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# Absolute-Brahma: Royce and the Upanishads

Joshua M. Hall

*While acknowledging a certain affinity between his own thought and the Vedanta concept of a world-soul or universal spirit, Josiah Royce nevertheless locates this concept primarily in what he terms the Second Conception of Being—Mysticism. In his early magnum opus, The World and the Individual (1990. New York, NY: Macmillan), Royce utilizes aspects of the Upanishads in order to flesh out his picture of the mystical understanding of and relationship to being. My primary concern in the present investigation is to introduce some nuance into Royce's conception of Indian thought, which may then serve to suggest similar possibilities for nuance for Royce's conception of the Absolute. I will attempt to do in two primary ways: first, I will consider Royce's use of Indian thought via the Upanishads in explicating his second historical conception of Being. I will then turn briefly to Emerson's poem 'Brahma' and the Bhagavad Gita to see if a certain reversal that occurs in both places problematizes Royce's depiction of the universal spirit in Indian thought as well as opens up new possibilities for Royce's own Absolute.*

Josiah Royce's most extended treatment of Indian thought, specifically Advaita Vedanta, occurs in Lecture IV of *The World and the Individual*, entitled 'The Unity of Being, and the Mystical Interpretation' (Royce, 1900, p. 140).<sup>1</sup> Before examining this lecture more closely, it will be useful to address briefly the larger theoretical structure of the work—which means the four historical conceptions of being according to Royce.<sup>2</sup> The first historical conception of being for Royce is what he terms Realism, a common-sense dualism in which all entities in the world are understood to be completely independent of any ideas about those entities. Royce understands this perspective to be self-destructive, because if ideas and beings are really completely independent, then we can have no knowledge of things whatsoever. This conception Royce links to Parmenides, and 'the Eleatic school' in general (Royce, 1900, p. 157).

The second historical conception of being, Mysticism, of which Advaita thought is an example for Royce, contends that all of reality is essentially united. Ideas and beings only appear to be distinct, but are in fact one continuous whole. This conception is unsatisfactory for Royce because that which is understood as the Whole, One, or Absolute in this conception—or so he contends—turns out to be

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Correspondence to: Joshua M. Hall, Core Text Program, Samford University, 800 Lakeshore Drive, Homewood, AL 35229, USA. Email: [jmaloy.hall@gmail.com](mailto:jmaloy.hall@gmail.com)

simply an abstraction away from every possible characteristic whatsoever, until one is left with a pure empty nothingness.

The third historical conception of being, Critical Rationalism, is concerned with Validity, and can be thought of as a Pragmatist perspective. Being is '[w]hat is, gives warrant to our ideas, makes them true, and enables us to define determinate, or valid, possible experiences' (Royce, 1900, p. 266). It is important to note that Royce does not deny this claim of Critical Rationalism, remarking that, 'if it is not the final truth, it is, unquestionably, as far as it goes, true' (p. 266). But if *being* is that which makes our ideas true, then what is one to make of the fact that our ideas are always incomplete and fragmentary, and that our meanings are never fully individuated and fulfilled?

This is where the fourth conception of being comes in—Absolute Idealism. What Absolute Idealism offers is an uppercase Truth, a truth weightier than the pragmatic truth of William James. It asserts an absolute consciousness that contains all of our finite consciousnesses and sees to it that the intentions or meanings of those finite consciousnesses are fulfilled in a complete and completely individual way. It has all of the breadth of knowledge (omniscience), the scope of knowledge (perceiving the entirety of time as one moment), and the precision of knowledge (each idea corresponding perfectly and individually to its being), that we, as finite beings, lack. Royce defines this fourth conception of being as follows: 'What is, or what is real, is as such the complete embodiment, in individual form and in final fulfillment, of the internal meaning of finite ideas' (Royce, 1885, p. 339).

