfy needs within the time-series. The validity of the time-series “lies in the fact that the postulate once made cannot be taken back.”<sup>53</sup> Every act is forever past once done, while every anticipation of the future at once made is forever done. Their relations to the present are ideal constructions, but also irrevocable acts that are necessary to act at all and satisfy the needs of the present. Given that acts are irrevocable, then acts in the past can stably inform the meaning found in the present to better anticipate the future's meaning. Thus the purpose of postulating the time-series “is to give *significance* to, or [. . .] express the *significance* of the present moment.”<sup>54</sup> Thus the postulate of the time-series depends upon but also extends the present's significance, so the present can always become a sign or a symbol or a representative of an indefinite number of objects at any point in the series of time as a whole. Thus the mediating third is ultimately a *triadic* relation of symbolization or signification between a consciousness in the present and any object in the series of time as a whole. Thus the letter combines the necessity to act and satisfy needs, the need for postulates, the irrevocability of acts, and the mediating third with a phenomenology of time and a semiotic terminology of symbols and signs. What remains is for Royce to reconcile the constructive act of symbols with an eternal truth.

### ***III. Royce's Absolute Semiotics***

Royce reconciles the constructive act of symbols with an eternal truth in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* of 1885. This reconciliation relies upon a theory of judgment that combines the early pragmatism with the phenomenology of time. Now a judgment has the representative function of signs and symbols. ‘Tests of Right and Wrong,’ a publication

from 1880, has some evidence that Royce began to reconceive of the judgment as a symbolic act that constructs objects. As the early pragmatism held, every judgment is an act of the will for a consciousness in the present moment. The present moment has a content that forces itself upon consciousness, so the content is initially data that has no meaning. "The data by themselves *signify* nothing at all," writes Royce, "All real *significance* is given by the activity which postulates that they *stand for* a reality not contained in [the data] themselves."<sup>55</sup> None of the data has a meaning by itself, but is an immediate fact that does not relate to anything beyond the present moment. A consciousness must supply mediation by *judging* data to *signify* a reality. Thus a willing activity must postulate a reality beyond the data in the present moment for a judgment to *signify*. Then in an essay from 1881, 'Kant's Relation to Modern Philosophic Progress,' Royce claims a judgment is a *symbol* that unifies sensations. "[A judgment has unity] when a present sensation is regarded as in a definite relation to real past experience, *as a symbol*," writes Royce, "of a reality wholly outside of the individual consciousness."<sup>56</sup> As the phenomenology of time held, a judgment is a *symbol* that constructs the time-series but now the series extends to objects in space that exist outside of consciousness.

Whereas before there was a disorderly mass or a continuum of states, Royce begins from an aggregate of sensations. Each sensation in the aggregate must have an intensive magnitude to exist and appear in the present from moment to moment. To exist and have any intensity at all, a sensation must have a *place* in the present and thus an extensive magnitude. Finally, a judgment has to accompany and make an assertion about a sensation. "[The] assertion that these data, or a part of them," writes Royce, "*stand for, symbolize, recall, resemble, or otherwise relate* to data that were real in a past experience now no longer existent."<sup>57</sup> A judgment is an act that extends the intensive and extensive magnitudes of sensation *outward* into time and space by relating data in the present to past data. Since data in the past does not exist, then the act of judgment must construct the past from the present by symbolizing past data with present data. This retrospective act of construction is an *acknowledgment of the past*. Then a prospective act of construction is an *anticipation of the future*. Each is necessary for experience to have any reality beyond the present, but both require another act to explain how experience becomes a world of time and space. This is the act of acknowledging the *existence of other conscious beings*. Other conscious beings must exist to confirm for each other that their sensations truly do refer to objects at a certain time and in a certain space by symbolic acts of construction. Thus the world of truth is a symbolic order that depends upon the activity of conscious beings. "For since the ultimate fact of the knowing consciousness is the active construction of a world of truth from data of sense," writes Royce, "the ultimate justification



of this activity must be found in the *significance*—*i.e.*, in the moral worth—of this activity itself.”<sup>58</sup> Judgments are now symbolic acts that have a justification by their moral and religious significance, since conscious beings must construct and are responsible for a world of truth that embraces them all in an eternal reality.

