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Book Review | *Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce*

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***Time, Will, and Purpose: Living Ideas from the Philosophy of Josiah Royce.* Randall E. Auxier. Chicago, IL: Open Court Press, 2013. 424 pages. \$59.95 paperback ISBN 978-0-8126-9678-3**

This book by Randy Auxier will add an important dimension to Royce studies as well as to a better understanding of the history of American philosophy in general. One of the aims of the book is to “present a new study of Royce in light of time and distance from his own day,” especially to demonstrate that Royce is an “available teacher for our time and culture precisely because the works he left us are brimming with living ideas.” (1) Auxier hopes to present Royce’s best ideas in a form that allows active application to contemporary life and thought. He does, in fact, apply them in particular to social and political philosophy and to a critique of the state of philosophy today.

To present these ideas in their best form, a major focus of the book is to correct what Auxier judges to be a number of misconceptions about Royce’s philosophy, as well as neglect of our ignorance of important features of that philosophy. Three misconceptions are particularly emphasized. The first concerns the prevailing view about the development of Royce’s thought, namely, that it went through three major shifts and that in *The Problem of Christianity*, there was a key shift to a doctrine of interpretation and the triadic theory of relations, due primarily to the influence of Charles Sanders Peirce. Auxier believes this is a misunderstanding concerning the influence of Peirce on Royce, one first proposed by John E. Smith in “Royce’s Social Infinite: The Community of Interpretation” (1950). On the basis of a careful historical overview of Royce’s work and its context, Auxier claims that “Royce was already using the idea of mediation through interpretation and the triadic theory of relations in 1880” and, further, that this was well-worked out in the Second Series of the

Gifford Lectures. Auxier clarifies his claim in more detail when he writes: “What Royce discovered in 1912 was how to *use* the semiotic theory of Peirce, which he had been using for years, to express the community metaphysics in a way that bridged his logic and metaphysics with human practice.” (20). My reading of Royce’s corpus confirms this judgment by Auxier.

Auxier believes that another misunderstanding of Royce occurs in terms of his concept of the Absolute. Smith, for example, notes three descriptions of the Absolute: (1) Absolute Thought; (2) Infinite System unified by a purpose; and (3) the community of interpretation. Auxier argues that Royce used close to fifty descriptions of the Absolute, but all were grounded in his conception of the Absolute as an *ethical idea*. This interpretation of Royce’s absolute were given full coverage in the book by Dwayne Tunstall, *Yes, But Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce’s Ethico-Religious Insight* (2009), and Tunstall and I support Auxier’s conclusion that for Royce ethics is *first* philosophy. Auxier carefully connects this emphasis of Royce with his methodology, his logic and his metaphysics. He writes: “Particularly, I would emphasize that one major aspect of that ethical idea implies a norm for thinking *clearly* about the Whole in relation to its parts. To think clearly for Royce is an *ethical* requirement, an indispensable part of the ethical life.” (20)

A third misconception about Royce’s philosophy and its development concerns the role that California played in his thought. Auxier believes Royce scholars have overemphasized the influence of California. Auxier rightfully points to Royce’s desire to leave California, after returning from his work at John Hopkins, seeing it as a ‘wasteland of ideas.’ Royce, as a fact, rarely returned to California and spent the rest of his life at Harvard. Auxier notes that he “loved the natural beauty of California but was equally happy with the New England Countryside.” I believe Auxier overstates the so-called ‘misconception’ in the emphasis on California and, as a fact, supports the importance of Royce’s experiences of California in his thought and life. Like other Royce scholars, Auxier notes that “the triumphal arrogance of white Californians disgusted Royce.” His desire to get away from California was a desire to get away from the individualism, ethical egoism, the prevalence of naked self-interest and grasping greed displayed in California’s early history. His history of California is in fact stated in moral terms, the villains in the book are those who betrayed community and pursue illusory self-interest. His experiences in California did teach him the value of community and the betrayals of community that occur in the pursuit of self-interest. Auxier, in his criticisms near the end of the book, of the contemporary political and social scene in the United States today, cites the following compelling chapter from Royce’s history of California:

It is to be hoped that this lesson [the immorality of the Mexican War and its clear implications for the conquest of California] which shows us as it does how much of conscience and even personal sincerity can coexist with a minimum of effective morality in international undertakings, will someday be remembered, so that when our nation is, in another time, about to serve the devil, it will do so with more frankness and will describe itself less by half-unconscious cant. For the rest, our mission in the cause of liberty is to be accomplished through a steadfast devotion to the cultivation of our own inner life, and not be going abroad as missionaries, as conquerors, or as marauders among weaker peoples. (Josiah Royce, *California*, 1886, 123)

Certainly California had some influence on Royce's conviction about the value of genuine community.

