THE ABSOLUTE IS NOT "GOD"

Randall Auxier
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
University of Wrocław
personalist61@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the question "what, for Royce, is Absolute pragmatism?" I break this down into a discussion of the idea of the Absolute, as related to pragmatism?" And "what is pragmatism, relative to Royce's Absolute?" I focus on a period in Royce's development from 1895 until 1906, in particular with his reworking of the idea of the Absolute and the idea of God during that period. The reason for this span is that these are the "Absolute pragmatism years." After 1907, "pragmatism" became whatever James said it was. Royce backed away from the term. Before 1907, and after Peirce introduced the term (1877), there was a lively discussion as to what pragmatism was, how the pragmatic maxim applied and to what. Royce was certainly a participant in this discussion, and an important contributor to the formation of the ideas. It is often repeated that James kidnapped "pragmatism" from Peirce, and Peirce objected. In no way did Royce concede to James any pre-eminence regarding the configuration of pragmatism until after 1907, when the cause became hopeless. Never did Royce and James come close to agreeing about what pragmatism is/was. But after 1907, with the publication and wide dissemination of James's *Pragmatism*, Royce pretty much gave up the struggle for the meaning of the word. I will examine this period in part to show that James's horror of the Absolute and his ambivalence about God are in surprising ways mirror images (rather than accurate descriptions) of what Royce was doing with pragmatism. This effort supplements Scott Pratt's resuscitation of Absolute pragmatism by adding some historical nuance that may help readers connect Pratt's recommendations with Royce. I also counterbalance some of what Kevin Harrelson says about the pro-empire, new Zionist Royce. I do not say that Royce's views are unproblematic, but I do not think some eschatological Kingdom of Heaven is what Absolute pragmatism seeks. Arguing that the Absolute is not "God," even if it is God (in a new sense) removes concern about a new Zion and a Christian empire.

Keywords: Royce, Absolute, God, pragmatism, theology

Introduction

The Augustus Graham Lectures (January-March, 1896) were delivered during a crucial moment both in Royce's own intellectual development and at a turning point in the history of American Philosophy.[1] These five lectures remain to us substantially complete but have not attracted much scholarly attention before now. One part of these lectures, the final sections of the fifth lecture, was published in 1897 under the title "The Problem of Job,"[2] but the rest remained unpublished and has been very little studied. "The Problem of Job" has attracted quite a bit of attention, for several reasons. It is one of the earliest and most poignant expressions of what came to be called "theistic finitism," which is the idea that God is limited in some way, usually with regard to power, and thus *cannot* prevent the evil in the world –not just that God does not do it for the sake of freedom, but rather cannot prevent moral or natural evil. Such a God suffers with us and sustains the order and value of the universe, in part through that suffering. Usually finitists argue that God eventually overcomes the evil to the extent it can be surpassed.[3] This view gives up on the traditional conception of God, and thus isn't really a theodicy. It is an accommodation to the modern temper, in the sense that the traditional God of religion is no longer believable to people living in an age of science. In 1906 in his Baltimore Lectures, which were published in 1919 as *Lectures on Modern Idealism*,[4] Royce explains what he means by "Absolute pragmatism," and responds to the inadequacy of other pragmatist proposals, especially the views of James. These "bookends" of 1896 and 1906 are the best material for evaluating the historical case.

God and the Absolute

Important for our purposes is that from 1896 forward, this limited being is "God" for Royce. I place the term in

[1] The Graham Lectures are available online at https://csub.app.box.com/s/svtr6mdq0qv5594l8ufz61p9c744ymi6, accessed October 4, 2025. All citations are from this site.
[2] Royce, "The Problem of Job," The New World, vol. 6 (1897) pp. 261-281. This is easily accessible here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/y78ak7tkt4lr482kjmzrmirdltdbhpd3, accessed October 4, 2025.
[3] A classic example of two theistic finitists arguing dialectically about how this position should be filled out is found in *God, Process, and Persons: The Philosophical Correspondence of Charles Hartshorne and Edgar Sheffield Brightman, 1922-1945*, eds. R.E. Auxier and M.Y. Davies (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000).
[4] Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919).

scare quotes because it denotes the historical, Western conception of God, but revised to suit the *theological* rather than philosophical needs of human beings who inhabit a greatly changed world. The traditional God, who would have been the same as the Absolute, is less and less believable to the educated people of 1896. Thus, we now have "God," who is a personal being, a companion, a paraclete, a fellow sufferer who understands more than we do. This deity is believable but limited in power. This is the "God" we can appeal to, and who, for example, helps us transform our grief into sorrow.[5]

A second reason that "The Problem of Job" attracted attention is due to its seeming departure from Royce's doctrine of the Absolute. Most readers of Royce's two philosophy books prior to 1896 had concluded that Royce was an absolutist in about the same sense as Hegel or Bradley, and that Royce's Absolute was supposed to be God, as in the God of religion.[6] If this God was now *finite* in some important sense, that would be a surprise to many, and difficult to reconcile with the Absolute God they associated with Royce. Royce argued in 1906 (The Baltimore Lectures) that the change in how the West viewed God started with Kant and gradually spread to the educated public. God became a philosophical idea, with Kant, and the personal being of traditional Western religion went into retreat.[7]