Royce explains the moral and religious significance of judgment as a symbolic activity in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* of 1885. This is a culmination of the work that began in 1878 with Royce's dissertation. The preface even acknowledges a continuity with the early writings and a continuation of their major themes. “The work as it here appears is an outgrowth of several separate lines of study,” writes Royce, “first attempted by the author in a thesis for the Doctor's degree of the John Hopkins University in 1878.”<sup>59</sup> The early pragmatism, the phenomenology of time, the symbolic activity of judgment, were separate lines of study that finally came together to address problems with a moral and religious significance. “In outer form this work may be considered,” writes Royce, “a [ . . . ] Phenomenology of the religious consciousness, first on its moral, and then on its theoretical side.”<sup>60</sup> Thus a phenomenology of religious consciousness is an analysis of how the symbolic activity of judgment can construct time but also disclose eternity *in* time to willing agents with moral ideals. On the moral side of the religious consciousness, there is the world of truth. The world of truth includes willing agents with a consciousness, their experiences of time, and the external world. “But the external world,” Royce writes in an essay from 1882, “that is actively accepted as being *symbolized* [ . . . ] by the present consciousness, not as being given.”<sup>61</sup> Not given but a construction that arises from the symbolic activity of judgment and the acceptance of these judgments entails a moral responsibility for the constructions. Thus agents are morally responsible for making judgments and what their wills intend to symbolically construct in time, space, and amongst each other. Thus the symbolic activity of judgment has a moral significance because willing agents agree to acknowledge one another by accepting each other's judgments about objects in time, space, and their moral responsibility in symbolically constructing and living in a world of truth. If the world of truth is ultimately a moral world, then willing agents must have a moral ideal to guide their judgments and symbolic constructions.

What is true demands the acceptance of everyone, so only a moral ideal that everyone can accept is sufficient for a world of truth. A skeptic rejects that everyone could agree upon a moral ideal because there is not one but many and the many ideals can morally conflict with each other. And yet absolute skepticism is self-defeating, since everyone has to choose a moral ideal of their own for any conflict to occur. No one can doubt every moral ideal, even if these are many and do conflict, since everyone must choose a moral ideal as an aim to guide

their actions in everyday life. Thus the skeptic's problem is truly a practical concern of the *will*, since skepticism entails a *doubt* about what an agent ought to do and *indecision* over the aim to choose. "This skepticism expresses an indifference that we feel when we contemplate two opposing aims," writes Royce, "in such a way as momentarily to share them both."<sup>62</sup> For a pair of conflicting aims, an agent can choose *either* one *or* the other but *not both*. We can, for example, choose to act or not to act. Any indecision is a suspension of choice and an indifference toward either alternative. An agent's will can indifferently realize either, so the will includes *both* alternatives as aims that the agent must eventually choose between. Both to act or not are aims that belong to the will of an agent that has not yet chosen between them. An agent must choose one or the other, since life demands action, so everyone has a will that must overcome doubt and indecision by realizing an aim. If practical rather than self-defeating, absolute skepticism expresses the doubt and indecision of *every* agent and a *universal* indifference toward all of the conflicting aims that are available but have not yet been chosen. Absolute skepticism thereby entails a universal *will* that includes all the conflicting aims that any agent could indifferently realize and must eventually choose between. *All* must end doubt and indecision by acting upon an aim, so a universal will would try to realize all of their conflicting aims as a whole. And yet the conflict between agents must subside if everyone could ever realize all of their aims. Thus the universal will has an aim that can govern the aims of each agent. "*Its own aim*," Royce writes, "*would be harmony and unity of conduct*."<sup>63</sup> All agents can overcome doubt and indecision to the degree that their wills harmonize and their conflicting aims strive toward a unity of conduct. Then there is a moral ideal that everyone can accept, even in conflict, without relinquishing the freedom to choose their own aims. "*Act always in light of the completest insight into all the aims that thy act is to affect*."<sup>64</sup> To strive toward a unity of conduct, each agent must try to attain a moral insight into the aims of everyone else. Everyone must judge how far their aims might affect the aims of others, so agents can adjust to one another and help realize their aims as a whole.

