

Idealist Affinities: John William Miller and Josiah Royce

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This paper will compare the philosophies of John William Miller and Josiah Royce with regard to philosophical idealism. We hope to highlight the idealist strain in Miller's thought by showing some affinities with similar themes in Royce. The relaxed term "affinity" suits the vagaries of the term "idealism" itself.(1) Royce was well aware of this malleable breadth.

Post-Kantian idealism, viewed in its whole range of manifestation, is not any one theory so much as a tendency, a spirit, a disposition to interpret life and human nature and the world in a certain general way—a tendency, meanwhile, so plastic, so manifold, so lively, as to be capable of appealing to extremely different minds, and of expressing itself in numerous hostile teachings.(2)

The equivocity of the term idealism renders our comparison more a matter of loose 'family resemblances' than of clear cut categories.

There is second difficulty with idealism as a point of comparison, its reputation. Discussing certain impediments to the reception of Miller's work, Vincent Colapietro points out that Miller's idealism is "likely to make him seem outdated and even quaint."(3) Much of the revolt against idealism in the Twentieth century took the form of hasty *ab extra* dismissals which left caricatures and low regard in their wake.(4) Association with German idealism came to imply, not depth, but a lack of rigor. With regard to this last charge, Etienne Gilson, one of the last century's most brilliant scholars and no idealist wrote, "Whether we agree with their philosophy or not . . . technically speaking, the doctrines of Kant, Fichte and of Hegel belong in the same class as the most perfectly elaborated Scholastic philosophies . . . of the Middle Ages."(5) There is no way to fight this battle here; it suffices to say that we use the term "idealism" non-pejoratively.

The panel promised a partial genealogy of idealism— one usually associates this term with a shattering of idols via some monstrous discovery, e.g. the leper and the ship of fools are found to be in the DNA of the psychiatric ward. Here, hopefully, the reverse is taking place, a negative is being shown in a more positive light— somewhat like discovering that an odd and embarrassing uncle has some merit after all. There are many possible points of comparison. Three similarities and a point of difference were chosen, the similarities because they may have some relevance as living ideas, and the difference because it seems to me to be the key difference. They are: error and truth; the ontological argument; triadic thinking; and the absolute. Even the point of difference, the absolute, is being proposed as a possible living idea.(6) The paper should not be read simply as a celebration of Miller. It points to perceived strengths in Miller's work, but it equally a commendation of Royce and the positive legacy of idealism.

Error and Truth

Royce and Miller both note that it is Plato's *Theatetus* that first raises questions about the status of error. Kant's transcendental dialectic—which holds that it is the fate of human reason to ensnare itself in paralogisms and antinomies whenever it accedes to its compulsion for metaphysical speculation—is another key moment. Later idealists were more optimistic about our speculative reach, but they came to believe that truth was ineluctably tied to error.

Miller is squarely within the idealist tradition on this point, “I propose the actuality of ignorance.”(7) For Miller, “error is essential” and “not a source of annoyance but a logical demand.”(8) Indeed, “truth is only the constant escape from error.”(9) Error may live for some time as truth, and truth as error. This is possible because truth and error are made and not found. Error *is* because realism *isn't*, “there are no absolute initial data.”(10) Truth is not a matter of copying some inherently meaningful bit of the world. The dialectical dance of truth and error takes place on the stage of history.

The historical is the only area in which error finds objectification. . . . In history we not only consort with error and evil; we actually make them, objectify them, enshrine them in institutions, glorify them with rite and ceremony, and die for them. What a *bloodless* view of the truth it is that does not include error in the same processes by which it itself is born. . . . [T]o avoid error is to avoid history, and to have no constitutional place for error is to leave the historical undefined and dateless(11)

Royce agreed that error is essentially related to truth, and he offered several reasons why truth always consorts with error. First, insofar as the whole evades any finite human perspective, truth cannot evade error—a consequence of Royce's holism and fallibilism. Second, Royce's anti-realism has us meddling in the given, “The external reality as such is . . . never a datum. We construct but do not receive the external reality.”(12) Royce's doctrine of intentionality ensures that any object is always an object as *meant*, tainted with our expectations, social training, and prior knowledge. Finally, Royce shares Miller's view that truth is achieved by concrete historical action and is not merely theoretical.