Having briefly considered these four historical conceptions, I now return to the second one, the conception of which Hindu thought is exemplary according to Royce—mysticism. 'Historically', writes Royce, 'Mysticism first appears in India. Its early history is recorded in the *Upanishads*'. Royce describes the *Upanishads* as 'half philosophical, half dogmatic treatises, compounded in a singular fashion of folklore, of legend, of edifying homily, and of reflective speculation...' (Royce, 1900, p. 156) As to his usage of these texts for his investigation of the second historical conception of being, Royce writes the following:

I venture no independent opinion as to the composition and chronology of these early Hindoo works. I take as simply as possible what upon their face they seem to contain. I read as well as I can Deussen's systematic interpretation of their general sense; and then, as I try to restate this sense in my own way, I find, amidst all the numerous doctrinal varieties of these various Hindoo Scriptures, this main thought concerning the ultimate definition of Being. (p. 156)

Royce' humility with regard to his understanding of the *Upanishads* is admirable. Nevertheless, a certain amount of concern seems justified insofar as Royce merely takes the texts 'upon their face' and relies on another scholar for a 'systematic interpretation', that is then refracted a second time through the lens of Royce's own thought.

Royce also admits that, in turning to these texts, he is in search of one abstract idea, that of the definition of Being. This singularity of focus could, it seems, have hindered

Royce in developing a nuanced analysis of the *Upanishads* and thereby of Indian thought in general. In fairness to Royce, however, a nuanced analysis of Indian thought was never his goal in *The World and the Individual*. Nevertheless, it will be helpful for the reader to keep in mind Royce's somewhat oversimplified discussion of the *Upanishads* in what follows.

'What is', writes Royce, 'is at all events somehow One. This thought came early to the Hindoo religious mind' (Royce, 1900, p. 156). Royce further notes that, 'this unity of Being is not so much a matter of argument as it is an object of intuition'. However, this unity is not static. On the contrary, '[T]he Hindoo is animistic. His world is all alive'. This dynamism is also central to Royce's own conception of the unity of being, of the Absolute, which he sometimes refers to as 'Life' or as 'Absolute Experience'. He also observes that, '[t]he Hindoo seer of the period of the *Upanishads* is keenly and reflectively self-conscious' (p. 157). Linking this focus on self-consciousness to the Western idealism of his own time, Royce remarks that, 'The axiom which our European idealists often state in the form: *No object without a subject*, is therefore always, in one shape or another, upon the Hindoo's lips' (p. 158).

One of the most concise and comprehensive treatments of these issues in Royce's work can be found in the following passage:

The world is One—why? *Because I feel it as one*. What then is its oneness? *My own oneness?* And who am I? I am Brahman; I myself, in my inmost heart, in my Soul, am the world-principle, the All. In this form the Hindoo's Monism becomes at once a subjective Idealism; and this subjective Idealism often appears almost in the epistemological form in which that doctrine has so often been discussed, of late, among ourselves. (Royce, 1900, p. 158)

One can see here why Royce would feel a certain kinship with Vedanta, a felt kinship made evident by Royce's frequent quotations of key Vedanta phrases such as '*That art thou*', and of lines from Emerson's poems 'Brahma'.

Royce turns next in this chapter to a specific group of passages from the *Upanishads*, both for a closer textual analysis and also to provide support for the general claims he has made. The majority of Royce's quotations come from the Upanishad entitled 'Chandogya', one of the 10 out of the 108 extant *Upanishads* determined to be 'authentic and authoritative' by the seventh century Vedanta scholar Shankara (p. x). Each Upanishad (literally, 'sitting near devotedly') constitutes the 'Knowledge' half of the four Vedas (as opposed to the 'Work' half)—the 'oldest scriptures of India, and the most important' (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. ix).

The majority of the text of the 'Chandogya' Upanishad consists of a sort of genealogy of four generations of religious seekers. What is sought by each of these individuals is the truth of the fundamental identity of the *Atman* [individual soul, one's self or spirit] and *Brahma* [the world-soul, the fundamental reality.]<sup>3</sup> The first seeker in the genealogy is taught this truth by elemental forces and several animals while he is tending to a herd of cattle. The first seeker's student is later taught this same truth by a campfire, while his teacher has left on a long journey. The seekers in the final two narratives in this section are taught personally, the first by his father, the

second by a teacher. It is the third narrative, of the father and son, which Royce focuses on in his analysis.

