

“All Our Puzzles will Disappear”: Royce and the Possibility of Error

“Todos os Nossos Problemas Desaparecerão”: Royce e a Possibilidade de Erro

Scott L. Pratt

Department of Philosophy
University of Oregon, United States
spratt@uoregon.edu

Abstract: An argument for the possibility of error was at the center of Royce’s first major philosophical work, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. The argument led, on one hand, to a conception of a transcendent Absolute, and, on the other, to a conception of human agency and meaning. In light of the argument, he concluded “all our puzzles will disappear at a stroke, and error will be possible.” Although the novelty of the argument helped to establish Royce as America’s leading advocate of idealism, the argument faded into obscurity after World War One and its significance was lost with the rejection of idealism by academic philosophy. Writing in 1920, George Santayana concluded that Royce’s argument for the possibility of error turned on “a romantic equivocation.” In the 1960’s, John Herman Randall recalled Santayana’s critique and concluded that Royce’s argument was “clever” at best. The impression of Royce’s work as a failed idealism with limited historical and philosophical value persists today. Even as Royce’s work faded from view, however, the need to account for error remained important. As a result of its inability to provide a successful account error, the New Realist movement — fresh from its victory over idealism — was replaced by the Critical Realists, led by Santayana, who, in turn gave way to the logical positivist’s demand for a theory of verification. Difficulties in accounting for error continue in the 21st century in the work of philosophers who seek to connect knowledge production with theories of truth, especially in contexts of cultural diversity. In this paper, I will reconsider Royce’s error argument both in order to set aside mistaken notions of the theory and to show how it can engage present concerns about knowledge, truth, and pluralism. The key to this reconsideration is the criticism of Royce’s theory by C. S. Peirce in his 1885 unpublished review of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. I will argue that Peirce’s criticism anticipates Royce’s own reconstruction of the theory in his later work. Peirce rightly concludes that Royce’s original argument that ties error to “general terms” (or complete descriptions) is incorrect. Instead, error turns on the operation of “indices” that serve to connect knowledge claims and objects in a way that requires the participation of other agents. Royce’s development of his theory of error leads to a logic of agency and a redefinition of transcendence with relevance to present problems in philosophy and in the wider world.

Keywords: Royce. Peirce. Error. Agency. Pluralism.

Resumo: *Um argumento para a possibilidade do erro foi o centro da primeira maior obra filosófica de Royce, The Religious Aspect of Philosophy [O Aspecto Religioso da Filosofia]. O argumento levou, por um lado, à concepção de um Absoluto transcendente e, por outro, a uma concepção de ação humana livre e do significado. À luz do argumento, ele conclui que “todos os nossos problemas desaparecerão de uma vez e o erro será possível.” Apesar da novidade do argumento ter ajudado a estabelecer Royce como o principal defensor do idealismo na América, o argumento caiu na obscuridade após a Primeira Guerra Mundial e seu significado se perdeu com a rejeição do idealismo pela filosofia acadêmica. Escrevendo em 1920, George Santayana concluiu que o argumento de Royce para a possibilidade do erro se transformou em “um equívoco romântico.” Nos anos 1960, John Herman Randall lembrou a crítica de Santayana e concluiu que o argumento de Royce era, na melhor das hipóteses, “inteligente”. A impressão do trabalho de Royce como uma falha do idealismo com limitados valores históricos e filosóficos persiste hoje. Ainda que o trabalho de Royce tenha sumido de vista, a necessidade de dar conta do erro permaneceu importante. Como resultado de sua incapacidade de fazer uma defesa bem sucedida do erro, o movimento Novo Realismo – recente de sua vitória sobre o idealismo – foi substituído pelos Realistas Críticos, liderados por Santayana que, por sua vez, deu lugar à demanda do positivismo lógico por uma teoria da verificação. Dificuldades em explicar o erro continuaram no século 21 no trabalho de filósofos que procuraram relacionar produção de conhecimento com teorias da verdade, especialmente em contextos de diversidade cultural. Neste artigo, reconsiderarei o argumento do erro de Royce tanto para por de lado noções errôneas da teoria quanto para mostrar como ele pode envolver preocupações atuais referentes ao conhecimento, à verdade e ao pluralismo. A chave para este exame é o criticismo da teoria de Royce feito por C. S. Peirce em sua resenha não publicada de 1885 para The Religious Aspect of Philosophy. Argumentarei que a crítica de Peirce antecipou a própria reconstrução da teoria feita por Royce em sua obra posterior. Peirce corretamente conclui que o argumento original de Royce que amarra o erro a “termos gerais” (ou descrições completas) é incorreto. Em vez disso, o erro se torna a operação de “índices” que servem para conectar afirmações de conhecimento a objetos de um modo que requer a participação de outros agentes. O desenvolvimento de Royce de sua teoria do erro leva à lógica da ação livre e uma redefinição do transcendente com relevância para presentes problemas em filosofia e para todo o mundo.*