“Truth is not for these post-Kantian idealists something dead and settled apart from action. It is a construction, a process, an activity, a creation, an attainment. *Im Anfang war die That.*”(13)

The Ontological Argument (14)

Royce contended that “it is an essential feature of idealism—a difficult thesis and not the one most commonly made explicit—that there is a connection between essence and existence”(15) He believed that despite the fact that “the ontological proof is so easily refuted, you use it all the time. It underlies all your notions of reality.”(16) Royce's point is that essence and existence cannot be treated as radically distinct. He wishes to stress their relation rather than the priority of essence. The relatedness of essence and existence shows itself in three important ways. First, any search for empirical evidence, whether one wishes to bump into sealing wax or a quark, involves assumptions about the *what* of the *that* being sought. Our experience is illuminated by ideas and these ideas are cultural artifacts, constructions, and learned inheritances. Secondly, we live on very general assumptions about the essence of reality that are never verified. Royce has several favorite examples

such as the belief undergirding the whole of natural science that “Human experience, taken as a totality of facts, exists”(17), or pragmatism’s judgment about the essence of truth that “it is eternally true that all search for truth is a practical activity”(18), or the nominalist and the realist who both assume, *tout court*, that individuals are the really real. Finally, Royce’s absolute can be reasoned to by a kind of ontological argument. Truth, for Royce, *must* be experienced if it is to be at all, and hence, there must be an infinite mind that knows this actual experience as the condition of the possibility of the experience we have.(19) This eternal actuality is never given as a datum, but we can reason to its necessity from indubitables like the experience of error. Royce’s point aimed beyond epistemology to the problem of evil; he thought such an Absolute offered reasons for hope that all will be well in the end—that the cold cash of human suffering will be made good by a check dated eternity.

As early as his doctoral dissertation Miller allied himself with idealism’s view that “*every proof is an ontological one*, or that truth is given in the very nature of a conception.”(20) Miller agrees that existence and essence are not radically distinct, but fundamentally related. The point of contact is the midworld, and, “the functioning object is the meeting place of reason and act, of essence and existence.”(21) The midworld is the pre-cognitive ground of any facts—including refutative ones, like kicked stones and second story windows. This is not a new form of essentialism, but an effort to show the importance of the relation of essence and existence. This meeting place of essence and existence is as much a region of opacity as it is one of lucidity, as Michael J. McGandy points out, “no action or symbol is ever fully conscious of itself.”(22) The midworld functions tacitly and is transformed unwittingly in the forgetfulness of use. The hidden shortcomings of any extant midworld reveal themselves in what Miller calls “punishments”—explicit negative consequences that call for reform and revision.

Triadic Thinking

At first glance this would seem to be a Peircean rather than an idealist legacy, but Royce and Miller saw an affinity between the two.(23) Both agree that dualism is an inadequate account of our human epistemological situation, as is a sheer mystical monism. The former sets up a gulf that, once established, can never be bridged, and the latter an identity that Hegel famously described as a “night in which all cows are black.” This point is the crux of their critique of Bergson. To the extent that Bergson holds that there are but two human capacities, perception and conception, his mistake is dualism (24); and insofar as intuition and mysticism unify these poles he falls into an amorphous monism whose problematic feature is that anything can be asserted by way of intuition and hence nothing can be. Royce and Miller hold that there is a third capacity, interpretation, that mediates between perception and conception. These capacities have objects, to use Royce’s version: the object of conception is a universal, of perception, an individual, and of interpretation, a sign. Miller will prefer “symbol” to “sign” since this makes its artefactual nature more explicit.

The first point of genealogical significance is Royce’s contention that a sign can function as “quasi-mind—an object that fulfills the function of a mind.”(25) He gives as examples of such signs, “a word, a clock-face, a weather-vane, or a gesture”(26) This is quite similar to what Miller calls “pure symbols” of which Miller’s favorite example is the yardstick.