The moral insight is the ideal that agents ought to help each other realize their aims. Each can help, but only if the aim that an agent seeks to realize includes the aims of everyone else. "The highest good would be attainable if all the conflicting wills realized fully one another," says Royce, "And all the world of individuals would act as one Being, having a single Universal Will."<sup>65</sup> If the aim that an agent seeks to realize includes the aims of everyone else, so the will of each is to realize the will of all, then everyone would act as one being with a universal will. Most would deny that this is possible, but this is only to deny that agents ought to end their conflict by striving toward a harmony and unity of conduct. If anyone ever wants to end doubt, indecision, and

conflict, then everyone ought to act as one being with a universal will by trying to realize the aims of all. Then agents must acknowledge the existence of others and their aims, but most tend to only acknowledge their *external* existence. "My will is the datum; his the dimly conceived, remote fact," writes Royce, "I realize his will not in its inner nature, but as a foreign power, and because he deals so even with me."<sup>66</sup> An agent is only ever aware of their own will. Everyone else has an external existence that each acknowledges, but as a fact that is bereft of an inner life and a separate will that becomes an obstacle to the realization of an agent's own aims. The result is conflict and doubt that arises from selfishness. The moral insight avoids conflict and doubt by prescribing against selfishness. By the moral insight, agents are to acknowledge the inner lives of others and regard the wills of others as inseparable from the realization of their own. "*Act as a being would act,*" writes Royce, "*who included thy will and thy neighbor's will in the unity of one life.*"<sup>67</sup> Thus the moral insight entails that many agents with separate wills ought to act as one being with a universal will that has the unity and agency of one life.

The moral insight is the ideal that ought to guide the symbolic activity of judgments for agents in a world of truth, since truth demands the acceptance of everyone in the world. A world of truth demands the acceptance of everyone, so everyone would have to act as one being with a universal will to accept the truth. Thus the world of truth is a moral world of agents that strive to have the unity and agency of one life. Agents with many lives can have the unity and agency of one life, but only by *judging* the lives of others and trying to *symbolize* how the wills of others are inseparable from the realization of their own. "He is a symbol," writes Royce, "a symbol that stands for something real, as real as thyself."<sup>68</sup> Others must have an external existence and inner life for a reality, if there are any agents that could help each other to realize their aims. Whatever has an inner *life* and a *will* for a reality is a *self* that judges the will of others and symbolizes the reality of their inner lives, so agents are able to help each other by judging a will that everyone has and symbolizing an inner life that is the reality of all. "Selfishness says: *I shall exist,*" writes Royce, "Unselfishness says: *The Other Life is as My Life.*"<sup>69</sup> Even the life of my own self has to judge the will and symbolize the inner life of my past and future self to have the unity and agency of one life, since what I was or might become is a life *other than* my life now. If my life is other than itself, but I can still judge myself to have a unity of will and symbolize myself to possess the agency of one life, then I can symbolize that the lives of others belong to my own life and judge that their wills are a part of my own will to realize. Thus the moral world of truth is the *life* of a *self* with a *will* that unifies the many selves with lives and wills of their own; who judge each other and symbolize a world of truth by the moral insight.