Palavras-chave: *Royce. Peirce. Erro. Ação livre. Pluralismo.*

In the world of the 21st century, marked by a pluralism of peoples and values, can anyone — nation or person — be mistaken in their claims about the world or the norms in terms of which they act? Can those who would change the world — the revolutionaries, the insurgents, the political activists — or those who would minimize change the conservatives, those who enforce the rules, the parties in power — ever be wrong? Is being wrong a simple instrumental judgment, that is, am I wrong only when I fail to achieve a goal I set or follow a principle I choose? Or are there transcendent principles that should serve as the standards in terms of which mistakes are

made? What makes for the possibility of error, of being fallible, is not often considered by philosophers bent on finding the conditions of truth. It is also a neglected part of our wider conversations about policy and culture in the context of the ways distinctive communities relate to one another and how nations and regions interact in exchange or conflict.¹

One might say that the issue is how to be “right”: on the one hand, it is to act in accordance with true principles, and, on the other, to seek the truth in order to better guide action. It is this latter concern that demands our attention. To act in accordance with what has been true (by faith or science or revelation or self-interest) is one thing; to seek the truth is another. Doing the latter may put received truths at risk by acknowledging the possibility of error. If the possibility of error is a necessary component of the search for the principles of action that will foster better lives, justice, and the flourishing of communities and cultures, then it would seem to be worthwhile to ask about error. If we consider the present world, then the possibility of error emerges in a deeply pluralistic universe and leads to a theory that starts by recognizing sharp divides, conceptual boundaries, and political and cultural borders. I will argue that Josiah Royce’s conception of error provides both an apt account of nature and its importance in the context of the present world, as well as providing guidelines for maintaining the possibility of error in order to foster growth and change.

In 1885, Josiah Royce published his first book, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, to some small acclaim. His colleague and friend at Harvard, William James, wrote a positive summary of the central argument but set aside further comment — a good thing for young Royce, since James thought that Royce was mistaken about error.² C. S. Peirce also wrote a review in 1885 for *Popular Science Monthly* that was rejected by the editor. Peirce nevertheless sent the review to James and it may have circulated among James’ associates. Where James had been flattering, Peirce was stern, identifying at least four problems he took as significant for Royce’s argument, and, in so doing, provided a map for the future development of Royce’s conception of error. At the heart of Royce’s book — or rather at its culmination — Royce offered a novel argument in support of the more or less well known idealist conception of the Absolute. Rather than arguing from some conception of truth and knowledge, Royce began from a conception of human limitations and the recognition that if human beings are good at anything, they are very good at being wrong. Although the

¹ In recent moral theory, error has reemerged as an issue in understanding the nature of moral agency. For some, an agent can only be moral if she can fail to follow a moral principle. This is the error constraint on agency defined by Douglas Lavin as “*an agent is subject to a principle only if the agent can go wrong in respect of it*” (2004, p. 425). See also Korsgaard (1996) and Cokelet (2008). Also see Almeder (1999) for a discussion of contemporary work on error. Rescher (2007) develops an account of error in *Error (On Our Predicament When Things Go Wrong)*. He only briefly discusses Royce’s contribution to the theory of error by citing what he calls “Royce’s Thesis,” and defines as “The contention ‘Error is sometimes possible’ cannot but be true” (2007, p. 5). He addresses none of Royce’s argument for the claim and its implications for understanding error nor does he consider any of Royce’s later discussions of error or his theory of interpretation.