Equally important for Auxier to correcting misconceptions about Royce's philosophy is the desire to reveal neglected, but significant aspects of Royce's philosophy, some of these are embedded in the misconceptions, but others follow from failure to read more carefully the whole of Royce's thought and particularly the full range of its historical context. Royce strongly argued that philosophy should be thoroughly grounded in its history. He was thoroughly immersed in this history and was an outstanding interpreter of historical figures and their texts. Auxier notes that Royce "had few equals in the mastery of texts." Following Royce's advice, Auxier seeks to provide a new and more extensive historical context for understanding Royce's philosophy as well as for moving philosophy forward in application to current problems and issues. Thus he discusses the work of George Holmes Howison, William Ernest Hocking, Boden Parker Bowne, and James Edwin Creighton, figures often neglected in American philosophy circles. Royce's interactions with Howison in the debate on the conception of God led Royce to refine and develop his theory of individuality, in fact, to wrestle with the concept of God, attempting to maintain on the one hand, God's intentional, willing, experiencing, and personal characteristics, and on the other side, God's rationality. This leads, argues Auxier, and correctly I believe, that Royce adopts in *The Problem of Christianity* a kind of 'theistic finitism.' Auxier writes: "thus Royce 'let's go of God's omnipotence and omniscience (as an outmoded concept of rationality) in favor of a process account of God's interpretive activity in pursuit of ideals.'" (127) In further support of his argument for a continual development and refinement of Royce's thought, Auxier claims that Royce dealt with the finite-infinite relation as a temporal process long before 1913. "As early as 1897, Royce already thinks of God's experience as a "process" and notes that if it is the same process as our own, only 'generalized,' it is also a social process. (127)

Another aspect of Royce's philosophy, underestimated by John Smith and generally ignored in Royce studies, is that Royce is a "temporalist," a proponent of a philosophy that takes the fundamental character of time to be the effective and meaningful reflection on philosophical problems. Further this aspect of Royce's philosophy was there from the beginning, contained in his 1880 essay "On the Purpose of Thought." This essay was written on Royce's return to California after obtaining his doctorate at John Hopkins. It is in his early work in California also that Royce set out an even more fundamental position, namely, what Auxier calls a 'fictional ontology.' Royce, says Auxier, began the construction of his philosophical system by means of a critique of ontology. In two articles in 1881, he argues that "every ontology is a useful fiction at best—we may *postulate ontology* for ourselves but knowledge in this domain is impossible." Auxier claims that Royce adopted a *descriptive* method in metaphysics. At heart of this is temporalism. "The *present acts* by which we construct our *possible* future experiences must be regarded as real, and these acts involve a temporal structure that is irreducibly three-fold. The past and present must be 'acknowledged' and the future 'anticipated' in every act. The definition of the present is the acknowledgement of other conscious beings and *their* possibilities. (39) Note that triadic relations are early features of Royce's philosophy.

Auxier also argues that Royce's fictional ontology also allows him to deal adequately with the difficult concepts of 'possibility' and 'necessity.' About this, Auxier writes: "Royce is already using the term 'possibility' in a fairly consistent way to describe not only the existential mode of the future, but also the most basic modal idea of the present ('other possible experience') as distinct from 'necessity' (which receives a number of formulations in Royce including 'the irrevocability of the past,' but all formulations involve *negation*, which requires a step away from concrete complexity, requires that something be left out of the account." (40) Again Auxier affirms that for Royce ethics is first philosophy when he says that Royce, early on, recognized that "The 'Myths' we tell ourselves in practicing ontology (including postulates about necessity or possible necessities) should serve *moral* ends and aspirations. The maxim could be stated: 'do not leave out (i.e. negate) whatever is morally required for practical actions.'" (40) 'Purposes,' defined by Royce in terms of 'future plans' as *possibilities* were, in his judgment, indispensable to any philosophy. This temporalist 'fictional ontology' proposed by Royce early in his career leads Auxier to claim that "This creative take on descriptive metaphysics, ontology, the sociality of present experience, suffices to give Royce, along with Peirce, a claim to being the first full-fledged process philosophy in the U.S., and certainly a committed temporalist from at least 1880 forward." (40) Further, argues Auxier, Royce never abandoned his advocacy of a 'fictional ontology' and 'descriptive metaphysics.' He cites a passage from Royce's 1916 seminar on metaphysics:

The philosopher must be guided by postulates which he doesn't attempt to verify but only asserts, or which he verifies by verifications which are matters of the moment. A general truth is *never* illustrated by experience and must be defined in terms of a postulate. . . . we *never* get in experience a survey of the whole, the synoptic view which gives you necessary laws. (Josiah Royce, *Metaphysics*, 82, Auxier, 56)

Auxier provides a thorough, well-researched discussion of Royce's temporalism following the theme that "the reality of time is what connects his empiricist, phenomenological, and metaphysical levels of generalization." (163). The exposition of Royce's notions of phenomenological and practical temporalism leads to the postulation of an 'intentional stance' in Royce's philosophy and the claim that Royce departs company with European phenomenology by his belief that ethics is first philosophy and thus that phenomenological description is undertaken for the *purpose* of grounding an ethical will. Auxier discusses Royce's belief that necessity is experienced at the practical level in the irrevocability of acts, at the psychological level in the law of docility, and at the phenomenological level in the selection of attention. Auxier's discussions of these issues, of metaphysical temporalism, and of panexperientialism are well worth a careful reading. This discussion also reveals interesting similarities and differences between the thought of James and Royce.

Auxier noted in his introduction that he intended to advance what he calls "a novel argument about William James in relationship to Royce." This is accomplished not only in his discussion of temporalism but also of Royce's personalism, leading to claim that James was a personalist. James scholars are chastised for neglecting this fact. The Royce-James relationship is further spelled out in Auxier's superb chapter on Royce's theory of individuality, again clarified on three levels- the psychological, phenomenological, and the metaphysical. The discussion of metaphysical individuality leads to a clear exposition of Royce's Fourth Conception of Being, related to Whitehead's Ontological Principle and Heidegger's *Dasein*. In this chapter, Auxier argues "James' theory of individuality is adapted to and from Royce's." There is strong evidence in Royce's corpus that he developed many ideas similar to those of James, e.g. the 'specious presence', the role of selection and attention in experiencing, the personal nature of all experience, the notion of ideas a plans of action and related to purposes, and did so very early in his career and perhaps before James proposed these ideas. Auxier pursues caution in the argument about influence, noting that it is difficult to establish who influences whom. This applies to both the James-Royce relationship and the Peirce-Royce relationship. One of the biggest differences between Royce and James, in Auxier's view, is over whether there is a "wide or more generalized personal experience."

Auxier also provides us with a very subtle, well-argued exposition of Royce's idealistic pragmatism, a view Auxier believes is shared by Peirce, and a view that he carefully contrasts with the 'radical-empirical' pragmatism defended by James and Dewey. These pragmatisms basically diverge, argues Auxier, over the issues of genuine intellectual doubt and intellectual problems as part of the pragmatic view of doubt and especially over the role and existence of *ideals* in informing our present problems. Royce firmly held, argues Auxier, and I believe correctly, that "philosophy is a kind of criticism that solves problems raised by genuine doubt." Auxier counters the claims by James and Dewey about Royce's "intellectualism" and recounts Royce's retort to Dewey on this charge. Although Auxier is sarcastically critical of James and Dewey, faulting their weaknesses in logic and metaphysics, this chapter on the varieties of pragmatism is well worth reading with care. In fact, one would wish that points made by Auxier could be made with less seeming venom, for his strongly stated claims could be easily dismissed though they have, in my judgment much merit. In relation to Auxier's criticisms of others, I cite James' observation about Bowne, in a letter to his wife, as perhaps well applied to Auxier. James writes: "He had a scornful pen which made strangers think him scornful, but when one knew him well, one saw how much of it was humorous good nature" (April 14, 1910 to Mrs. Browne, in Auxier, 206). James may or may not be over-generous here in his estimate of Bowne; I remain unsure about the tone adopted by Auxier in his criticisms.

This is a book well worth reading even if it may raise one's ire. I strongly recommend reading the chapter on "Metaphysics of Community," which gives a well-argued exposition of Royce's strongly held belief that "communities, and specifically institutions, should philosophically be conceived as communal persons." Auxier claims this as Royce's most important living idea. I tend to agree and believe this idea has significant relevance to contemporary problems, individual, psychological, social, political, religious, and philosophical.