Royce was still forming his understanding of how Kant's idea of God had changed everything in 1896. He had published a lengthy and popular book about the development of idealism in 1892 *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* [SMP],[8] but that book turned out to be less specific about the idea of God than was needed by those who wondered what would become of God in their time (and beyond). Royce had traveled back home to Berkeley in 1895 and was there confronted with a public debate for which he was not really prepared. He hadn't knowingly signed on for such a show, but he carried through reluctantly. Two prominent philosophers, along with Royce's own former mentor, challenged his various "doctrines" about God. The most important challenge, by George Holmes Howison, was that Royce's absolutism destroyed the place of the individual in the cosmos and in the community. It had evidently never occurred to Royce that his doctrine of the Absolute could be read that way, since in his own mind he had never advocated the kind of absolutism that could have that effect.[9]

This spurred an evolution in Royce's thinking[10] which culminated in *The World and the Individual*, his Gifford Lectures (1899, 1900), in which his aim was to make out

[5] The poignant argument of the chapter entitled "The Religious Mission of Sorrow" (1912) suggests that grief and sorrow are two different ways of seeing the tragedies of the world. The former wishes the world away so that the grief will abate; the second, the sorrow, embraces the world as it is and idealizes the shared experiences we have now lost, such that we may still find value and even joy in them. The critical edition of this book is here: https://hrc.csub.edu/josiah-royce-edition/edition-volumes/ accessed October 4, 2025. It is easy to see that this "God" is not coming in an apocalyptic storm to judge the world or establish a millennial reign. His entire theological relation to us is different from traditional Western religions.

[6] Regarding this opinion, most of these readers followed the poorly informed opinion of William James, who lumped together a lot of different views he didn't like. His slipshod summary of absolutism is well summarized by Frank Oppenheim in *Reverence for the Relations of Life: Re-imagining Pragmatism via Josiah Royce's Interactions with Peirce, James, and Dewey* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 109-111. The current paper may be taken as a supplement to Oppenheim's effort at re-imagining pragmatism from Royce's point of view, embracing his whole account and adding to it.

[7] The Baltimore Lectures (1906) are accessible here, as edited and later published (1919): https://csub.app.box.com/s/1jkw1vudrfpzv6ovt4mgxc8kv66d7i2n, accessed October 4, 2025. It is important to remember that these lectures date to the year before James published *Pragmatism* (1907).

[8] This book is *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, which may be found here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/xaapr2slu5trxm0nvxiotpoyzka1nnnz, accessed October 4, 2025.

[9] Quite a lot has been written about this debate over the decades. My own summary, with notes to other interpretations, is in my book *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Chicago: Open Court, 2013), ch. 3. Hereafter cited as "TWP."

[10] In Oppenheim's interpretation of the genesis of Royce's thought, this moment is associated with Royce's "second maximal insight" into the relation of God and the world. This interpretation is offered in and then expanded in numerous writings. The most perspicacious summary I have found, for the curious reader is in Oppenheim's short book, *Royce's Voyage Down Under: A Journey of the Mind* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1980), pp. ix-xviii. I do not wholly subscribe to this interpretation of the development of Royce's thought, as three maximal insights, with lesser insights along the way. There is no denying its general accuracy of the framework, especially since it follows closely (too closely in my opinion) Royce's own narratives about himself. I think Oppenheim neglects continuities that make the "maximal insights" seem more transformational than the really were. I find evidence of all these "maximal insights" much earlier in Royce's published and unpublished writ-

the place of the individual in an idealistic philosophy. The published version of his 1895 Berkeley lecture[11] was the public beginning of this development, and indeed, whole pages were torn out of a copy of that publication and pasted into the Graham Lectures the next year. But Royce's host in Berkeley, Howison, had proposed publishing all of the lectures given in 1895, together as a volume. Royce, being somewhat unhappy about the proceedings, agreed only if he could add a "Supplementary Essay" to the published proceedings, clarifying his position. Howison agreed. Royce, realizing he had a lot of work to do on the issue of "individuals," went back through the whole history of philosophy tracing down the idea. He discovered that not much had been done with the idea, in metaphysics and logic, since the major debates of the High Middle Ages. Royce decided it was time to trace the idea from that time to his own time, and that is what he does in the first part of the lengthy Supplementary Essay, published in 1897 in the volume entitled *The Conception of God*.[12]

Thus in 1896, when the Graham Lectures were presented, Royce was in the midst of the research that yielded his view of God in *The Conception of God*. Howison (mis)used his position as editor to comment in the notes on various flaws in the *new* doctrine –not something we would normally countenance today. Royce read these notes and was untroubled by them. Ultimately Royce decided to "move on," as it were. By 1897, he had already staked out the difference between "God" (of religion and theology) and God as the philosophical Absolute. That epistolary exchange with Howison was occurring while the Graham Lectures were being drafted and delivered.[13]

It comes to this: at one level, historically speaking, we need to take very seriously what Royce says about God and the Absolute in the Graham Lectures, because he was exploring possible views, and we can see what he is doing, as well as imaginatively expand on paths not quite taken. In another sense we need to keep in mind that since the ideas were in transition, their mature forms are foreshadowed in 1896 but not asserted as settled doctrine.[14] They were still in transition in *The World and the Individual* (1899, 1901 [WI 1 & 2]), as Oppenheim argued (see below). The structure of WI1 mirrors the structure of the Graham Lectures (GL). Both begin with an exposition of three "historical" conceptions, but in GL, it is historical conceptions of God, versions of theism, while in WI1, it is historical conceptions of Being. The germ of the main dialectical arguments in WI1 are found in GL. Grasping this helps us understand the difference between the philosophical and the religious projects Royce was undertaking. They are closely related, but they are not the same.

