

The Concept of the Absolute;  
Its Historical Development

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*1910*

Submitted to the Department of Philosophy of  
the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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Philosophy may be defined as a search for the ultimate principles of reality. It is the reflection of humanity upon its own existence, the effort and desire to know the meaning of the ever-changing activities of its environment and the attempt to find the substantial and unchanging principle or principles from which all things spring. Philosophy is an intellectual endeavor to make a rational system out of what is seemingly chaotic; it is purely a mental procedure which arises from the very nature and demand of the mind, to all appearances a necessity from which man cannot escape, and which he must work out in whatever environment he is cast. It was this demand which prompted Thales and the earliest Greek philosophers to declare the elements as the ultimate; the Eleatics found an explanation in "Being"; and, later, their critics, influenced by an emphatic attention toward the changeableness of everything, saw the ultimate in "becoming"; Democritus with his atoms of final division and Plato with his abstract ideas were polar opposites, but still expressing this same mental attitude of striving for the ultimate. The conflict of the nominalists and realists in the Middle Ages, over questions which they thought vital to their theology were similar outcroppings. Berkeley the first of the idealists, who sought to overthrow materialism, raised the new problem of knowledge, or rather raised that problem in a new way, but he sought an ultimate more worthy than the atoms, which ultimate he declared to be the mind of God. Leibnitz with his monads, the relation of which was not interrelation but pre-established harmony; Spinoza with his predominating intellectualism, in the idea of an infinite substance with its diversity of appearances in the equally infinite attributes, both have constructed systems because of this demand. Fichte the most extreme subjectivist and Hegel the rationalist, who makes reason bind all in a unity are types of the German spirit in philosophizing.

This then has been the hope of reflection, to grasp in thought the ultimate. Order is thought's marked characteristic and it has been considered that the more thorough the thought-system and the more complete the arrangement of concepts, the more nearly had the goal been reached. As the philosophies have passed into history they have been succeeded by others, which have sought a satisfactory interpretation, in connection with the older systems, of what has been brought together from other lines of thought and discovery, and in the light of these new facts to offer a complete solution. The status of philosophy has been changing and progressing with adaptations to overcoming some new obstacle, but always this tendency has been toward monism. But there has been another reason, than the satisfaction of thought for this desire for unity, of which philosophy is just the reflective side, and without which philosophy would have a minimum value. That is the religious conviction. Though it has not always been stated, in the majority of systems, the religious stands out and above like a dome capping the whole structure. The god of all religions has been credited with the most complete and most superlative attributes which were conceivable; hence, what philosophy has declared to be the final, has each time been ascribed to the god.

It was Spinoza who went the whole limit and gave us pantheistic absolutism. Instead of being irreligious, as his contemporaries accused him of being, he was so thoroughly religious that he could not accept the common belief of God as one of a hierarchy, but must clothe him with all the extremes of conception; God is eternal, infinite, all-inclusive and whoever thinks him less is the more irreligious and irreverent; This is religion and philosophy in one. The God of religion is identified with the Supreme Reality of philosophy. Absolutism is the final word.

Kant and Spencer both admit that such ideas as the absolute, the infinite, the eternal, are terms which reason cannot but postulate, yet which it cannot know directly, nor at all comprehend. They are both agnostic as regards the power of pure reason. Green and Bradley, to notice more recent advocates have been

preachers of this doctrine of the absolute in England; and still more recently there is Royce the American and Münsterberg who has championed the cause on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the many angles of vision, and the inclination of temperament the demand for the absolute still shows itself. In truth, all philosophies have in some measure radiated the tendency, to which, culminating in the later philosophies, the name "absolute" has become attached. All Germany has become literally steeped in this manner of thinking. England is a near second, for whom the absolute is almost the paramount article of the philosophic creed. Even the pluralist, whose empiricism excludes him from classification with the idealists, says that it cannot be escaped, yet says it cannot be proved, and "though not proved actual must be believed in somehow".

What have been the influences which have brought about the present status of the concepts of the absolute? We are able to turn to the history of philosophy and discover three elements, which are the three systems of Spinoza, Berkeley, and Kant. Spinoza gave the incentive to absolutism by his all-inclusive "substance", which instead of favoring the materialist in his belief of an ultimate substratum, or the spiritualist in his belief that mind was the final, gave place to both theories and combined the two in order that he might abolish dualism. Berkeley showed how knowledge was subjective and there must be mental perception and thought ere there was existence and the materialistic theory now being considered out of the way, Idealistic philosophy was one step nearer its goal. Kant emphasized the supreme authority of the moral law as against the limits of reason and gave to the idealist the opportunity for making his theory more secure against materialism. This is the development Fichte produced, arriving at radical subjectivism. His, Schelling's and Hegel's systems are constructed upon Kant's conclusions. From the man, who said reason brings its own laws with it and prescribes them to the universe, they take the cue to push their theories to the extreme and end in absolutism, panlogism, pantheism or whatever they may be termed, all in direct opposition to what Kant had wished to emphasize, namely, that reason is limited, and instead of being comprehensible, the sphere of the absolute is excluded from human thought.