Since everything in the moral world of truth belongs to the life of a self with a will, then anything in nature will have some kind of selfhood with a degree of willful life. "Unselfishness [. . .] shows thee, in all the life of nature about thee, the one omnipresent, conscious struggle for the getting of the desired," writes Royce, "everywhere from the lowest to the noblest creature and experiences on our earth, the same conscious, burning, willful life is found."<sup>70</sup> For everything in nature is other than an agent's life, but an integral part in the life of any agent and cooperates with agents to help realize their will. Thus nature possesses a life and a will that creatures can have to a varying degree, since all of nature and humanity belong to a self with the unity and agency of one life. The life of nature and humanity is found in a community. "The moral insight shows us that, *whatever the highest good may be, we can only attain it together*," writes Royce, "the sense of community is [. . .] the *first* need of humanity."<sup>71</sup> Humanity attains the highest good in a community, but a community attains the highest good together with the help of nature, so the community that seeks the highest good already includes humanity and nature. The moral insight even demands that agents extend the reality of life and will as far as possible, so agents would eventually realize that nature and humanity belong to a community with a *life* and a *will* that embraces both of theirs. "It would demand all the wealth of life that the separate selves now have; and all the unity that any one individual now seeks," writes Royce, "It would aim at the fullest and most organized life conceivable."<sup>72</sup> The most organized life conceivable is *God*. God is an absolute life with a universal will that can embrace the wilful life of nature and humanity in the infinite unity of a divine community, so the moral insight would eventually terminate at God.

The moral insight entails that *God* is the *religious* ideal that ought to guide the symbolic activity of judgments for agents in a world of truth. And yet an ideal is ultimately insufficient, since agents want to *realize* their wills and discover the truth of *reality*. "We want to find some reality that our ideal aims can lead us to regard as of Infinite Worth," writes Royce, "[and] the religiously valuable reality in the world shall be [. . .] a Supreme Reality."<sup>73</sup> Paradoxically, agents can discover a supreme reality with infinite worth only by *constructing* a world of time and space from *symbolic* acts of judgment and postulates necessary for experience. "Mere dead impressions are given," writes Royce, "We turn them by our act into symbols of a real universe [and] give it whatever significance it comes to possess."<sup>74</sup> Dead impressions become symbols of reality once an agent constructs an indefinite series of time by postulating the past and future. Then a present moment in the series can stand for an object at any time and extend to objects that exist in space by an act of judgment. A judgment is an act of will by an agent that indicates a set of impressions with a subject and adds a predicate that transforms those

impressions into a symbol of an object existing beyond the judgment in time and space. Thus a *symbol* is a third that mediates between a willing agent and any object existing beyond the act of judgment. Then an act of judgment is the mediating third that can *symbolize* any object from the past or at the future for a willing agent in the present. Finally, there is a real world, since a *symbolic* act of judgment is a meditating third between a willing agent at some time and any object existing in space. And yet, if the real world of time and space is *our* construction by symbolic acts that belong to *us*, then how are willing agents ever in error about the objects in time and space?

The real world of common-sense is a succession of time for objects that coexist in space. Each moment in the succession is separate from the rest, so only the present moment is known to consciousness. If only the present is known, then no error is possible in the present. If a moment from the past or at the future is known only in the present, then no error is possible with respect to either. And yet a judgment about the past or future is to symbolize objects that do not exist, so an agent must postulate their reality, but also the possibility of error with respect to those objects. "Since error is plainly possible in some way," Royce asks, "*What are the logical conditions that make it possible?*"<sup>75</sup> Logically, no one can deny error. To deny error entails that the proposition 'There is no error' is an error, so error is plainly possible. What, though, is error? Common-sense claims that error is a false judgment and a judgment is false by failing to agree with an object. A true judgment must agree with an object, but a judgment happens in the moment and is separate from the rest. The possibilities for failure or agreement are infinite, so how can a judgment agree or fail to agree with a *unique* object? Common-sense is mistaken, since a judgment is principally a conscious *act* that expresses the *purposes* of an agent who *intends* to choose a unique object. The problem recurs, since an agent intends to choose only what is known. "Everything intended is something known," writes Royce, "The object even of an erroneous judgment is intended," so: "Only what is known can be erred about."<sup>76</sup> If no one can err about what is known, then error is still not possible. What an agent intends to choose is also an object that their judgments construct on purpose, so any object entails that construction was successful and there is no error. "To be in error about the application of a *symbol*, you must have a *symbol* that *symbolizes* something," writes Royce, "But insofar as the thing *symbolized* is not known through the *symbol*, how is it *symbolized* by that *symbol*?"—or: "insofar as the thing *symbolized* is, through the *symbol*, in one's thought, why is it not known, and so correctly judged?"<sup>77</sup> The problem about the possibility of error is, according to Royce's own formulation, a semiotic problem.<sup>78</sup>