Royce was reluctant to accept the invitation to provide the Graham Lectures because they were defined as concerning "The Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God as Manifested in His Works." Royce did not want to talk about this kind of God, but he did it anyway.[15] It was an opportunity to modify or correct the assumption that Royce's "God" was more or less interchangeable with his idea of the Absolute, which it isn't. In a way, the Absolute *is* God (philosophically), but in a way it definitely isn't God, it's "God." This inaccurate and widely held assump-

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ings. I have argued for greater continuity in TWP. I do not dispute Oppenheim's facts, only his emphasis of some over others and the way that emphasis leads to an overly easy abbreviation of interpretation that scholars have substituted for close study of the original sources.

[11] This was just a pamphlet put out by the Philosophy Student Union of the University of California (Berkeley) in 1895, following the so-called debate. It is available here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/51f86132imfacxcc0mlq4r8r0mfljwdf, accessed October 4, 2025.

[12] The full text is available here: https://csub.app.box.com/s/kok2atur9b02i01ol4eycwt06mc44jok, accessed October 4, 2025.

[13] I do not know whether Howison's letters survive, but Royce's letters make clear enough where matters stand. See *The Letters of Josiah Royce*, ed. John Clendenning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), letters to Howison 1895-1897 in that volume pp. 335-361.

[14] In two separate (as yet unpublished) studies I have focused on the scope and meaning of "theistic finitism" in Royce's philosophy, first, "Royce, Oppenheim, and Theistic Finitism," a keynote address read at the annual meeting of the Josiah Royce Society, Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH, April 3-6, 2014; second, "Royce's Philosophical Theology and Theistic Finitism," an invited public lecture for the Katholische Akademie in Berlin, e.V., Berlin, Germany, December 16, 2021 (presented F2F and online), with responses by Christoph Seibert and Christian Polke.

[15] See John Kaag, "The Place of 'The Problem of Job' in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 33:1 (2012): p. 36.

tion that the Absolute *is* God gave a religious sheen to the philosophical Absolute, and it has driven away many philosophers who want no God, and *therefore* no Absolute.

But Royce's Absolute is not "God," even if he sometimes used the word *God* to describe it (from a theistic point of view) along the way (which happened less and less as his vocabulary was refined). Never did Royce say or assert that one should take his arguments as anything except a case for the necessary hypothesis of the Absolute, *in philosophy*, as reason to *believe in* the "God" *of religion* –the historical object of faith for various religious traditions. Royce himself did not believe in the "God" but he understood that many fine people do. He was no enemy of the idea or those who believed it. As he points out in 1896, some of those religious traditions had a God closer to the Absolute, some further from it, but no religious tradition had a God that *was* the Absolute *of philosophy*. He explains in 1892 in SMP and again in 1906 that when God became the Absolute, after Kant, the God of theology was in trouble, because the Absolute is impersonal and the God of theism *cannot be* impersonal. By 1906, Royce sees this as the central tension of post-Kantian idealism.

Oppenheim has, fortunately, provided both a diachronic and a synchronic characterization of the Absolute in Royce. In terms of the development of this idea, Oppenheim says that this idea "traced a strikingly more diversified path [than James understood] in his [Royce's] intellectual development concerning the Absolute." (Oppenheim, *Reverence*, p. 110.) It is worth quoting Oppenheim at length, with edits: Beginning as a "decidedly skeptical critical empiricist," Royce found "a 'certain internal absoluteness' in the mental laws of Kant's system," but with reservations about the immutability of the categories. So the absolute begins as an *adjective* for Royce, modifying experience(s), and we will see that it retains this role to the end of his life. Next was an analysis of the possibility of "human errors" in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885 [RAP]) which "led him to his insight about the truth of an All-knower, an Absolute." (Oppenheim, *Reverence*, p. 110) This insight is what Oppenheim calls Royce's "first maximal insight," in his developmental narrative of three maximal insights. This one was also called Royce's "ethico-religious insight" and has been examined by a number of scholars.[16] This is the analysis that led Howison and others to question whether the individual was real for Royce.

Oppenheim continues, "by 1889, he had come to counterbalance this knowing side of the Absolute with its experiential and volitional sides." (ibid.) Here we find that the Absolute does more than know the answers when we make errors, but acts and wills in relation to those, and the idea of error becomes more a special case of the "fragmentariness" of experience. Royce had made this shift before the debate of 1895, which is one reason he complained that Howison and his guests were arguing with views that were out of date. Fragmentariness was the ontological fact of human experience, and error was only its epistemological sign. This really had to be Royce's view all along, but readers misunderstood his argument, which was intended to be "psychological" in his (expansive) sense of that term –the dialectic of belief and doubt, a sense of psychology he took from Peirce, and quite in contrast to James's way of using the word. Royce is following closely what Peirce says about doubt in the series of articles known as the *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*.[17] Thus, for Royce to be taken as having offered a *metaphysics* of the Absolute in RAP surprised him, since he developed that ontology later, after RAP but in SMP.[18]

Then Oppenheim says that "in 1896, his "second maximal insight" was into the socially constituted individual as an object of exclusive interest. Accordingly, Royce presented the Absolute as the most concrete of

[16] See Dwayne Tunstall's *Yes, but Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-religious Insight* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).
[17] This series of articles has been edited in light of its complex history by Cornelis De Waal, *Illustrations of the Logic of Science* (Chicago: Open Court, 2014).
[18] See Gary L. Cesarz, "A World of Difference: The Royce-Howison Debate on the Conception of God," in *The Personalist Forum*, 15:1 (spring 1999), 84–128.

individuals, the Individual of individuals, with the finite individuals depending for their reality upon a relation to the Absolute." (Oppenheim, pp. 110-111) This is the fellow-sufferer of "The Problem of Job," what I am calling "God." Significantly, "his seemingly static, All-knowing, Absolute Judge of 1885 had now become a processing reality that aimed at ever fuller perfection." (ibid.) I would disagree with this, except that Oppenheim says "seeming," since he knows that Royce never held the static view. Royce's Absolute had been a process all along. It was James who convinced gullible people of a poor interpretation of what Royce was saying, as Oppenheim richly documents.