² Even though James only recommended Royce’s work to “the reader’s attention,” he also declared “Everything in Dr. Royce is radical” (JAMES, 1885, p. 13).

novelty of the argument helped to establish Royce as America's leading advocate of idealism, the argument faded into obscurity after World War One and its significance was lost with the rejection of idealism by academic philosophy in North America. The impression of Royce's work as a failed idealism with limited historical and philosophical value persists today. What most critics then and now missed — and which Peirce did not — was that Royce's conception of error was on the right track. Even though Peirce disagreed in the details, he recognized that Royce's focus on error was a sound starting point for truth, or rather for the quest for truth.

Royce raised the issue of the possibility of error in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* as a response to the recognition of the tragic and finite character of human existence. Philosophical inquiry responds to this recognition by seeking something beyond human limitations that can provide some larger meaning to human life. Hope for humankind, in fact, hope for finite beings of all kinds, lies in an understanding not of some glorious heaven or afterlife, but in the character of evil. The problem for Royce's attempt to provide a theory of this reality is that at first he can only *postulate* a theory in which there is hope and meaning. Postulation, since it is uncertain and leads to skepticism, opens the way for an account of error that, in turn, will lead to a theory of reality that justifies hope. The pervasive desire for certainty on the part of human beings, even if a doomed desire, "implies we can be in error about an external world" and so even the skeptic who rejects the possibility of certainty must, in the rejection, affirm "a difference between true and false statements about nature" (1885, p. 372).

What is error? In some cases, as Royce observes, error is simply a claim with which I disagree. In other cases, it is an action that fails to realize some purpose its agent sought. In still other cases, I make claims about myself, others, and the world, and in some way they turn out to be wrong. Royce focuses on this last sort of error, but his argument, he claims, is perfectly general in that even different kinds of errors, to be errors at all, share a common structure. In sum, there are two conditions that are necessary for an act to be an error, whether the act is an assertion, a judgment of value, or an attempt to realize some result: first, the actor or agent must have some intention or purpose in mind. Second, the claim made must say something about the thing or relation or result that does not hold.

Suppose you are standing on the high desert in Western North America and you see in the distance a speeding car just at the horizon. The car perhaps is an old model, rusted and dented and stirring up a cloud of dust. You think to yourself, "That car on the horizon is an old Pontiac." If the car on the horizon turns out not to be a Pontiac, then you have made an error. If, on the other hand, there is no car on the horizon, then your claim is not in error, it is *meaningless*. In short, the subject term must be able to "pick out" your intended object and then, despite selecting the right object, the predicate must not hold. If there is no intended object, then the claim is like an arrow shot without a target: it cannot miss. There is no error. This situation is both simple enough and apparent: to be in error, one needs a claim and an object. If they correspond or connect in expected ways, then the claim is true and if they do not, it is an error. As Royce concludes, "Error is [...] generally defined as judgment that does not agree with its object" (1885, p. 396).

The common-sense notion of error, Royce concludes, can be reduced to a simple syllogism: "Everything intended is something known. The object even of an

erroneous judgment is intended. [So] the object of an error is something known" (1885, p. 398-399). The argument can also be put as the conclusion "Only what is known can be erred about" (1885, p. 399). Now suppose that your day on the high desert is interrupted not by one car on the horizon, but a dozen of many kinds. Now, the claim "The car on the horizon is a Pontiac" becomes problematic. Which car on the horizon do you intend? The Pontiac, you say, and there may be a Pontiac on the horizon, but your claim is offered as a claim qualifying a thing as a Pontiac, and not as an existence claim that may or may not hold in an indeterminate situation. The problem is that the partial knowledge of the intention (in this case, the subject term "the car on the horizon") cannot, by itself, pick out the object well enough for the predication to be right or wrong. If the idea were not partial but complete, for example, "the car on the horizon, seventh from the left, passing by a ravine, driven by a driver in a yellow helmet, and a Pontiac," then the intended object would be fully selected. But now the claim would, in order to pick out the right object, simply state what must already be true about the car. Again, there could be no error.