A willing agent must have sufficient knowledge for an intention to successfully choose a unique object that an act of judgment tries to symbolize. And yet the knowledge must have been vague enough for the symbol to choose but err with respect to the unique object. All knowledge is vague to some degree, since a willing agent can intend to choose only what attention can focus upon. Since attention is finite, then the focus of agents is always partial and thus their judgments can only symbolize an incomplete object. Any object is sufficiently complete for a willing agent to intend and successfully choose, but also incomplete enough for an agent to err about by trying to symbolize the object with a partial judgment. Thus no one errs without trying to succeed. And yet, if successful, the symbol *must* agree with the object or the symbol does not symbolize at all. If the symbol *does* agree, even partially or incompletely, then where is the error? Suppose that there are a pair of agents that are trying to judge the inner lives of one another. "A [ . . . ] symbol," writes Royce, "stands there in me as the representative of his mind, and all that I say about my neighbor's inner life refers directly to this representative."<sup>79</sup> My neighbor's inner life is a vague object that I can intend and successfully choose by a partial judgment. Still, however incomplete an object, whatever I say about my neighbor's inner life is said about the judgment that partially symbolizes that inner life to me. What I judge is only the symbol I had chosen to construct, since I do not have direct access to the inner life of my neighbor. The same is true for the neighbor that tries to symbolize my inner life. We cannot err about our own constructions, but we cannot compare our symbols to the other's inner life either, so neither of us can err about the other.

An error about the past or future is a partial judgment in the present that intends to choose and succeeds to symbolize but fails to agree with an object in the past or future. And yet, even if an agent must postulate their reality, an object in the past or future does not exist in the present, so neither are comparable with a symbol in the present. Thus no one could discover any error and even the partial judgment of a symbol in the present never errs. The problem is the assumption of common-sense that time is a succession of moments, where the past and future are separate from the present. I could err about time if the incomplete object I intend to judge in the past or future was a *complete* reality that someone could compare with my symbol in the present. Similarly, I could err about my neighbor's inner life if the incomplete object I intend to judge was a *complete* reality that someone could compare with my symbol. "Only a third person, who included them both," says Royce, "only such an inclusive thought could compare the phantoms with the real."<sup>80</sup> A third person would have to include my judgment and my neighbor's judgment, the inner life that each of us intends but can only symbolize as an incomplete object, and the complete reality of our

inner lives. Then a third person could compare the complete reality of our inner lives with each of the symbols we construct to determine if the judgment agrees or fails to agree. A failure to agree entails that a judgment is false and thus in error from the perspective of a third person. A false judgment is an error, since the intention does not succeed, so the incomplete object does not reveal the complete reality in a symbol. The complete reality is what the symbol *would* reveal, what the incomplete object *would* become, what *would* fulfill the intention of a true judgment that agrees with the perspective of a third person that includes them all. The object seems to exist beyond our judgment, but is actually the complete realization of our symbol, the fulfillment of our will, and the truth of our intention. Since the object is incomplete, we can err by failing to agree with the complete reality that our judgment intends to symbolize from the third person's perspective. Thus, if anyone can ever err about objects in time and space, then the third person's perspective must include the complete reality of time and all the acts of judgment that intend to symbolize every object in the past, present, or future.