In the Gifford Lectures, the finite experience is "but a fragment of an absolutely organized whole of experience, at once universal and individual called the Absolute." (ibid., Oppenheim is summarizing Clendenning's biography of Royce here,[19] p. 239) But from there Oppenheim skips to the 1908 version of the Absolute, which is "the universal conscious experience," and "the world spirit," and "the eternally true and constantly loyal Will of the universe with which all finite loyalists strive to conform their series of temporal deeds." (ibid.). Elsewhere I have given a general interpretation of how these versions of the Absolute stand, overall, at three levels: metaphysical, phenomenological, and psychological.[20] I read Royce's philosophy as more continuous than Oppenheim allows, and I do not see these developments as changes in his view so much as an unfolding and filling out of a view he always held. My analysis is, I think, more granular than Oppenheim's, but I do rely on his excellent and insightful work.

Much of what I am interested in developing here comes between the 1901 Absolute and the 1908 Absolute. After 1908, Oppenheim's narrative points out that Royce rarely spoke of the Absolute in the major works of 1912 (SRE) and 1913 (PoC). In 1912 he was emphasizing the irrevocability of human deeds as an experience *of* the Absolute, while the interpreter Spirit has a wider view than we have. By 1913, the term Absolute nearly disappeared from *The Problem of Christianity* (only three occurrences) although my understanding of why this happened seems to differ from Oppenheim's. He attributes this to Royce "Peircean insight" in which the "Universal Community of Interpretation" is doing the same work as the Absolute did earlier.

I do not concur with Oppenheim's interpretation here. I agree that it looks like God as the Absolute "goes away" in 1912, but only in the sense that "God" is no longer needed. "God" wasn't ever really needed by Royce. "God" was always a theological object of faith, and a faith he did not have from about the age of 11. That was his mother's "God," which he respected but did not share. Royce had encountered Spinoza at around that time, and even though he later cringed to think he had believed he *understood* Spinoza at that tender age, he left "God" behind and never felt it as a loss. He just wasn't very inclined to church, much to his mother's disappointment. But I think the difference between theology, which leaves "God" intact (as in the Graham lectures and "The Problem of Job"), is being confused with the destiny of the Absolute, which is still in play in 1912-1913, and indeed is defended in the 1915 *Metaphysics*, and distinguished from the "God" of religion.[21]

Oppenheim says Royce "avoided the term 'Absolute' using instead terms like 'Universal Community of Interpretation' and 'Interpreter Spirit' and calling the entire world 'the process and life of the Spirit and of the Community.'" (Oppenheim, p. 111). I don't regard the terminology in PoC to be indicative of a change in Royce's view,

[19] John Clendenning, *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce,* 2nd ed. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).
[20] See TWP, chs. 5-6.

[21] Josiah Royce, *Metaphysics: His Philosophy 9 Course of 1915–1916, as Stenographically Recorded by Ralph W. Brown and Complemented by Notes from Byron F. Underwood*, eds. William Ernest Hocking, Richard Hocking, and Frank M. Oppenheim (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998). Esp. pp. 49, 58, 192. It is not always clear in these lectures when Royce is speaking for his own view and when he is summarizing someone else's view. Yet, the entirety of the course makes it clear that the Absolute is still a living idea for Royce.

and I think that older usage shows up as endorsed in his 1915 lectures. The synchronic schema Oppenheim gives distinguishing the logical, metaphysical, and psychological aspects of the Absolute is something I have replaced with my own slightly different account in *Time, Will, and Purpose*, chapters five and six. But my task here is not just the genealogy of the Absolute, it is its relation to "pragmatism," and that is complicated by the development of pragmatism itself. I must therefore add some things about the Absolute that bear on pragmatism.

It might be more accurate simply to say that God or the Absolute isn't what "he" used to be, and Royce was delivering the news in 1892, and certainly by 1896. He had, after all, been studying Nietzsche very closely and was aware that God was either dead or soon would be. So it isn't just that Royce was personally past this older "God," it is something much bigger. In this forecast, we really have to see Royce as being correct, and well ahead of his time.[22] Royce says:

> For my part, I think that such writers [Nietzsche, Browning, Walt Whitman, Tolstoi] and their works should be treated with the same freedom which they themselves exemplify. They worship nobody, and stand for themselves. Let us follow their example, so far as they themselves are concerned. . . it is folly not to recognize how much such people and such work may mean to us. (LMI p. 141)

This is hardly the view of an apocalyptic apostle of the New Zion. Yet, my point is not just about the difference between God and the Absolute. It is about pragmatism and the Absolute. And so we must tell a different story, this time involving the destiny of the idea of pragmatism in Royce's thought.