Royce began by attempting to explain the experience of being in error, but the attempts to account for error in situations in which intentions and objects are related by only partial knowledge do not seem to lead to an account of error. Royce argues that these simple accounts are insufficient. In each case, the intention and object fail to connect in a way that provides the possibility that the claim made can be both correct enough to be related to the object intended and incomplete enough to be mistaken. The solution Royce offers is "*That the agreement or the disagreement of [one's] judgments with their intended objects exists and has meaning for an actual thought, a consciousness, to which both these related terms are present, namely, both the judgment and the object wherewith it is to agree*" (1885, p. 377). In other words, in order that a claim about something be an error, there must be some larger inclusive perspective that contains both the object and the idea of the agent making the claim as parts. From this larger point of view, the judgment made by the agent, by you about the cars, for example, is known and so is the object you intended to describe such that, from this larger perspective, a further judgment can be made that you are mistaken and that the car you saw was (disappointingly) a Chevrolet.

From one angle this represents a commonplace notion of error. When you first made your claim about the car on the horizon, you were satisfied that the car was a Pontiac. But you might be mistaken and, in less idealist terms, this could be the case if, for example, you radioed an observer in a tower closer to the cars where the observer was perhaps watching the cars as part of the race. You might see the number on the car and, with that, provide enough information to the observer to pick out the car you meant. You then claimed that the car in question was a classic Pontiac. The observer, now seeing the car you intended and knowing something about the makes of cars, can judge your claim. Thanks to your partial description, the observer could make the connections and your error was possible. Royce's own conclusions stretched further than the commonplace. Even if some observer could judge your claim, that observer too, insofar as she lacked complete knowledge, would still require a larger perspective to make her judgment fallible. Suppose there were no such larger perspective available: in this case, like an umpire behind the plate at a baseball game, the decision of the observer could not be mistaken. While Royce

does not propose the argument in terms of a regress, one can see that if any human judgment is fallible, then every human judgment is subject to inclusion in a wider perspective that can guarantee its fallibility.

Royce concludes that the largest perspective would necessarily be an infinite one that includes all judgments and objects as parts of the whole. For Royce, error can be seen as possible because, while the Absolute Mind includes all ideas (and so all objects as well), finite beings are mere parts and can possess only some of the ideas including ones that from the larger perspective are mistaken.

Much later in *Sources of Religious Insight*, Royce returns again to this general conclusion.³ As in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, he begins by acknowledging a commonplace version of his conception of error. Just as your claim at the high desert race, in order to be more than just a momentary observation, aspires to the wider angle of the observer in the tower, so Royce holds that this aspiration to a wider view is what gives even ordinary claims their standing as beliefs that can organize further judgments and action.⁴ But the commonplace recognition of wider viewpoints finally requires the existence of a largest view as well. Our confidence in the ordinary process of belief formation is itself warranted by “*the fact that whatever else is real, some form of such a wider insight, some essentially super-individual and superhuman insight is real*” (1912, p. 112). He concludes “If there is no such world-possessing insight, then, once more, your opinions about the world are neither true nor false. Or, otherwise stated, if there is no such inclusive insight there is no world” (1912, p. 113). From error, then, Royce is driven to claim a wider and wider insight in terms of which the finite and fallible character of human life can be understood. Hope, then, is justified for finite beings because their failures guarantee the presence of an insight beyond all limited points of view. “And to sum up,” Royce concludes in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, “let us overcome all our difficulties by declaring that all the many Beyonds, which single significant judgments seem vaguely and separately to postulate, are present as fully realized intended objects to the unity of an all-inclusive, [...] conscious thought [...] Then all our puzzles will disappear at a stroke, and error will be possible” (1885, p. 423).

Peirce’s concerns about Royce’s argument were fourfold. The first was a technical concern. Royce, he says, “seems to think that the real subject of a proposition can be denoted by a general term of the proposition; that is, that precisely what it is that you are talking about can be distinguished from other things by giving a general description of it” (1992, p. 232). Like Russell after him, Royce here offered a theory of reference that treated the subject of a proposition as a definite description. Error emerges on this account when the definite description is incomplete (or inaccurate)

³ He apparently held to this basic account of error throughout his career. His 1915-1916 lecture course on metaphysics includes the note that he read passages from his discussion of error in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* in class as part of his discussion of error and its implications. See Royce (1998, p. 70).