If a third person's perspective must include *all* the acts of judgments and the symbols that intend to symbolize *every* object, then this third person is an *all-inclusive* and *universal* thought that includes the complete reality of time and space. "Let us [. . .] declare once and for all present in all its moments to a universal all-inclusive thought," writes Royce, "that all the many Beyonds which single significant judgments seem vaguely and separately to postulate, are present as fully realized intended objects to the unity of an all-inclusive [. . .] thought, of which all judgments, true or false, are but fragments, the whole being at once Absolute Truth."<sup>81</sup> *All* of the moments in time must have a presence to an all-inclusive and universal thought, so partial judgments that intend to symbolize objects in time can err or express the truth of a complete reality. The complete reality is the truth of every symbol, the completion of each object, the fulfillment of any intention, the realization of all wills and their partial acts of judgment. "An error [. . .] is an incomplete thought, that to a higher thought which includes it and its intended object, is known as having failed in the purpose that it more or less clearly had, and that is fully realized in this higher thought," writes Royce, "And without such higher inclusive thought, an assertion has no external object and is no error."<sup>82</sup> An incomplete thought finds a completion in a higher thought, since the higher thought realizes the intention of every judgment to symbolize an object. A judgment has an object, since a willing agent *intends* to symbolize and thus constructs an object *on purpose*, but only a higher thought that includes them can determine if the purpose succeeds to have a complete reality or fails. Each failure is an error and errors are infinite, so the higher thought is infinite.

An all-inclusive, universal, infinite thought contains the intention of every judgment to symbolize an object and realizes all of the purposes that willing agents can have *as a whole*. As a whole, the purposes of willing agents can succeed to have a complete reality or fail and thus their intentions were in error for an infinitely inclusive and universal thought. Thus willing agents are always striving toward what is *always* and *forever* true or *irrevocably* and *endlessly* in error, so the infinite thought is the complete expression of an eternal reality that willing agents intend to symbolize *in* time and can ideally attain together. Either error is not possible, in other words, or the one being with an absolute life and universal will *is* the eternal reality rather than a moral and religious ideal of ours. Thus, since error is possible, the absolute truth and eternal reality is *God*. *God* is truly the *third* that mediates between *every* symbol and *all* of their objects for each willing agent that lives in nature and strives among humanity. All of nature and humanity participate in a *divine* community with an absolute life and a universal will to fulfill the purposes and intentions of every willing agent, their objects, and their symbols in an eternal reality. God's eternal reality is a *triadic* relation between an *absolute* symbol acting out all of the judgments that symbolize an object, an *absolute* object that completes all the symbolic acts of construction, and an *absolute* life and will that fulfills the purposes and intentions of everything that lives and wills in time and space. From the dissertation of 1878 onward to *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* in 1885, there are semiotic insights that allow for a semiotic interpretation of Royce's absolute idealism, so a Roycean approach to semiotics entails an absolute semiotics. Either error is impossible, in other words, or semiotics is absolute.

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## NOTES

1 Most texts compare the classical pragmatists, but fail to discuss the semiotic dimensions in the writings of the classical pragmatists. For example: Moore (1961), Scheffler (1974), De Waal (2005), Talisse and Aikin (2008), Misak (2013). A rare exception to the trend is Morris (1970), but the analysis is plagued by a behaviorist interpretation of semiotics and pragmatism.

2 Most histories of American philosophy follow the same pattern and almost all neglect the semiotic dimensions of American philosophy and classical pragmatism. For example: Riley (1923), Schneider (1946), Werkmeister (1949), Stroh (1968), Flower and Murphey (1977), Kucklick (1977 and 2001).

3 Though too numerous to mention for each of the classical pragmatists, there is an abundance of scholarship on the ideas and themes in John Dewey that are relevant to semiotics. For example: Gaskill (2008), Stables (2008), Eliot (2009), Mackey (2009), Kruse (2011), Afifi (2014), Innis (2016 and 2019), and Eicher-Catt (2021).