Delivering the news that the "God" of religion, who had been interchangeable with the Absolute, was basically dead would have been unwelcome among the religiously devout of Brooklyn. Royce knew that. It was not as in the case of the madman who delivers the news and then has to say he has come too early. Royce had in mind a more nuanced approach –to give the news on a spoonful of, if not sugar, then something to moderate the bitterness. The Absolute is what is left to us in the future, and "God" is for those who can't handle the Absolute. Royce's message was that since Kant, God could not be in the future what the traditional religions had tried to promulgate. A different age had arrived and, to use the language of the mocking crowd in *The Gay Science*, "God" had immigrated –to idealistic philosophy. The "God" of religion would not be believable to the people of the dawning age –because that "God" was not pragmatic. God, after Kant, was now the Absolute of philosophy precisely because the *philosophers* could not accept Kant's finitism, for logical, epistemological, ontological, and psychological reasons. They needed a new God, one belonging to pragmatism –so Royce believed.

Royce's solution? It was different from Hegel and Schelling and Bradley, who, in very different ways, balanced God's transcendence and immanence by emphasizing the latter. All were apologists of mediation as the main source of human finitude. Royce certainly accepted mediation, in that we have no immediate experience of the Absolute, but we do *experience* the Absolute, in an incomplete or fragmentary way. The meaning of that experience, the irrevocability of the deed, could be worked out philosophically. Nietzsche and Whitman and Browning and Tolstoi helped. Yet, regarding the balance struck in 19th century idealism between an impersonal Absolute and a personal deity, the contemporary person must favor the Absolute, Royce thought. He basically instructed the Brooklyn audience in the new path.

Pragmatism and the Absolute

It was important to Royce not only that we think about the Absolute in a clear and defensible way, but that we

[22] Royce took a lot from Nietzsche, but not his individualism. He says: "The well-known doctrine of Nietzsche is that of an individual equally merciless to himself and to others. It is a restlessly intolerant and muscular individualism which despises its own sufferings , an idealism without any ideal world of truth, a religion without a faith, a martyrdom without prospect of a paradise." (LMI p. 68)

have some practical experience that points to that reality. This "pointing" has a semiotic and a logical structure, and these structures are not the same. The semiotic structure has a triadic character, an iconic, an indexical, and a symbolic aspect, and one does not get *any* of these, as meaning, without *all* of them. The necessity accompanying this experience of meaning is of the internal and external meaning of ideas, and how they are linked. In short, the reality of the parts of the meaning (whether iconic, indexical, or symbolic) depend on a complete meaning which is not accessible to finite experience. We get it by conception, not perception. To consider any part of the meaning is the presuppose the whole meaning. The logical structure has to do with how logical individuals imply the complete individual, that is, the Absolute. The semiotic structure is a phenomenological level (in Peirce's sense of that term), while the logical structure is a metaphysical issue. I have discussed all of this in detail elsewhere.[23]

Thus, Royce had a different idea about the relationship between God and the Absolute, experiential and practical. That issue was purely philosophical, i.e., not something we can settle in experience itself –we must *think* about our experience. That is very much the topic of the Graham Lectures. There has been much written about the "God of philosophy" as distinct from the "God of religion.," ever since Descartes. In Royce we have a clear case of these being quite different, but since very few have studied Royce's *theology*, which is worked out in detail only in the Graham Lectures, very few understand that he has a "doctrine" of the "God" of traditional religion (a position about that idea), and it is quite different from the Absolute, as I have argued. Pragmatism, as Royce understood it, is the difference. Let us look at some specifics in the Graham Lectures, and then at some in the Baltimore Lectures.

As I mentioned. Royce spends the first part of the Graham Lectures setting out three traditional religious conceptions of God, much as he does with the historical conceptions of Being (to which these ideas about God are analogous). He endorses none, of course, including the tendency to see God as Absolute, the culmination of which he finds in what he calls the Hindoo mystical union with the One.

From there he moves on to the "philosophical conceptions of God," found in idealism. Here he says:

> Common to the various forms of Idealism is the further undertaking to define the Absolute in spiritual terms, and to insist upon the unity of its life as analogous to the unity which we observe in our own inner life. Beyond this point, indeed, the modern philosophical idealists have widely diverged, both as to method of procedure and as to result,—some, like our contemporary Von Hartmann, defining the Absolute as an Unconscious Spirit, others laying stress, as I myself shall try to do in later lectures of this course, [65] upon the notion of the Absolute Spirit as a conscious as well as a rational Self—a Person in the highest sense of that word. (GL 1, p. 12)

Note that the unity of the life of the Absolute is analogous to the unity we "observe" in our own life. I would add "such as it is." This is not the God of religion. Since Kant, the conception of God has "taken a new turn." Royce aims to reclaim the Personhood of God for *philosophy.* His idea of person, personhood, and personality will be philosophical, not religious. It is a point that connects him with James, who was also a philosophical personalist, but James never understood that Royce's Absolute is supposed to be a Person. Personal idealism, which Royce shared with Howison, Borden Parker Bowne, and many other philosophical idealists of his time, was, between 1896 and 1906, not a position opposed to or opposed by pragmatism.[24] Royce continues:

> Modern [66a] Idealism has a conception of God which once more explicitly regards him as the one ultimately real being, and which does so, not, in the way of the ancient mystics, who trusted merely to intuitions, but in full view of the destructively

[23] See my *Time, Will, and Purpose*, chs. 5-6. For a detailed analysis of the actual logic, see my "Complex Negation, Necessity, and Logical Magic," in *The Relevance of Royce*, eds. Kelly A. Parker and Jason M. Bell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 89-131 (ch. 6).

[24] I have explained this point in great detail in chapters 4 and 7 of TWP.