⁴ In his metaphysics lectures, Royce similarly concluded “My judgment has therefore an essential character of appeal to a being who can observe that I have an agreement to the object which I actually intend. The decision as to whether my judgments are true or not could be made only by one at once identical with me as I made the judgment and identical with me whenever I know completely that which I endeavor to judge” (1998, p. 71).

and so, as a means of picking out its referent, may miss its mark. The trouble, according to Peirce, is that definite descriptions never serve to pick things out. Instead, reference is a matter of an “index, which is like a pointing finger” that “alone can designate the subject of a proposition, designates it without implying any characters at all” (1992, p. 232). By relying on descriptions, Royce fails to identify the signifying operation necessary to establish a subject’s existence prior to making a claim at all, and in doing so calls into question his analysis of error. Curiously, however, Peirce does not therefore reject Royce’s treatment, but rather suggests that when descriptions are replaced by indices, the problem of error reemerges.

The reemergence of error in Peirce’s modified account forms the second concern he has about Royce’s discussion of error. Rather than understanding error as a failure of a description, “it might be asked *how* two different men can know they are speaking of the same thing” (1992, 273).⁵ “Suppose,” Peirce says, “one man should say a flash of lightning was followed by thunder and another should deny it. How would they know they meant the same flash?” The answer is that one person would “recognize the mark and then [...] conclude they meant the same flash” (1992, p. 233-234). Error is possible in such a model if it is possible that the second person, the observer, finds the mark indicated by the first but concludes that the predicate was mistaken because no thunder followed. As in the desert car race, you and the observer in the tower coordinate observations and, thanks to the different perspective of the observer, a judgment can then be made that your claim is an error. This kind of error is not a distant judgment but identifies a conflict in claims, which is also part of the character of error.

Peirce identifies his third concern with Royce’s argument as a general failing of the Hegelian idealism Royce inherited. “The capital error that permeates his whole system in every part of it is that he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash” (1992, p. 233). In Royce’s presentation of error, while he accounts for how, from the angle of a wider perspective, a given claim can be wrong, the experience of error is restricted or appears to be restricted to the wider perspective alone. The agent who has erred appears not to notice and is perhaps prevented from noticing by the fact that the wider judgment is ultimately an infinite (and, one supposes, an infinitely removed) judgment. Since beliefs are not separable from action for Peirce, error is more than a distant judgment; it is also manifest in the conscious course of action of the one who has erred. The failure to recognize a clash in experience leaves out a key element of error.

Peirce raises a fourth concern as well. In the last section of his presentation of the problem of error, Royce proposed an objection attributed to Plato’s character, Thrasymachus. The objection is tied to the idea that an error is a matter of an actual judgment made by an observer whether or not it is recognized as such by the failing agent. For Thrasymachus, all that is required is a possible judge, not an actual one. However, such a “barely possible” judge, Royce says, would not serve because at the moment of the error, the claim or action would not be an error at all since the inclusive insight is *constitutive* of the error (and of truth). Peirce, who takes himself as the “foolish” Thrasymachus, argues that Royce’s rejection of a possible judge fails

⁵ This problem becomes a central one for James as well. See James (1897 and 1905).

to recognize the process of induction. Here, the claims are not true or false sharply divided, but rather a matter of probability. Peirce does not reject the claim that there is a perspective from which errors are already errors. Instead he holds that human experience does not have access to such a perspective, even as humans inquire and find both relative truth and relative error. Modifying Thrasymachus' view demanding a possible rather than an actual judge, Peirce argues for a practical conception that requires an actual process of inquiry as a condition for the possibility of error.

At work in Peirce's critique of Royce is a developing conception of error tied to inquiry. In her recent work on Peirce, Deborah Mayo (1996 and 2005) has argued that Peirce's theory of induction provides the general ground for his larger conception of the sciences as self-correcting. In order for a science (or a given method) to be self-correcting from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of science, it must satisfy two conditions. First, it must "asymptotically approach truth in the long run" and, second, must provide a "method of replacing rejected hypotheses with better (truer) ones" (LAUDAN in MAYO, 2005, p. 302). The second condition implies the importance of error since in order to improve the findings of a science, hypotheses must be found better or worse, more or less true or more or less false. Peirce adopts a view that places the progress of science not just in some truth in the long run, though this is a consequence of his view, but rather in methods that are *error sensitive*. The inductive methods Peirce endorses are "very good at uncovering mistakes and learning from errors" (MAYO, 2005, p. 303). As suggested in his critique of Royce, Peirce holds that error does not turn on the reality of a long run perspective. It depends upon the practical demands of present testing. The ability to appeal to other differently placed agents for judgments about hypotheses provides for the possibility of actual error in the context of actual investigations in the present. Actual judgments of all sorts contribute to the long run perspective of the system of investigation, but some, mainly those more able to detect error, make the largest contribution.