Out of the possible number of systems adopting absolutism as their end, there may be discovered three to one of which each of the remainder may be eventually reduced. They may be designated as Materialistic Absolutism, Logical Absolutism and Mystical Absolutism. In a discussion of these three theories, those theories in opposition will necessarily be involved. Not to extend the examination over too much territory, Kant and Spencer may be taken as earlier, and the pragmatists as later critics.

The metaphysical theories of the materialistic type have lost their crudeness and become systems of no small acceptance, because they have taken on 'brighter hues. There is not that primitive way of making the ultimate a matter of infinite division into minute particles, which in their last analysis partake of the same nature universally. "Matter" atoms and "soul" atoms in a dualistic relation with matter thought of as inert and soul as activity is not the point of controversy any more. Even when there had not yet been sciences developed to give unity on the basis of force or law or some other hypothesis Thales demanded the explanation of nature and was satisfied in declaring that the elements in different proportions accounted for the diversity of things. Instead of reducing the universe to one element or a few elements chemistry has revealed the existence of between seventy and eighty such elements and this trail has led farther than ever into the wilderness. But, though the problem has been shifted by substituting for element, the terms, forces, qualities energy and divers other principles of verbal coinage the end is not yet. Vitalized matter, electrical ions, and what-not are given the responsibility of accounting for ultimate reality. But so little value can be given to the theory of knowledge by materialism, that any effort to patch up a system to satisfactorily include it tends to become a mere juggling of words. With the later thinkers, the materialists have approached the spiritualists and also, as a matter of fact the spiritualists have approached the materialists. It is hard to see how it raises the value of what is any more for the ~~the~~

pan-psychist to call all mind-stuff, than for the materialist of the less favored type to call all matter-stuff. In either case it is such as it is anyhow. It has become, in some part at least, only a matter of emphasis, on the one side spiritualized matter, and on the other, materialized spirit, receiving the greater attention.

When materialism claims to be the philosophy based upon science, it should be prepared to go the whole distance and say that scientific observation can and will discover through laws what the final ground of existence is. But materialism may become a hindrance to science, for science as science never considers ultimate problems. Materialism can be only a postulate or working hypothesis for science, and what science has used as symbols of operation, atoms, matter, energy, are snatched at by the materialist as the underlying substratum of all reality. But science must not be carried out of nor beyond her sphere. To account for mind and matter under the same system of laws is impossible; the essence of mind whatever it may be, is baffling and continually remains a mystery. If it is possible to account for mental phenomena by means of matter, there must be something not yet discovered in what is termed matter. In any case it is unscientific to fill out in imagination what does not seem possible to be known. It is only an imaginary knowledge, which for hastening satisfaction says that it is the nature of matter to so act in what we call psychic processes. On that ground the assumption is made that the activities of ~~the~~ physical phenomena are better known than the psychical, which is simply begging the question about what the process of knowledge is. Thought as a mere "physiological function" of the nervous system or as a "phosphorescence of the brain" tell nothing about the mental processes; the problem remains still the same. It should be remembered that both psychology and natural science are systems of thought. Instead of trying to determine some ultimate principle, after all these years of effort,

the strange thing is that the outcome of materialistic philosophy has not been despairingly rejected by its followers, as but a mystery, which, in the attempt to explain it, has accumulated greater proportions with the ages. Without it there is as much gained with science. There might as well be as much value in lumping the whole business into an absolute totality, or making continued divisions until you have an independent substratum. In the first case we have pantheism and the world real, in the second pantheism and the world appearances. To say that it is the "nature of" matter or that energy is "inherent in" matter is not adding anything to philosophy; science has postulated that, as well as discovered it, if it is true. Materialism is not scientific therefore, when it attempts to go beyond the results of science, that is, when it poses as a philosophy built simply upon the postulates of science.