> critical Agnosticism of Kant, with a keen appreciation of the limitations of human knowledge, and with an earnest effort to appeal to the verdict of the dispassionate reason. (GL 1, p. 13)

This is pragmatism, as Royce understood it. The fallibilism, that there is nothing "ultimate" in the human domain, and the rejection of agnosticism (the position associated at that time with Herbert Spencer) are key indicators. And he adds, "Idealism, has founded its positive theses upon the very basis which Kant's Agnosticism has laid." (GL 1, p. 13)

There is no avoiding this, however:

> [T]he theses of the of these lectures will be: That God is the Absolute Spirit, and as such the one Reality; That despite this fact, yes, [70] even because of this fact, Ethical Monotheism is a true doctrine; That although Aristotle's conception of God was, as far as it went, a true conception, our modern notions of nature will not permit us to use Aristotle's arguments; and, *in fine*, to sum up all in one statement, That God is the only reality, but that his revelation to us is the moral, not the natural order. For the natural order, as we men see it, is a show, a hint, an anticipation of a hidden reality whose foundation we can indeed surmise, as I shall try to show you, though we cannot attain thereto. But in the moral world, as we shall see reason to maintain, God and man, as it were, touch hands. Here then we shall reach the manifestation of God in his, and, if we choose, in our works. (GL 1, pp. 13-14)

Royce sees no reason why this sort of moral (personal) idealism should be inconsistent with pragmatism, and he complains on numerous occasions, sometimes naming James, sometimes not, that some of the pragmatists are developing an allergy to God and the Absolute, and even to idealism. Remembering that Royce's understanding of pragmatism comes directly from Peirce, whom he rightly takes to be a personal idealist, this aversion surprises Royce. Peirce, after all, is the source and authority here. Royce was in regular communication with Peirce from the summer of 1892 onward, and likely would have been aware of his objections to what James was making f pragmatism. There was at this time no reason to think James would prevail and wrest control of the term and the movement from others.

Later in the Graham Lectures, Royce says:

> [O]ur social experience of one another gives us the only suggestion as to how these two contrasting but inseparable aspects of reality [the natural and the moral] can be reconciled. Your experience is not present to me. To me your experience is remote, merely possible, merely ideal. But for you your experience is given, is a fact, is present. Well, what is now suggested to us is the notion that perhaps that system of organized possible experience, so remote from us and from even our science, has its reality in so far as it is not merely possible experience, but is present to some divine point of view, is a given as well as a merely possible system of experience. (GL 2, p. 43)

This move to "experience" is the solution to the tension in idealism between the impersonal Absolute of Bradley, Hegel, and their like, and the personal Absolute of Royce. The move to "experience" is also an indicator of Royce's pragmatism.[25] One of the most important point is that, from our finite point of view, the Absolute experience must be treated as possible experience, a term which is the key to his argument about the Absolute in GL. He is employing the idea of possibility as John Stuart Mill does –the "permanent possibilities of experience." (GL 2, p. 32-33) Recall that James says later in the dedication of the 1907 book that he fancies Mill as the leader of the pragmatists. It was surely a topic of conversation between Royce and James. Royce later identifies this higher "possible experience" as "'the experience or the verdict of science', as distinct from the actual experience of any one mortal." (GL 2, pp. 39-40) In short, this is Peirce's idea of truth as agreed to by an ideally situated community of inquirers in the infinitely distant future. The Absolute has this experience, for Royce. It is pragmatism. Even Dewey eventually embraces this definition.

I end this examination of GL with this passage:

> All our actual sensory experience comes in passing moments, and is fragmentary. Our science, wherever it has taken any form, contrasts with this this immediate fragmentariness of our experience the assertion of a world of phenomenal truth, which is first of all characterized by the fact that for us it is a conceptual world, and not a world directly experienced by any one of us.

[25] I have argued this point in detail in TWP, chapter 4.

> Yet this ideal world is not an arbitrary world. It is linked to our actual experience by the fact that its conceptions are accounts, as exact as may be, of systems of possible experience, whose contents would be presented, in a certain form or order, to beings whom we conceive as including our fragmentary moments in some sort of definite unity of experience. That these scientific accounts of this world of organized experience are true, at least in a measure, we are said to vary [sic] insofar as we first predict that, if they are true, certain other fragmentary phenomena will get presented under certain definable conditions, and insofar as, secondly, we successfully fulfill such predictions. (GL 2, pp. 40b-40c[26])

> Anyone can see here that the community of inquiry, the pragmatic maxim, and the truth as the consequences of the way we inquire, are all packed into this passage. But the important point is that the Absolute the fulfilled experience, here is an all-inclusive community of inquiry. Most important is that the ideal unity of our own experience is grounded in the Absolute, and our actual experience, when we practice the method of science, reaches toward that ground. There is nothing for a pragmatist to fear, here, unless the community of inquiry cannot be idealized in order to account for the conceptual character of scientific knowledge. If there is an eschatology in Royce's philosophy, this is it. Harrelson's worries about a few scattered remarks are misplaced.

The result of this examination is that in GL, Royce defended a position that he took to be pragmatism. But let us now turn to the Baltimore Lectures so that we can see how Royce sees his view relative to the roiling discussion of pragmatism that is breaking loose in 1906. This is a good moment for Royce to be addressing both absolutism and pragmatism. His own views about the individual are fully formed here, having moved through his important *Outlines of Psychology* (1904), in which he sorts out the various ideas about the self and its relation to the individual, and this analysis supplements his logical-metaphysical doctrine from *The Conception of God* and *The World and the Individual*. It is also a good moment because James has not yet published *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, which will dominate all subsequent discussions of the term. Lovejoy's "The Thirteen Pragmatisms" of 1908, would seal the arguments into their sub and sub-sub domains forever.[27]

The word "pragmatism" was on everyone's lips in 1906, but its interpretation was still wide open. Most importantly, the relation of "pragmatism" to the problem of truth was also still an open discussion. That is the very issue that led Scott Pratt to suggest that we should take a new look at Absolute pragmatism, since we have a crippling problem with truth in the present. It would seem that finding some really solid ground upon which to defend truth, and to defend ethics, is desperately needed. That might be found in Royce's ideas. I think it is, as must be obvious to any reader by now.