I borrow now from Hegel and from Royce. The easiest approach comes from Royce, I think. It is his doctrine of “signs”. I would prefer to use the word “symbol.” A symbol is an object, a yardstick, a spoken word. These words are all objects. But they are objects which

nature cannot produce. They are expressive. They are objectified thought. They lead to the original of the portrait.(27)

A second point of commonality is that Royce and Miller are making a socio- linguistic turn. We are not first in some Cartesian cabinet from which we must extricate ourselves with apodictic steps to the daylight of others and things, rather we are always-already in communication. The individual emerges from the community which is no mere aggregation of individuals. To put it tritely, it takes a village to be locked in a closet, and the village speaks a language.

There are at least two telling differences. Royce, described interpretation in Spinozist terms as a kind of view *sub specie aeternitatus*, “It surveys from above. It is the attainment of a larger unity of consciousness. It is a conspectus.”(28) Miller brings things down to earth to a world of sound and fury. His notion of the “original symbol,” the human body, is a striking example of this, one that goes against the very grain of the dominant (Platonic and Christian) traditions of Western thought that so scorned the body. Miller’s re-introduction of the body is in stark contrast to Royce’s ocular conspectus, for Royce the “body” is the body of Christ, the beloved community. The second point of difference can be summed up by saying that for Royce the world signifies whereas for Miller we do. One might think of this along the lines of the difference between the early and the late Heidegger—with Miller making the semiotic realm a product of our activity and Royce, in a sense, “listening to being.” Royce speculates that “the very being of the universe consists in a process whereby the world is interpreted—not indeed in its wholeness, at any one moment of time but in and through an infinite series of acts of interpretation.”(29) Royce is a panpsychist(30) and this means that everything is in some sense a mind, not, to be sure, as “mere registering machines”(31), but as significant and interpretive beings. The cosmos is abuzz with communication, “the real world itself is, in its wholeness, a Community” (32), or “the universe . . . is a realm which is through and through dominated by social categories.”(33) Miller does not follow Royce down this speculative path and his semiotics retains a more humanistic character.

The Absolute

Royce’s concept of the Absolute evolved, and I think it is better to see these changes as consistent enrichments of the view from a fresh perspective, rather than as a sharp break between some “early” and “late” Royce.(34) In the earlier work, the absolute is described as an infinite mind that is the condition of the possibility of our scientific and common sense experience. In the later work, Royce emphasizes a community of interpretation and ethico-religious justification. The absolute is not simply an intellectual device, but a *need*, an ethical and religious *telos*, “we all need the superhuman, the city out of sight, the union with all life—the essentially eternal.”(35) Royce expended great effort wrestling with epistemological issues because they were the philosophical currency of his day. Royce repeats, again and again, that philosophy is a kind of rewording or recapitulation. He saw no way to call humanity back to a forgotten God except by passing through these problems to his desired end.

Ever the perceptive interpreter, Miller put his finger on the fact that “Josiah Royce’s Absolute is an essentially realistic device.”(36) This is true insofar as the epistemological aspects alone are considered, and Miller is clear he will have none of the religious dimension and “its tendency to eventuate in some dogmatic completion.”(37) Miller repeatedly voices his objection to philosophical demands that are ahistoric and eternalistic.

Miller does not find the very idea of an absolute ridiculous. Contemporary discomfort with the unconditioned is a Cartesian legacy, a consequence of the demand that philosophy proceed from certain ground by apodictic steps, “We resist the unconditioned. It seems obscurantist But I am rejecting the idea that we come upon utterance. I say it is the *unconditioned*. It is rather the self-conditioning.”(38) We *say* it is unconditioned since it must already be functioning if we are to say anything at all. Criticism will reveal that the Absolute is the self-conditioned, an inheritance of concretized praxis, “Instead, then, of proposing the unconditioned as an answer let it be considered as the property of a problem.”(39) He says it is a “property of a problem” rather than “the problem itself” because each unconditioned is historically specific. Absolutes succeed one another serially; hence the task of criticism is ever present. That there is always some absolute at work leads Miller to the conclusion that, “*the absolute is the form of finitude*.”(40) Since all absolutes are made and proposed by acts of humans in history, “all absolutes are doomed.”(41) He will do away with the notion of an eternal spectator, of a “heavenly city . . . not built by hands.”(42) He avers that “truth has stepped down from eternity into time, and so into specific events.”(43) Royce’s heavenly city out of sight has become an earthly *polis*. Miller and Royce agree that some absolute is always already functioning, but they disagree with regard to its nature. For Royce it is a “city out of sight” ruled by a panoptic interpreter. For Miller, it is a city built by human hands, fated to Ozymandias’ end. Miller offers us a thoroughgoing finite historicism wherein any functioning absolute is our own handiwork— an inheritance to be recognized, revised, and relinquished.