Idealism, however, takes the opposite side of the question, and ascribes everything to mind. While the earlier idealists did not expressly state the question so, their theories were generally absolutistic. There was no thought of separating the God of religion from the all-containing the absolute. It seemed to be a natural conclusion that the two conceptions must be identified. And, it is true, that is still the idea expressed by all absolutists, although to meet their present critics, they are compelled to emphatically affirm it in so many words. This conclusion is what ever remained a puzzle to Spencer. He asks how infinite mercy and infinite justice can be characteristics of the same being. He says our conceptions, being largely symbolic, are capable of development into complete ones, and serving as steps to conclusions which are proved valid by their correspondence to observation, we acquire a habit of dealing with them as true conceptions - as actualities. Learning by long experience that they can if needful be verified, we are led habitually to accept them without verification. "Thus," he says, we open the door to some which profess to stand for known things, which really stand for things that cannot be known

in anyway. With Spencer as a critic of the absolute (and infinity) it is all a matter of conceivability. He concludes that knowledge ~~that knowledge~~ is altogether relative - that consciousness is only conceivable as a relation and the absolute is incapable of a necessary relation. Spencer gives the definitions of science as knowledge of what is near and conceivable, religion as belief in what is far away and unknowable. We see here his admission that there must be an absolute - identical with God - but because it is logically inconceivable it is therefore not comprehensible. That we use such words as infinite, and immortal and un-knowable shows the negative character of any power of ours for expressing such ideas and our futile efforts to give positive value to such concepts.

Now what Spencer calls a religious principle, Kant calls a regulative principle of pure reason. Both are agnostics, when it comes to considering such concepts as "infinity" or "absolute" as having any objective counterpart - as far as human reason is concerned. They acknowledge the probability of the absolute, but not the possibility for human conception, because human knowledge is confined to experience. According to Kant, we may conclude that our concept of the absolute has a degree of positive meaning, but only as a regulative principle of pure reason, which spurs us on to further accomplishing activity. The bad light in which the agnosticism of Kant and Spencer has been taken is due largely to the medium through which the opposition has looked. It is again the question of the identity of God with the absolute, that has caused the trouble. Spencer himself evidently held this view, so of course the conclusions of his First Principles are not acceptable to the religious mind. He who would teach the existence of God and then declare him to be unknowable is open to criticism on his very first assumption. But Kant distinguishes between pure reason and practical reason and finds a more consistent foundation in his conclusion that the principle which pure reason discovers is a regulator for practical reason, which alone can give a basis for theology.



The absolutism of Hegel, while professing to explain it, virtually leaves no concreteness to reality. The importance of his system is that it shows the universe to be a "through-and-through" kind, as James says, systematic and rational, capable of rationality in systems, and of system in rationality. But in "burying the real subject and the real object in the abstraction of thought", the system fails to provide any real foundation for that dynamic principle which for both science and philosophy is an "indispensable token of reality". What is immediate as data for finite experience is untrue, because such data are not their own others. They are negated by what is external to them. The absolute is true because it and it only has no external environment and is consequently its own other. As James remarks about Hegel's process of argument, "this sounds well but is incomprehensible to most of us". To the uninitiated, there is much in Hegel which remains "words mere words", a wealth of words with a poverty of meaning.

It is this point of subjective objective relation or internal and external meanings, as Prof. Royce designates it, which has remained so dense and hidden, through all the history of absolutism. What Royce has done and what his work has meant to idealistic theories is well expressed by Prof. Wilson in the following, "The elaboration of the subject by Prof. Royce has had the effect of clearing away much of the philosophic dust, which has been wont to linger over the field of idealism and of laying bare the roots of the matter for our inspection. The argument is based upon a truth which modern scientists have been too much disposed to overlook, a fact which, when stated has the appearance of a truism, that all knowledge of whatever sort must be in the subjective form of consciousness ~~or~~ or experience". Upon the formal certainty of this point the whole system of absolute idealism is built up. If the universe to us is confined to mental content then this mental content itself is declared to be

the ultimate and absolute reality. Thus, what Royce has set before us is a fuller development and an elaboration of the suggestions of Berkeley and Fichte about <sup>of experience</sup> subjectivity. But his absolutism has not that ambiguity for the meaning of "idea" which is confusing, in the work of the pioneer Berkeley, by whom the term is used to express both perception and thought experiences. Though so opposite in their conclusions about the meaning of the absolute, how closely Royce approaches Kant may be shown by the following quotation from "The World and the Individual":

"... in consulting experience we are simply seeking aid in the undertaking to give our ideas a certain positive determination, to this content and no other. But never in our human processes of experience do we reach that determination. It is for us the object of love, and of hope, of desire and of will, of faith and of work, but never of present finding. This individual determination itself remains so far the principal character of the Real; and is, as an ideal, the Limit toward which we endlessly aim". This sounds as despairing as if one were to stop with Kant in his conclusions of the Critique of Pure Reason. But Royce continues, "yet if we could reach that limit of determination which is all the while our goal, if our universal judgments were confirmed by an adequate experience, then we should stand in the immediate presence of the Real". Which is very hopeful but is a dogmatic affirmation of what is not known. We may call Royce a Logical Idealist in this respect, that he demands a logical connection extending through our experience.