Royce's first concern in this passage is with the brief cosmology given by the father in the story, Uddalaka, to his son, Svetaketu. Of particular importance is the fact that Uddalaka rejects the position of 'some' that 'in the beginning there was non-existence only, and that out of that the universe was born' (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 68). In its place, Uddalaka suggests the following:

in the beginning there was Existence alone—One only, without a second. He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being. All that is has its essence in him alone. Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self [*Atman*]. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU. (pp. 68–69)

In summarizing this and similar passages, Royce remarks that, 'this One Being... somehow mysteriously resolves to become many' (Royce, 1900, p. 161). In his skepticism regarding this explanation, Royce writes, 'It is one thing to teach the tradition about how, in Nature, the Many came from the One. It is another thing to ask how the Many, now that they appear, are related to the One' (p. 161). Thus far, Royce's comments seem uncontroversial and even purely descriptive. He then goes on, however, to make a claim beyond mere description, though it is still couched in descriptive terms.

'As Uddalaka dwells upon this mysterious relation', writes Royce, 'he soon is led to explain that the Many are essentially illusory' (Royce, 1900, p. 161). However, nowhere in the roughly three and a half pages of the text that contain this father-son narrative is this explanation given. Furthermore, in Uddalaka's cosmology (which Royce takes to be the mythological husk that merely contains the philosophical kernel) the One 'projected the universe', and then 'proceeded to enter into every being'. The text does not explicitly suggest that this cosmological aspect, with its assertion of phenomenal beings, was meant by the teacher to be discarded after the identity of soul and world-soul had been realized by the student. Nor does it seem an obvious implication. On the contrary, in fact, Brahman is presented as the 'subtle essence' of *all things*—things that it seems must have at least sufficient reality to house the being of Brahman that 'proceeded into them' in some way.

Royce then goes on to defend this claim about the illusory existence of the Many by citing Uddalaka's analogy of how the sap of various trees blends anonymously together to form honey. Just as no part of the honey, Uddalaka explains, can speak up and say, 'I came from that tree!' so no soul can ultimately say, 'I came from that person!' (p. 164). But for Royce, not only is there no individuality *after* the mixture into the common substance—be it honey or Brahman—but there was also never any individuality *to begin with*, there were no real distinctions. Royce (1900) explains this as follows:

There was and is only the Knower. The disciple was the Knower. It was he who blindly resolved, 'Let me become many'. He shall now, in a final intuition, grasp the

immediate fact that he is, and eternally was, but One. The parable of the honey and juices is at once to be interpreted in this form. (p. 164)

In the text, however, the claim seems less bold, namely that all ‘creatures, *when* they are merged in that one Existence, whether in dreamless sleep or in death, know nothing of their past or present state, because of the ignorance enveloping them—know not that they are merged in him and that from him they came’ (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 69, emphasis added). Note here the word *when*. *When they are merged in the One*—when and therefore not necessarily always. After all, if there are no things, then what is there to be merged, what is there to have come from the One? In other words, perhaps it is the case that that having a fundamental identity (as in the case of all physical entities being composed of atoms) might not preclude real and significant distinctions among those entities. All things are essentially the One, Brahman, and this is made evident in death and in sleep, for example, but perhaps these things are still meaningfully separate things at a different level of analysis, a different level of reality.

One might also ask of Royce’s interpretation of this narrative the following question: why is it *the disciple* that resolved—and why ‘blindly’—to ‘become many’? According to the cosmology of the Chandogya Upanishad, this resolution took place in the beginning, before the creation of the many—a many of which the disciple is an example—as a resolution made by the ‘Existence’. Of course, insofar as the disciple is a Self, and the Self is fundamentally the same Knower that is called Brahman, then it is appropriate to say that the disciple made the resolution. Why substitute, however, a name derived from the multiplicity of phenomenal existence to describe an agent supposedly acting before the creation of said phenomenal existence?

Royce would likely respond that this substitution could only be considered even potentially problematic if one grants to the cosmology as much weight as one grants to the philosophical ideas expressed, a move that Royce is not willing to make. The ‘allegorical and essentially exoteric cosmology’, he asserts, ‘passes over into that subjective idealism upon which the whole doctrine finally depends’ (Royce, 1900, p. 165).

One might legitimately inquire, though, as to whether there is any legitimate basis (in Royce’s admittedly limited and largely secondary knowledge of the *Upanishads*) for Royce to assume that the cosmology of the *Upanishads* is ‘essentially exoteric’ (p. 165) or that the doctrine of idealism that he distills from the text can or should function without its broader context in Vedic thought. Royce’s response to this line of questioning is to refer the reader to other passages in the *Upanishads* ‘in which the teacher starts with an explicit idealism’ (Royce, 1900, p. 166). But does the absence of the mythological envelope in certain passages of the *Upanishads* justify ignoring the mythological content in other passages? I will have to leave this as a question here.