Beyond what has already been described, what is the character of this Absolute pragmatism? Royce is explicit. The Baltimore lectures include several significant arguments about pragmatism which were not taken up in the wider discussion. By the time these ideas were published in 1919, the pragmatism ship had sailed. But for us there is sufficient time and distance to look again. After discussing the heroic effort of the German idealists to reconcile the "paradox that the self was the center of the universe, while the Absolute was nevertheless impersonal," (LMI, p.70), Royce says:

> Our idealists were, one and all, in a very genuine sense what people now call pragmatists. They were, to be sure, absolutists; and nowadays absolutism is supposed to be peculiarly abhorrent to pragmatists. . . . What I now emphasize is that all these thinkers make much of the relation of truth to action, to practice, to the will. Nothing is true, for them, unless therein the sense, the purpose, the meaning of some active process is carried out, expressed, accomplished. Truth is not, for these post-Kantian idealists something dead

[26] These passages are pasted into GL from the 1895 edition of *The Conception of God*, pp. 21-22. Thus, the view predates GL, but is also repeated in the 1897 edition of CG. It is not a passing phase of Royce's pragmatism, it is the heart of it.

[27] Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Thirteen Pragmatisms," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 5:1 (January 2, 1908), pp. 5-12; 5:2 (January 16, 1908), pp. 29-39. Lovejoy does not mention Royce, but does point out that personal idealism is a version of pragmatism, referencing F.C.S. Schiller. The fact that Royce was not mentioned in 1908 is surprising, in the context, but it probably contributed to the general feeling that he wasn't a pragmatist. Most of the effort is expended on showing how hopeless James's view is.

> and settled apart from action. It is a construction, a process, an activity, a creation, an attainment. *Im Anfang war die That*. (LMI pp. 85-86)

The final lines in German are those written by Goethe's character Faust, and no sooner has he written them than Mephistopheles appears in the form of a large black dog. To say "In the beginning is the act" is both what idealism and pragmatism have in common, but pragmatism has always been weak on the finality, the irrevocability of the act. The human experience of the Absolute, insofar as we experience the Absolute, resides in the irrevocability of the act, for Royce. Any pragmatist who does not believe in the Absolute should perform the following experiment: (1) do something; (2) now make the world such that it has never been done. Even God cannot achieve this, for even if God could arrange the world such that the act never happened, God could not arrange the divine internal life so as to forget having made those changes. It goes without saying that many religious people hold, paradoxically, that "God" (recalling our earlier distinction) can do such things, but Royce isn't worrying about that sort of "God." He has set that "God" into a historical frame that ends with Kant.

Thus, pragmatically, if we place the truth in the consequences of the act, one aspect of the truth *of* that truth is that the act is irrevocable, permanent, a part of every possible future experience. To have truths of this sort is both pragmatic and absolutist. But to experience the irrevocability of the act is certainly not an experience of "God." Royce does not think that finite beings have immediate experiences of "God," although religious traditions have mystical practitioners who claim to experience "God." By 1906, William James had done as much as anyone could to document the historical breadth and depth of mystical experiences in his 1902 Gifford Lectures. Royce did not discount the experiences, but the interpretations given to those experiences he sees in light of history and context. They do not prove that "God" or the Divine is what one or another religious tradition claims. If there is a God, that being is not the sort of entity that finite consciousness can encompass in an experience, or that limited intellect can bring under a concept. Kant's antinomies are unsatisfactory but not inaccurate. Royce says in GL:

> [I]f there concretely is such an absolute experience, then there concretely is such a reality present to it. If the absolute experience, however, remains to the end barely possible, then the concept of reality must be tainted by the same bare possibility. But the two concepts are strictly correlated. To conceive, for instance, absolute reality as containing no God, means simply that an absolutely all-embracing experience, if there were one, would find nothing Divine in the world. (GL 2, p. 40f; CG 1895, p. 24)

Some pragmatists, especially in recent decades, are content to find nothing divine in the world. That position probably undermines truth, even scientific truth, without an Absolute. If pragmatists want truth, and they do, especially now, they must become reconciled to a benevolent type of absolutism. Royce says:

> [T]hat all are discontent with their finitude, is a matter of common experience. I interpret this as implying, and as inevitably implying, that it is the truth that every finite life actually finds its fulfillment in an Absolute Life, in which we live, move, and have our being. I maintain . . . that to attempt to deny this Absolute Life is simply to reaffirm it under some new form. That the Absolute Life has to be conceived as the absolute union of experience and rational necessity, of freedom and of law, of infinitude and finitude, of what we regard as irrational and of what we regard as rational, I have elsewhere maintained at length. [See CG 1895, GL, CG 1897, and WI2] I am not here to preach my own doctrine. But may I assert that personally I am both a pragmatist and an absolutist, that I believe each of these doctrines to involve the other, and that therefore I regard them as not only reconcilable but as in truth reconciled. (LMI p. 258)