4 Some recent scholarship is beginning to uncover the semiotic insights in the writings of the classical pragmatists themselves at a certain period of time in their careers, see Pfeifer (2018) on the semiotics of William James and Stango (2019) on the semiotics of John Dewey. A chronological approach is still necessary, though, see Dillabough (forthcoming) on the semiotics in John Dewey's early philosophy.

5 Deely claims (in 2001: 508–509): "By comparison with Peirce, not only Dewey but all the other names in American philosophy, with the possible exception of Josiah Royce [. . .] and, in more limited respects, William James [. . .], are strictly second-rate." Royce is indeed an exception, but there is no need to assume that the other American philosophers are *strictly* second-rate either. The others may have their own approaches to semiotics that differ from or could contribute to the Peircean and Roycean approaches to semiotics. For a Deweyan approach to semiotics, see Dillabough (forthcoming).

6 For an analysis on Peirce's science of semiotics in the argument of 'On a New List of Categories' from 1867, see Dillabough (2021).

7 The term ‘semiosis’ intends to convey processes of sign-activity or sign-interpretation, rather than an explicit theory about sign-activity and interpretation or a ‘semiotics.’ For a brief mention of the difference, see Deely (in 2010: 99 and elsewhere).

8 For scholarship on Royce’s semiotics, see Raposa (2010), Pfeifer (2016), Colapetira (2019), De Tienne (2020), and Cardenas (2023).

9 The tendency to assume that Royce’s semiotics derives from Peirce late in life seems to have begun with Smith (1950: 19–33, 68–74, 85–86 and 92).

10 Auxier (2013: 15–18) explicitly challenges the dominant trend that derives from Smith. An alternative to the dominant trend was Cotton (1954: 216–220), who suggests that Royce read Peirce much earlier. Oppenheim (2005: 26–30) suggests that Royce read Peirce much earlier, which Pfeifer (2017) tracks. All agree that Royce read Peirce probably around the early 1880s. No one seems to believe that there was a semiotics latent in Royce’s early writings and the later writings articulate that semiotics, which culminates in *The Problem of Christianity*. Kuklick (1985: 214–215) argues that Royce “took much of his work [. . .] from Peirce’s articles,” but “Royce himself said the the ‘germ’ of his position [in *The Problem of Christianity*] is in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*.” The present essay will develop Kuklick’s suggestion that Royce “retrospectively has in mind the necessary third and higher thought which includes my idea and its object.” Indeed, with resources drawn from Royce’s early writings, the third and higher thought is construable as an *absolute symbol* of all objects for any agent.

11 Kuklick (1985: 14–15) also notes but does explain the importance of the ‘mediating third’ in the dissertation of 1878. The essay will argue that the ‘mediating third’ is the kernel for Royce’s semiotics both early and late.

12 Auxier (2013: 39) notices the irreducibly triadic dimension of time in Royce’s early phenomenology, but does not articulate the semiotic potential of “the temporal structure that is irreducibly three-fold.” The present essay shall develop this suggestion with Royce earliest writings.

13 Royce 1915: 122; see also Clendenning 1999: 3.

14 Royce 1915: 123; see also Clendenning 1999: 3.

15 Royce 1915: 129; see also Clendenning 1999: 4–5, who says: “If literally Josiah Royce’s mountains were the physical heights that enclosed him, symbolically they were the borders of his ideal world. [. . .] Royce’s mountains were the walls of experience; the story of his life depicts him pressing against the barriers, reaching out to the world beyond.”

16 Royce 1915: 131.

17 The whole of 1 Corinthians 13:12 from the King James Bible is a perfect gloss about what Royce’s absolute semiotics tries to explain and justify: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.”

18 For an overview of Royce’s undergraduate years at the University of California, graduate years in Germany and at Johns Hopkins University, see Clendenning 1993: 48–60 and 60–73.