Royce further notes that since the truth of the fundamental nature of reality is characteristically closest to us ‘when we are closest to dreamless slumber... The Absolute, then, although the Knower, must be in truth Unconscious’ (Royce, 1900, p. 168). The *Upanishads*, however, declare repeatedly that Brahman’s ‘true nature is

pure consciousness' (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 60). Although one could of course argue, in Royce's defense, that this concept of a conscious Knower can be shown to be incoherent, or that it is equivalent to describing unconsciousness, the assertions of the text to the contrary nonetheless merit noting. Moreover, it is not obvious that Royce's move from (1) the state of an individual human being coming closer to knowing the full reality as being an unconscious state, to (2) the fundamental reality/knower being essentially unconscious, is warranted. I will put this issue aside here, however, and simply consider the ramification that this conclusion—namely, that ultimate reality is unconscious—has for Royce.

'If this is so', Royce remarks, in what proves to be his most serious criticism not only of Hindu thought but of Mysticism in general, 'wherein does the Absolute Being differ from pure Nothing?' Royce states the paradox of a conscious Absolute concisely when he writes: 'all dualism, involving the reality of objects outside the Knower, is illusory, while all consciousness implies just such dualism' (Royce, 1900, p. 170). Royce acknowledges that 'The seers of the *Upanishads* are fully alive to this problem', and he references two characters in the *Upanishads* who express exactly this concern. How Royce's own conception of the Absolute escapes this paradox is another interesting question.

Royce then acknowledges the solution to this problem in the *Upanishads*—'The Absolute is the very Opposite of a mere Nothing. For it is fulfillment, attainment, peace, the goal of life, the object of desire, the end of knowledge' (Royce, 1900, pp. 170–171). The One only appears as nothingness, he suggests, because '*That is a part of our very illusion itself*' (p. 171). Royce describes this solution as an employment of a 'contrast-effect', similar to a type of negative theology. One simply abstracts away each definite characteristic imaginable, until that which is left in the unspoken, undefined space must be the Ultimate, as in the case of Anselm's so-called ontological proof for the existence of God (in which God is not conceptually defined, but rather gestured toward at the limit of conceptuality). 'In the very contrast of the finite with the ineffable', Royce writes, 'this mysticism lives' (p. 172). The main 'theoretical weapon' of both the *Upanishads* and of Mysticism in general, with which to defend against its critics, according to Royce, 'is some *reductio ad absurdum* of Realism' (p. 176). Royce obviously takes this strategy seriously, as it is what he himself uses in order to depart from Realism, the first historical conception of being, and what propels him onward to the third conception of being. And yet, Royce (1900) is not willing to remain with the *Upanishads* and Mysticism:

I have said, more than once, that the essence of Mysticism lies not in the definition of the subject to which you attribute Being, but in the predicate Being itself. This predicate in case of Mysticism is such that, as soon as you apply it, the subject indeed loses all finite outlines, lapses into pure immediacy, quenches thought, becomes ineffable, satisfies even by turning into what ordinary Realism would call a mere naught. (p. 177)

For once, Royce seems to side to a certain degree with Realism, with his verdict that what Mysticism aspires to is indeed after all only a nothingness. This claim, though,

that the ultimate reality is ultimately nothing, is one to which Mysticism, in the case of the *Upanishads* at least, is capable of responding, and it is just such a response that I will now attempt on its behalf. In this effort, my guiding question will be the following: Is Royce perhaps addressing only one of the two faces of Advaita thought, the pure emptiness of Brahma regarded in that aspect, and in doing so, is he neglecting the other face, the reality of the multiplicity of the phenomenal world inhabited by Brahman?