Miller’s philosophy faces the same problems of reflexivity that any relativism does: there is at least one eternal truth, that all truth is historically conditioned— *except* this very truth. Neurath’s boat analogy springs to mind here— the idea that philosophy is like having to rebuild a ship at sea. Quine, an admirer of Neurath’s boat, writes:

Have we so far lowered our sights as to settle for a relativistic doctrine of truth—rating the statements of each theory as true for that theory, and brooking no higher criticism? Not so. . . . [W]e continue to take seriously our own particular aggregate science, our own particular world-theory Unlike Descartes, we own and use our beliefs of the moment, even in the midst of philosophizing Within our own total evolving doctrine, we can judge truth as earnestly and absolutely as can be; subject to correction, but that goes without saying.(44)

I believe Miller would feel a qualified affinity for this remark. Philosophy arrives late in the day, and no philosopher has ever philosophized without first mastering an already functioning inheritance of great complexity, one not of his or her own making. One needs a lot of time on the water before knowing which planks are rotten and in need of repair or replacement. But how do we escape the reflexive paradox? Well, we don’t, if escape means finding some apodictic ground from which to proceed; we must simply live with some paradox and proceed from where we are. Consistency demands that we admit that historicism has no special status and is indeed subject to revision, “but that goes without saying.” I think a pragmatic criterion might come in handy here. On the Millerian view there is quite a lot for philosophy to do that relates to our chances of living well in *this* world. Those who trot out the reflexive paradox as a reason to disengage from the task of criticism must ultimately settle for some form of dogmatism, skepticism, or silence.

Endnotes

1. See, Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), viii. One of the main aims of this hefty tome is “the meaning of idealism itself.”
2. Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 2.
3. Vincent Colapietro, *Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom: John William Miller and the Crises of Modernity* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2003), 133.
4. Michael Oakeshott addressed this issue in 1933, “For the abuse which was formerly the lot of philosophy in general is now reserved for philosophical Idealism. Which (it is the common opinion) is decadent, if not already dead. Its doctrines are held to comprise a mixture of fallacies and truisms . . . So far as I can ascertain, however, these opinions are founded upon no firmer basis than one of confused reasoning and irrelevant anecdote. Idealism is in these days dismissed In these circumstances, then, what seems to be required is not so much an apology for Idealism as a restatement of its first principles. . . .” Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 6-7. Some have not failed to take account of idealism. See, Nicholas Rescher, *Metaphysics* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), 46-51. Rescher appends an idealist confession to his “realistic perspective,” which makes one wonder if it isn’t an idealist perspective after all.
5. Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 113.
6. The fact that I have used the expression “living idea” twice makes it important to mention a recent work on Royce by Randall Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011). Of course this very notion points back to the title of Benedetto Croce’s famous title for his book on Hegel.
7. John William Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co, 1982), 117.
8. Ibid., 14.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. John William Miller, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), 175-6. Emphasis mine.
12. Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* [Gloucester, Mass., Peter Smith, 1965], 384-435.
13. Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* , 86. Royce references Goethe’s *Faust Part I* in this quotation.