What is significant for our discussion is that error is not a judgment independent of the agents who believe and test certain claims, but instead adjudicates the use of claims in the context of a method that monitors or is sensitive to error. For Peirce, the judgment of an infinite mind is, in a sense, cashed out in an error sensitive *method*. Such results, of course, could not be forthcoming if the method used is not error sensitive. For example, if the method of testing were one in which a single observer simply repeated her observation of a static sample again and again, the method would fail to be error sensitive. All three methods of knowing Peirce discussed in his early paper, "The Fixation of Belief," that is, tenacity, authority and a priorism, are each examples of methods that are weakly error-sensitive at best.

The problem with Peirce's account of error as presented by Mayo, however, is that while it recognizes the importance of indices (over descriptions) and the value of outward clashes and testing, it nevertheless fails to provide an account of the standard in terms of which failure can occur outside an instrumental standard or a standard internal to the method itself. A given agent may suppose some hypothesis about producing some product and successfully produce the product over the long run without ever attending to the consequences of the production on the environment or resources. If the standard is the efficient production of the product, testing will seek a result that leads to such production. Despite such internal success, however,

one might wonder whether those using the method of investigation and production themselves can be mistaken. With no further standard of evaluation, no wider insight, it is unclear that the method would be error sensitive except in the weakest sense: when the environment and resources can no longer support production of the product, the method will fail. If one agrees with Royce's general claim that error requires a larger viewpoint or perspective, Peirce's theory of induction seems to propose inductive methods that can warrant error within their own processes, but cannot warrant the possibility that the method itself is mistaken. The problem is actually the problem identified by Peirce's Thrasymachus: what perspective is required for us "to be satisfied that investigation has a universal tendency toward the settlement of opinion," not simply in a particular case but on the whole. For a given inductive method, which has established an internal standard, what perspective can be identified to make it possible that the method and its internal standard are themselves in error?

In his 1912 article, "Truth and Error," Royce revisits the issue of error and the conclusions of his earlier work. After reviewing the meanings of error and various attempts to account for error, he concludes by offering seven requirements that he thinks necessary for a satisfactory theory of error. Error, as it reemerges in Royce's later work, is now taken as a problem of finite perspectives asserting themselves as the perspective of the whole. As it appears in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and later in *Sources of Religious Insight*, error is a partial view that, in order to be an error, stands in relation to some wider perspective that includes it as a part. In this later article, error is reformulated as an activity that "willfully asserts itself" as if it were the wider perspective. The implication is no longer that error is an error because some distant judge sees it that way. Instead, error is a certain kind of process carried out by an agent and characterized by its inability to recognize its limitations. In effect, Royce's later formulation of error combines his earlier idea that error requires the presence of a wider insight, a larger whole, with the principle offered by Peirce in his theory of induction: that a condition for the possibility of error is the presence of an error-sensitive process. The resulting standards for a theory of error begin with the idea that error requires both a perspective beyond the perspective of the method at hand and that the method at hand be sensitive to error as judged by this wider perspective.

The fourth standard recalls Royce's discussion in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*: "the rational test or success of ideas, hypotheses, and opinions lies in their relations not to momentary experiences, but to the whole of life, so far as that whole is accessible" (1912a, p. 123). The last clause is significant because the rational test is now relative to the whole "so far as it is accessible." In the original discussion of error, it appears that one could be mistaken and never know it since the judgment of the inclusive mind may be inaccessible. Now the operative whole in terms of which an error is constituted is closer at hand. The change also seems to mark a concession to Peirce's criticism (and the criticism of many others as well) that the "absolute" of Royce's earlier work stood at such a great distance that it seemed irrelevant to the troubles of daily life. It appears that Royce would now agree with Peirce when he says that "it makes no difference whether or not all questions are actually answered by man or by God." What matters is a tendency toward the settlement of opinion and this requires the ongoing presence of some larger whole in terms of which particular judgments can succeed or fail.