In *The Upanishads* (2002), which contain a wide variety of style and content, Brahman is at times referred to as ‘The Uncaused Cause’, reminiscent of Aristotle’s Prime Mover god (p. 20). Brahman is also described as ‘the one light that gives light to all. He shining, everything shines’, a description reminiscent (perhaps due to an indirect influence) of Heidegger’s conception of the being of beings. Brahman is also described in the *Upanishads* as existing differently in different realms or dimensions of reality, such as ‘in one’s own soul’, ‘in the heaven of Brahman’, ‘in the world of the fathers’, and ‘in the world of the angels’ (pp. 23–24). The text also refers to Brahman as the ‘first-born’ of all being (p. 43). Altogether, these various and colorful descriptions seem to retrace the very same ‘finite outlines’ that Royce finds to be stripped away from all concrete existence whenever Hindu thought attempts to conceptualize the ultimate reality.

A more complex cosmology than the one referenced by Royce can be found in the Upanishad entitled ‘Prasna’, which describes ‘the Lord of beings’ as he ‘meditated and produced Prana, the primal energy, and Rayi, the giver of form, desiring that they, male and female, should in manifold ways produce creatures for him’ (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 35). In this cosmology, the Absolute Spirit seems more like a creator god than an empty Reality, though of course Royce would challenge the relevance of this passage insofar as it is mythological.

Also connected to the cosmologies of the *Upanishads* is the sacred syllable OM (or AUM), which is identified with Brahman and with creation. ‘The syllable OM, which is the imperishable Brahman, is the universe’ (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 50). OM also sheds light on the relation of seeker to ultimate reality. ‘OM is the bow, the arrow is the individual being, and Brahman is the target. With a tranquil heart, take aim. Lose thyself in him, even as the arrow is lost in the target’ (p. 46). Understanding ultimate reality through this syllable also provides an interesting instance of the many in the one: ‘This syllable, though indivisible, consists of three letters A-U-M’ (p. 51).

As if in response to claims such as Royce’s in *Studies of Good and Evil* that ‘it chanced, by some of accident of race-development, that the Hindoo, from an early period of his evolution, did not love life’, the opening remarks of the ‘Isha’ Upanishad assert that ‘renunciation is renunciation of the ego, of selfishness—not of life’ (Royce, 1898, p. 353; *The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 26). Within this Upanishad, the interesting claim is made that ‘To darkness are they doomed who worship only the body’, but ‘to greater darkness they who worship only the spirit’ (p. 28). One must therefore, as this passage shows, be cautious in construing Advaita thought as being a denial of life and the body and an absolute valorization of the spirit, which is relevant in particular for



Royce's claim about the nothingness at the center of Indian thought (since physicality and the body are usually considered opposites of nothingness).

The body of a human being is described in the *Upanishads* as being 'composed of the essence of food', since from 'food are born all creatures' (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 55). Food, in turn, comes from vegetation, which comes from earth, which comes from water, which comes from air, which comes from ether, which comes from the Self, who came from Brahman. Here, one finds a third sort of creation story, and again the physical is described as chronologically descendent from a creator Spirit. Moreover, this physicality is central for human beings, not just an accident of their souls. 'The earth is honey for all beings', the text states later, 'and all beings are honey for this earth' (p. 89). Again the poetic physicality is striking. And in yet another passage suggestive of physicality, the Self 'sends out worlds' and 'guardians of these worlds', and then, wishing to be a part of its creation, 'opening the center of their [the guardians', that is, humans'] skulls, he entered' (p. 62).

The most significant response that can be offered by the *Upanishads* to Royce's concern about the nothingness of Brahman, however, takes a linguistic form. Royce notes in the quote above that 'the essence of Mysticism lies not in the definition of the subject to which you attribute Being, but in the predicate Being itself'. And it is true that most often in the *Upanishads*, linguistically speaking, Brahma appears as the predicate of a sentence. Or, to put it differently, Brahman is rarely presented in the *Upanishads* as the subject of a sentence to which concrete characteristics are attributed. 'That art thou' (p. 70), says Uddalaka to Svetaketu. You are that. 'You' or 'thou' here is a phenomenon in the phenomenal world, a human being, in this case Svetaketu, and 'that' is Brahma, Absolute Spirit, ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is here being predicated of Svetaketu. He is a phenomenon that is actually the entirety of reality, although in this negative, abstract, empty sense.