In 1896, Royce *was* in Brooklyn to preach his own doctrine. That was not his task in Baltimore. But to act on this reconciled union, as we all do every time we act, shows that "we all not only accept life, but try to conquer its irrationality, and to idealize its finitude. So to act is essentially, whether we know it or not, to view the temporal as the symbol and the likeness of the eternal." (LMI p. 259). That

is how the 1906 lectures end. Within two years it would have been difficult to say such things, since the publication of James's book left the impression that, as Royce said in a letter to James, pragmatism is "in large part, a splendid joke,--a brilliant *reductio ad absurdum* of all attempts at serious grappling with any philosophical issue. This was in no sense your intent; but, as a fact, the externals,--the mere setting and style of the *Pragmatism*, tend to produce in the man on the street this impression" of a splendid joke.[28] This criticism is harsh, but it became clear to Royce that pragmatism was becoming a joke. Royce did not think that to be the case in 1906. By 1908 Lovejoy showed to the satisfaction of many that the movement was ridiculous. James had been bested by Bertrand Russell in a public bout, and James made the matter worse by writing a book on truth no one could defend. We all know how Peirce responded to James's kidnapping of the term. In 1908, Royce was distancing himself from pragmatism. In an unenthusiastic letter refereeing Henry H. Bawden's book on pragmatism for Macmillan, he says:

> In itself, the book is good,--a scholarly presentation of Pragmatism by one of the followers of the movement, and by an academic teacher and writer of reasonably good position and reputation for his age. But Bawden is not a very original man. . . . What I miss is any commanding quality,--any originality sufficient to compel attention, or to insure a deep impression. Pragmatism is, however, so popular at present, and so much in need of a synthesis and of connected presentation, that there is a good chance that this book could find its way to a fair sale. On the whole, then, I recommend publication,--not as a great book, but as "a good horse if you like that kind of horse." The public seems just now to like the kind of horse called Pragmatism.[29]

Macmillan did not publish the book.[30] But what is telling is that Royce sees pragmatism as still in need of synthesis and connected presentation *after* James's book, which he thought was awful. He opened the Third World Congress of Philosophy in Heidelberg (1908) with a call for Absolute Pragmatism.[31] Soon he would realize that there was no coming back from what James had done. That probably happened at the 1908 Congress.[32]

In a very real sense, then, saving pragmatism from the nominalism it fell into, with its aversion to a hard-edged idea of truth, all for the sake of avoiding idealism and its Absolute, means turning the clock back to 1906 and taking a serious look at Royce's case for Absolute

[28] Royce to William James, no date, but presumed to be 1907 by the editor. *Letters of Josiah Royce*, ed. John Clendenning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 511. I think Royce's response to *Pragmatism* may have broken the camel's back with James. In 1906, when delivering the lectures that became that book, he wrote to James Jackson Putnam, who evidently assumed Royce was one of the targets of the lecture, James says: "I didn't have Royce in view at all for he is essentially a pragmatist, & *tries hard not* to use the Absolute to deny experience by—the men I was antagonizing were Bradley, Taylor, and Rickert." James to Putnam, Dec. 3, 1906, in *The Letters of William James*, vol. 11, eds. I. Skrupskelis and E. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 289-290. James often lumped Royce and Bradley together regarding the Absolute, see for example ibid., p. 295. Why he did not do so here is something of a puzzle.

[29] Royce, Letter to the Macmillan Company, February 17, 1908. *Letters of Josiah Royce*, p. 520.

[30] Henry H. Bawden, *The Principles of Pragmatism: A Philosophical Interpretation of Experience* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910).

[31] Royce, "The Problem of Truth in the Light of Recent Discussion," in *Bericht über den III. Internationalen Kongress für Philosophie* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1909), pp. 62-90.

[32] F.C.S. Schiller reported in a letter to William James on Royce's and others talks at the Congress, and characterized the whole thus: Altogether as far as *interest* went it was Pragmatism first & the rest nowhere." Schiller to James, September 8?, 1908, in *Letters of William James*, vol 12, eds. I. Skrupskelis and E. Berkeley (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 92. This "hedging" speech also brought the following report to James by Thomas Segeant Perry:

> In the philosophic world I notice that Bro. Royce is hedging & is beginning to appear in Congresses as the only true and original pragmatist. While it will be a comfort when you get home to have the internecine warfare that has devastated Irving St. come to an end . . . you must be careful, for he can't be a real pragmatist, one those whose portrait you drew in yr. first lecture [in *Pragmatism*]. I am sure he loves Truth & shld. be exposed. Make no peace until the whole tribe is exterminated. This will give you something to do when you get home. (ibid., p. 97)

I can easily imagine it would not bother Royce to be "exposed" as one who "loves Truth." But the strident tone helps us understand the importance of the struggle for the term. In my opinion, as Royce realized he could not have both truth and pragmatism anymore, on account of James, he gave back the term "pragmatism" and kept truth. Upon reading Royce's Heidelberg address, James says in a letter to Schiller it is "a charming piece of literary composition," but: "As an *approach to stating* our view (I think he has tried to) it is feeble; as a *correction* of our view, it [is] pitiful and inexcusable after all we have printed." Letter to F.C.S. Schiller, early January 1910 (ibid., p. 409). This pretty much finishes the case. If Royce's hedging was an olive branch, it wasn't accepted.

pragmatism. We land on "in the beginning was the act." The act is irrevocable, Absolute. That includes the act of thinking. I have never been able to abide the nominalist version of pragmatism, and have always reverted to Peirce. But Royce has this worked out, thoroughly, defensibly, and, I must say, absolutely.

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