The fifth standard reinforces the definition of error and requires that whatever explanation is offered for error, it should be explained “as due to the same conditions as those which make possible finite life, evil, individuality, and conflict in general” (1912a, p. 123). The “Outward Clash” and the experience of finitude, evil, and even of being an individual distinct from others, are now to be connected to the account of error. As a result, the sixth standard declares “theoretical error cannot be separated from practical error.” Plans developed in the abstract will always be connected with action and action with its “feeling of hitting and getting hit” is liable to succeed or fail.

The seventh and final standard responds to the question I raised regarding Peirce’s notion of error sensitivity. If error sensitivity is internal to the method, can methods ever be in error? “Error,” Royce concludes, “is the expression, through voluntary action, of a belief. In case of an error, a being, whose ideas have a limited scope, so interprets those ideas as to bring himself into conflict with a larger life to which he himself belongs” (1912a, p. 124). The standards emerge in the conflict with the whole to which the agent belongs. This whole is a “life” (or perhaps “lifeworld”) of “experience and action.” It is the larger life that “determines what the erring subject, at his stage of experience, [...] *ought* to think and do.” The agent errs when she “so feels, believes, acts, interprets, as to be in positive and decisive conflict with this *ought*” (1912a, p. 124). A given method or a given science must therefore “belong” to some larger life in terms of which it too can fail.

Error, it is clear, emerges for an agent when she is part of a larger whole. For human agents, the larger whole is a community of others with whom one shares a history, a set of aspirations, and a daily life. For Royce, communities are at once collections of individuals and at the same time wholes in possession of their own agency, their own ability to act and judge. An error is mistaking the view of a part of the community for the view of the whole community. Such a mistake is an error in part because it fails to probe for error. Once one adopts the idea that her perspective is the wider perspective, there is no recognized higher authority to consult, no wider perspective. At the same time, this very individual is also a part of a whole whose actual presence serves as a judge who can take in the ideas of the individual and the ideas that serve as standards for the individual and make a judgment. The possibility of error for an individual is the presence of a larger whole of which she is a part.

In the context of his last major book, *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce reframes the process that makes error possible as the process of interpretation. Drawn from Peirce’s semiotic theory⁶, Royce argues that percepts and concepts (subjects and predicates in his earlier discussion) can only stand in relation through a mediating act of judgment accomplished by an agent who can take in both percept and concept and can then interpret their relation. Error, as a failed relation between a claim, idea or action directed toward some purpose, object or outcome, is a result of an interpretative process that necessarily requires some inclusive view. Such inclusive views may be long-standing communities or may be new communities that emerge at the scene of conflict or interaction between two agents.⁷ Such a view may even be

⁶ See Royce (1913, p. 275-276).

⁷ See Royce (1914, p. 42-54) for a discussion of the emergence of communities of interpretation at the scene of conflict.

he view of an individual as she grows and changes and reinterprets her own past.⁸ Such a process, on the one hand, acknowledges the reality of borders that divide ideas, cultures, states, and individuals and, on the other, acknowledges the continuity of the parts of a whole in terms of which conflict can be fostered or resolved. The wider “life” that includes these conflicts and their interpreters is an “essentially social universe” that is the “sole and supreme reality” and also an on-going process of interpretation (1913, p. 350). “Interpretation,” he concludes, “demands that at least an infinite series of distinct individual acts of interpretation shall take place [...] If, the real world contains the Community of Interpretation [then it] expresses its life in an infinite series of individual interpretations, each of which occupies its own place in a perfectly real order of time” (1913, p. 340).

Whereas Royce originally claimed a single absolute as the necessary condition for error, in *The Problem of Christianity* he claims that a *social universe* is the condition. If we are finite, struggling, living beings, and the possibility of error is essential to our lives, then we are necessarily in a pluralistic universe. Such a universe amounts as well to an ongoing process of interaction and investigation — interpretation — moving at times toward greater integration and at times away from it.⁹ The success of a person or group, if Peirce is right, turns not on the simple recognition that there are more inclusive perspectives, but rather on the active development of methods that are error-sensitive. One may recognize the outlines of a pluralistic universe but then shade her eyes, preferring to ignore the signs that something has gone wrong, that evil is near and failure imminent. This is a response to the reality of error, but it is a response with a cost.