In a few brief passages, however, a human speaker in the *Upanishads* takes on the voice of Brahma itself and speaks as Brahma: 'I am that Self! I am life immortal! I overcome the world—I who am endowed with golden effulgence! Those who know me achieve Reality' (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 59). In this passage, Brahma is the subject of the each of the sentences, and attributes are being predicated of it (rather than vice versa). With this reversal, it is no longer the case that a concrete, positive phenomenon has empty, abstract Reality predicated of it; instead, Reality has various concrete, positive phenomena predicated of it. And in this way, the ultimate reality, the Absolute Spirit, becomes something more than empty and abstract. It becomes more concrete, and this difference is striking.

This reversal also occurs in an untitled poem in the *Upanishad* entitled 'Svetasvatara':

Maya [earth, the world of illusion] is thy divine consort—  
 Wedded to thee [Brahman/Atman].  
 Thou art her master, her ruler.  
 Red, white, and black is she,  
 Each color a guna.<sup>4</sup>  
 Many are her children—

The rivers, the mountains,  
 Flower, stone, and tree,  
 Beast, bird, and man—  
 In every way like herself.  
 Thou [Brahman/Atman], spirit in flesh,  
 Forgetting what thou art,  
 Unitest with Maya—  
 But only for a season.  
 Parting from her at last,  
 Thou regainest thyself. (p. 124)

Here Brahman is a character in a narrative, a love story even. It is interesting, however, that Brahman only ‘regainest’ himself when he again departs from the world of phenomena and concreteness symbolized by the person of Maya.

This reversal of the trend Royce notes in the *Upanishads*, which is only rarely apparent in the *Upanishads* themselves, is much more pronounced in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous poem ‘Brahma’, a text which is based not only on the *Upanishads*, but also on the later sacred text entitled the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Translated literally, the name of this epic poem can be rendered in English as the ‘Song of the Lord’, and in the context of the current discussion, I would suggest noting the ambiguity (in the English translation) of the prepositional phrase ‘of the Lord’, the genitive interpretation of which would entail that the ‘the Lord’ Brahman is himself singing the song (rather than the song being merely about him, as in the dative interpretation considered alone).

The *Bhagavad-Gita* (hereafter, *Gita*) is the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*, one of two epic poetry cycles in Hindu literature written after the *Upanishads* (Miller, 1986, pp. 1–2). The *Gita* takes the form of a dialogue between a war hero named Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. The latter is ultimately revealed to be an avatar or incarnation of the god Vishnu, one of the deities most often associated with Brahma or Absolute Spirit in Hinduism. Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as Brahma and describes and demonstrates his powers at great length.

In many ways, insofar as Royce quotes this poem by Emerson at least five times in his major works, and insofar as the poem draws on both the *Upanishads* and the *Gita*, the poem can be thought of as a sort of locus where all the strands of my own investigation here converge.

If the red slayer thinks he slays,  
 Or if the slain think he is slain,  
 They know not well the subtle ways  
 I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;  
 Shadow and sunlight are the same,  
 The vanished gods to me appear;  
 And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;  
 When me they fly, I am the wings;  
 I am the doubter and the doubt,  
 And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,  
 And pine in vain the sacred Seven,  
 But thou, meek lover of the good!  
 Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (Emerson, 2000, p. 732)

The first two lines are a quotation from the 'Katha' Upanishad, spoken in that text by the 'King of Death' to a Brahmin (a Vedic priest) wishing to know about God (Brahman) (*The Upanishads*, 2002, p. 18). These words are also repeated in the *Gita*, spoken by Krishna to Arjuna (Miller, 1986, p. 32).

The identification of Brahman with a 'hymn' also occurs in the *Gita*, as a part of several poetic passages that describe how Brahman is in and is all things (Miller, 1986, p. 85). The 'sacred Seven' is probably a reference to 'The seven ancient great sages' referenced in the *Gita* (p. 85). And the line 'And one to me are shame and fame' also derives from two similar lines in the *Gita*, describing the enlightened individual as 'the same/to foe and friend, to blame and praise./The same in honor and disgrace' (p. 124). The understanding of Brahman as an 'abode' or safe place or home is also a recurring issue in the *Gita*.

The most significant point about the poem for my purposes here is that Brahman, the Hindu god most closely associated with Brahma (Absolute Spirit), is both the subject and the speaker of the poem. Brahma describes itself using references to the phenomenal world, and uses predicates to attribute phenomenal qualities to itself. This format stands in contrast to what I observed in the majority of the *Upanishads*, in which different speakers refer to Brahma, praise Brahma, describe it, etc., but in which, for the most part, Brahma does not appear as a speaker.