19 Given that Wundt would later propose a theory about the origins of language in bodily gestures, especially in *Die Sprache* (1900), there is a possibility that Wundt was an influence on Royce’s attempt to find semiotic solutions to problems

in post-Kantian epistemology. Even later George Herbert Mead would have his own semiotic insights that derive from Wundt's concept of the gesture, see 'Wundt's Concept of the Gesture' in Mead (1934: 42–51). I owe this suggestion to Dr. Cornelis de Waal from Indiana University Indianapolis.

20 Royce 1876: 'The Return to Kant in Modern German Thought,' *The Papers of Josiah Royce*, Box C. Quoted in Clendenning 1993: 67–68.

21 Royce 1878 in *The Writings of Josiah Royce: A Critical Edition*. A transcription of the dissertation is available at <https://josiah-royce-edition.org/online-royce-volumes/>.

22 Royce 1878: iii.

23 Royce 1878: vi–vii.

24 Royce 1878: 79.

25 Royce 1878: 179–180.

26 Royce 1878: ix.

27 Royce 1878: 207.

28 Royce 1878: 209.

29 Royce 1878: iii.

30 Royce 1878: 106; emphasis added.

31 For an analysis on Peirce's science of semiotics, the division of the fundamental types of sign, the distinct relations of signification at work in the logic of illation, and the derivation of the categories, see Dillabough (2021).

32 Royce 1878: 106. For an introduction to Royce's 'Thought-Diary,' see Dillabough 2019d. The introduction and a transcription of the manuscript are available at <https://josiah-royce-edition.org/thought-diary-1878-1879/>.

33 Royce 1878: 106.

34 Royce 1878: 106–7.

35 Royce 1878: 123.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Royce 1879: 126.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Royce 1879: 127.

40 Royce 1879: 128.

41 Royce 1879: 132.

42 Royce 1879: 136.

43 Royce 1879: 136–7.

44 Royce 1879: 137.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Royce 1879: 139.

47 Royce 1879: 141.

48 Royce c. 1880a: 3–4. For an introduction to 'The Possibility of Experience,' see Dillabough 2019a. The manuscript and introduction are available at <https://josiah-royce-edition.org/the-possibility-of-experience-c-1880/>.

49 Royce c. 1880a: 10–11.

50 Royce c. 1880c: 2. For an introduction to 'Sketch of the Infinitesimal Calculus,' see Dillabough 2019b. The manuscript and introduction are available at <https://josiah-royce-edition.org/sketch-of-the-infinitesimal-calculus-c-1880/>.

51 *Ibid.*

52 For an overview of Royce's relation to the work of Shadworth Hodgson, see Dillabough 2019b. Available at <https://josiah-royce-edition.org/the-interpretation-of-consciousness-c-1880/>. See also the letter to William James on the 9th of September in Royce 1880 (in 1991): 86–89.

53 Royce 1880 (in 1990): 84.

54 *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

55 Quoted from Kegley 2008: 33; emphasis added.

56 Royce 1881: 364; emphasis added. A revised version is also in Royce 1885: 255.

57 Royce 1881: 377; emphasis added.

58 Royce 1881: 380; emphasis added.

59 Royce 1885: xvii.

60 Royce 1885: xvi.

61 Royce 1882: 43; emphasis added. A revised version is also in Royce 1885: 302.

62 Royce 1885: 133.

63 Royce 1885: 138.

64 Royce 1885: 141.

65 Royce 1885: 145.

66 Royce 1885: 147.

67 Royce 1885: 148.

68 Royce 1885: 158.

69 Royce 1885: 161.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Royce 1885: 175.

72 Royce 1885: 194–195.

73 Royce 1885: 222.

74 Royce 1885: 321.

75 Royce 1885: 392.

76 Royce 1885: 399.

77 Royce 1885: 401–402.

78 Royce's absolute idealism is then an answer to Deely (2001: 636–637) for how and why “the study of signs and the action of signs, semiotics, is *eo ipso* the study of the possibility of being mistaken.”

79 Royce 1885: 407.

80 Royce 1885: 416.

81 Royce 1885: 423.

82 Royce 1885: 425.