If Royce is right about the presence and intractability of error, failure to be error-sensitive can only be destructive of others or suicidal or both. In a world where we wonder whether anyone can be mistaken in her claims about the world, it seems clear from Royce’s perspective that one can be, like it or not, but that error can be manifested in a variety of ways. The fact that someone can be wrong does not, however, mean that there are some given transcendent principles, or some supreme judge who has delivered a judgment which we can adopt as the truth. There may be such a judge, but what experience suggests is that the accessible judge, the one whose verdict is rendered in our lives, is a process of engagement in which communities of interpretation emerge and develop finding some of what we believe in error and other beliefs as instructive additions to whatever is held true. It is as Peirce expected: a life indefinitely prolonged is a condition of error, but it must be a life that is necessarily a part and a whole at once, a member of itself, and a member of a larger life.

The theory that draws together Royce’s early insights about error and his later ones in light of Peirce’s theories of induction and semiotics provides the outline of an answer to the possibility of error in the present world. Beginning from the experience of error, Royce brings us finally to a pluralistic universe in which the process of ongoing, error-sensitive inquiry can serve as a ground for hope and a means for overcoming our failures and isolation. The recognition that individuals, nations, and

⁸ See Royce (1913, p. 292, 326).

⁹ Instead of harmony, the notion of integration as developed by Mary Parker Follett (1925) provides a better description of the character of a flourishing whole.

cultures, can be mistaken leads us finally to recognize and foster “that interpretation of life which sends us across the borders both of our conceptual and of our perceptual life, to lay up treasures in other worlds, to interpret the meaning of the processes of time, to read the meaning of art and of life” (1913, p. 295).

References

- ALMEDER, Robert. Recent Work on Error. *Philosophia*, 27 (1-2), p. 3-58, 1999.
- COKELET, Bradford. Ideal Agency and the Possibility of Error. *Ethics*, 118, p. 315-323, 2008.
- FOLLETT, Mary Parker. *Creative Experience*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1924.
- JAMES, William. Review of ‘The Religious Aspect of Philosophy’ (1885). In: AUXIER, Randall (ed.). *Critical Responses to Josiah Royce, 1885-1916*, v. 2 (Reviews and Articles). Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 2000.
- _____. The Function of Cognition (1897). In: McDERMOTT, John J. (ed.). *The Writings of William James*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 136-151.
- _____. How Two Minds Can Know One Thing. In: McDERMOTT, John J. (ed.). *The Writings of William James*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 227-231.
- LAVIN, Douglas. Practical Reason and the Possibility of Error. *Ethics*, 114, p. 424-457, 2004.
- MAYO, Deborah G. *Error and the Growth of Experimental Knowledge*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- _____. Peircean Induction and the Error – Correcting Thesis. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 41 (2), p. 299-319, 2005.
- PEIRCE, Charles S. (1877). The Fixation of Belief. In: HOUSER, Nathan and KLOESEL, Christian (ed.). *The Essential Peirce*, v. 1. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 109-123.
- PEIRCE, Charles S. (1885). An American Plato: Review of Royce’s ‘Religious Aspect of Philosophy’. In: HOUSER, Nathan and KLOESEL, Christian (ed.). *The Essential Peirce*, v. 1. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 229-241.
- RANDALL, John Herman. Josiah Royce and American Idealism. *Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (3), p. 57-83, 1966.
- RESCHER, Nicholas. *Error (On our Predicament when Things go Wrong)*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

ROYCE, Josiah. (1885). *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965.

_____. (1901). *The World and the Individual*. Second Series. New York: Dover Publications, 1959.

_____. (1912a). Error and Truth. In: ROBINSON, Daniel S (ed.). *Royce's Logical Essays*. Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1951, p. 98-124.

_____. (1912). *The Sources of Religious Insight*. Frank Oppenheim (ed.). Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

_____. (1913). *The Problem of Christianity*. Frank Oppenheim (ed.). Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001.

_____. *War and Insurance*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1916.

_____. *Metaphysics*. Richard Hocking and Frank Oppenheim (ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.

SANTAYANA, George. *Character and Opinion in the United States*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920.

SPRIGGE, T. L. S. *The God of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

Endereço / Address

Scott L. Pratt
University of Oregon
Department of Philosophy
97403-1295
Eugene, OR – USA

Data de envio: 4-6-2010

Data de aprovação: 12-10-2010