14. Royce, *Metaphysics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 116. Or, :“For idealism, of course, there is an intimate connection between essence and existence.”Ibid.,109. See, Josiah Royce, Joseph LeConte, G.H. Howison, Sidney Edward Mezes, *The Conception of God* [New York: The MacMillan Co., 1909], 135-348. Also, Royce, *Metaphysics*, 93-173. Also, Royce, *The World and The Individual, Vol. I*, 265-470. The so-called “ontological argument” is associated with a host of issues: universals, particulars, individuation, and centrally the relationship of thought and being, of essence and existence. Here we are focusing on essence and existence. One should keep in mind that “thinking” for Royce is not mental representation, but an act which has aspects of will, purpose, language, sociality, and history embedded in it. Royce, and this is an aside, saw individuation as the key and neglected issue. The status of universals had come to the fore precisely because the Aristotelian tradition held, uncritically for Royce, that the individual was the really real. If this cannot be assumed, then individuation leaps to the fore as a problem.

15. Royce, *Metaphysics*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 116.

16. Ibid.,130.

17. Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908), 334.

18.Ibid.,326.

19. Charles Hartshorne gives a nice account of what Royce is trying to say in the following passage. “The argument might be put succinctly thus: we cannot measure knowledge by its agreement with a reality simply outside of knowledge, for the unknown is not available as a standard. On the other hand, human knowledge cannot regard itself as the measure of reality: what we know is not, even for us, the same as what is real. What, then, do we mean by the reality we partly know and partly do not know? The answer is that knowledge has certain internal criteria which human knowledge only partly fulfills but which an ideal form of knowledge , which we can conceive of, would entirely fulfill. This ideal knowledge then serves to define reality, which is simply: what the internally perfect knowledge would have, or does have, as its presented content. Finally, we cannot say “would have” for that is to turn reality, as the actual, into something merely potential, which is contradictory. Hence, we must say: “does have.” That is, ideal knowledge must exist.” Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reece, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000), 197.

20. John William Miller, *The Definition of the Thing* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980), 112. Emphasis Miller’s.

21. Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, 34.

22. McGandy, *The Active Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 97.

23. Royce is explicit that he does not see Peirce as directly influenced by the German idealists; rather they come upon a similar position by different paths.

24. On its face the charge of dualism seems fair: “This book affirms the reality of spirit and the reality of matter, and tries to determine the relation of the one to the other by the study of a definite example, that of memory. It is, then, frankly dualistic.” Unless his concept of an image which “is more than that which an idealist calls a representation, but less than that which a realist calls a

thing—an existence placed halfway between the thing and the thing and the representation.” Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 9. How “image” is interpreted might alter this assessment.

25. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 346.

26. Ibid.

27. Miller, *The Paradox of Cause* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), 60.

28. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 306.

29. Ibid., 346.

30. See, T.L.S. Sprigge, *The God of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 357-407.

31. Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, 323.

32. Ibid., 343.

33. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 344.

34. On the unity of Royce’s thought see, Randall Auxier, *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011). This new perspective helps do away with what I think are ‘received myths’ about Royce. I think it is taken to be the case that Royce’s later work represents some kind of accession to James (the “battle of the absolute”). I think it is more accurate to say that James’ influence was early on, as Royce admits, and that his later work represents more of an effort to wrestle with Peirce and Howison. It was Howison’s critique, as Auxier shows that was the real spur. Finally, Royce was always, like any idealist, dealing with the problem of the concrete individual and its relation to the whole. This is a typical and persistent problem for idealism. This is why his *magnum opus* is entitled *The World and the Individual* long before any battle over the absolute with James.

35. Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 346.

36. John William Miller, *The Task of Criticism*, ed. Joseph P. Fell, Vincent Colapietro, Michael J. McGandy (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 65. This relates to a remark by Stephen Tyman to the effect that idealism in many of its forms suffered a “kind of failure of nerve” which let “well-disguised versions of exactly the positions idealists wish to oppose” creep in. Royce’s absolute is a kind of vestigial structure of realism. Tyman, *Describing the Ideal* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 116.

37. Miller, *The Paradox of Cause*, 68.

38. Miller, *The Midworld of Symbols and Functioning Objects*, 64

39. Miller, *The Paradox of Cause*, 70.

40. Ibid., 84. Emphasis Miller's.

41. Ibid., 145.

42. Miller, *The Paradox of Cause*, 107. Emphasis Miller's.

43. Ibid., 167. Emphasis Miller's.

44. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), 24-5.