This reversal, in which Brahma appears as the subject of statements to which attributes are predicated, as opposed to being the universal predicate—Being—of all subjects, is exactly what is happening in Emerson's poem. In the poem, Brahma moves in the world, keeping and passing and turning. Brahma describes how the world appears to it, its indifference to 'shadow and sunlight', to 'shame and fame'. Various deities appear before Brahma as before a supreme ruler. And perhaps most interestingly, Brahma descends to even so humble a level as to be the metaphorical wings of a runaway, to be not only the human being who doubts Brahma, but also the doubt about Brahma itself. And on the opposite end of the faith spectrum, to be the very hymn sung by a priest about Brahma. The poem finishes with a summons by Brahma for a face-to-face encounter between Brahma as speaker and Brahma as the human being that is being addressed in the poem.

I find this structure of Brahma speaking for itself throughout the *Gita*. I do not have the space to examine the text of the *Gita* closely here, but the main point is that Brahma again has the place of a speaker, who predicates attributes of himself, thus adding positive, constructive, phenomenal aspects to what otherwise seems an abstract, empty concept of ultimate reality.

In closing, and in returning to Royce, I wish to leave the reader with two groups of questions. First, if Vedanta could be shown to conceive of its world-soul as more nuanced and complex than a mere 'Nothing' as Royce describes it, how would this affect the

position of Vedanta thought within Mysticism and the position of Mysticism with regard to the four historical conceptions of Being? I have indicated that Royce has sympathy for Mysticism, and departs from principally because of the nothingness he sees at its center. Would Royce no longer consider Indian thought construed in this more complex way as being an example of Mysticism? Would he consider it instead a full-fledged example of Absolute Idealism like his own Absolute? Or, if Advaita thought were still classified as part of the second historical conception of Being, would the move to Critical Rationalism away from Mysticism have to be rethought?

Secondly, what might be gained for Royce's thought if one were to give the Absolute an opportunity to speak, to be the subject of predicates instead of only the final predicate of all subjects? What might this reversal mean for Royce's thought? Straightforward and comprehensive definitions of the Absolute are surprisingly rare in Royce's writings, especially given the centrality of the concept of the Absolute to his thought. And when Royce does describe the Absolute, he usually describes it as that which comprehends finite consciousnesses, which fulfills our meanings and purposes. He does not, by contrast, seem to talk about the Absolute as the subject of which concrete attributes can be predicated. The Absolute does not appear as a flower, or as the composition of a symphony, in the way in which the Vedic Absolute does in Emerson's 'Brahma' and the *Gita*.

Might attributions of this type make Royce's Absolute seem less remote, more intimate, more a part of the consciousnesses of which it is the observer and consummation? Would it do an injustice to Royce's thought to describe the Absolute in this way? Should Royce's Absolute remain the predicate of every subject, the end of every beginning, the fulfillment of every meaning, and not a meaning engaged as meaning itself? In its more evolutionary, developmental and community-linked moments, especially in the later writings, Royce's Absolute seems capable of taking on a large degree of concreteness. Insofar as it cannot, finally, perhaps we would do better to either supplement Royce's thought with Advaita thought, or simply turn to Advaita thought in its place.

## Notes

- [1] It is worth noting, however, that other schools of Indian thought, including Samkhya, played important roles in Royce's conceptions of Being.
- [2] For interesting biographical details of Royce's engagement with Indian thought, see Clendenning (1999) and Oppenheim (2007). And for more philosophical accounts of this engagement, see Leidecker (1931), Riepe (1967), and Singh (1973). For good general introductions to *The World and the Individual*, see Marcel (1956), Clendenning (1999), and Cesarz (2012).
- [3] The words Brahma and Brahman are sometimes used in different Vedanta texts to describe the same thing: the absolute spirit or ultimate reality. In other places, Brahman signifies this, while Brahma refers to a specific deity in the Hindu pantheon. In the current investigation, I will use the terms interchangeably unless otherwise noted.
- [4] The gunas in Vedanta thought are the three fibers of the phenomenal world, and can be thought of as a kind of matter, but without the materialistic connotations of the word.

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