The other type of Absolute Idealist is the Mystical. The contradictions which we discover, the logical idealist says are due to our finitude and hence our ignorance, but the mystical idealist does not so face the question. Does reason present any contradictions? he may be asked, and he may answer yes and no both as possible, but with either answer there must be given an

explanation why it does or does not. Logic may be applied to all experiences but in some there are contradictions. The contradictions are due to the misuse of logic - because there is an overlapping of the good, the true and the beautiful and the use of logic, aesthetics, or ethics in the realm ~~of another~~ of another results in error and discrepancy. Münsterberg places the claim to 'values of absoluteness' in "conviction". About such a system brings the wonder, on first consideration, whether there has been any improvement made over the Hindu philosophy. Any 'absolutive' doctrine is pantheistic and when it has the mystical trend such as Münsterberg - and Bradley, who despairs of the living value of logic - gives to his system, it is little different in the end from the philosophy of Brahman, even though there is an appeal for the preservation of the individual. And we may ask how this is so materially different from the conviction of Descartes about the existence of God. For the mystic idealist the emphasis is, that we have chosen, we have set our problems. We have not found them in natural systems nor even in logic. It is the meaning which we make of what is given to us, of what comes to us in various manners, that is valuable. It is the things of life, the values of life which we set, and to which we apply our logic, that have meaning for us. Logic is dead without something to work upon and these are known before logic is applied. Logic is just a rule, a history of a process under given conditions. Some things also, are just appreciated and not realized in any conceptual logical effort, indeed they cannot be. Lotze continually reiterates the view that the formal activity of thought could not give the content of reality and that the categories of logic could neither do justice to the processes of nature nor to the movements of history. In setting the claims of the value-judgment in a new and fuller light he made clear the right of the spiritual consciousness to have a voice in the final interpretation of reality. Our convictions which we cannot escape and by which we live, come from our very nature, and we hold to these convictions through all time regardless of logic etc. We cannot fall into the pessimistic

way of thinking that we and the world are neither one  
any more than mere appearances without real meaning.  
We hold to the conviction of the Absolute and our religious  
views attending, and bend all our lives toward our  
convictions for an active life and not toward our logic.  
We do not use the tools of our existence for their sake  
nor for the mere fun of using them, but for the value  
in progress toward our convictions, that we may  
obtain by them.

Royce rather anticipates the criticisms of the Pragmatists  
in a discussion of what he calls the Third Conception  
of Being as one of four historical conceptions. Kant is  
the one who fathered this movement, which, Royce says,  
is not yet definitely named, hence the designation he  
gives it. This is a modified realism, which, according  
to this conception to be real means to be valid or  
true, or to be an object of possible experience. It is essentially  
a conception of the age - a scientific one, typical of the  
thought of the century just past. Its argument is for  
empirical reality - a separation of internal and external  
meanings. "Being," this conception asserts, "is what gives  
true ideas their truth". To be real is to be the object  
of an idea. It confines itself to forming internal  
meanings and testing them by external experience.  
It tries to rest content with abstract universals  
more or less determined by particular observations.  
"In vain," Royce objects, "does one stand apart from the  
internal meaning, from the conscious inner purpose  
embodied in a given idea, and still attempt to  
estimate whether or no that idea corresponds with  
its object. There is no purely external criterion of  
truth. We deny that individuals rest solely upon  
external experience as such for their guarantee.  
Experience is experience for something and is wholly  
internal, nor do our internal meanings ever present  
to us, neither do our external experiences ever produce  
before us for our inspection, an object whose

individuality we ever really know as such. Our ideas are vague and incomplete and we seek what other there is to make them complete in a final truth. Now this "other" always lies beyond and is an ideal "limit" toward which we aim. Each idea seeks its own other. "The completed content of the ideas own purpose is the only object of which the idea can ever take note. This alone is the other that is sought". The other of all others is finally determined to be the absolute. This is the course of Royce's argument at building up his idealism. His refutation of the Third Conception is, that it fears the result of the admission of experience as subjectively internal, for it would then resolve itself into idealism and lose its objective reality. This is on the assumption that this new type of realism must on that admission, draw the same conclusions, which Royce seems to think inevitable, namely the unity of an absolute which he identifies with God. But such a realist as Kant must not be overlooked at this point, for, although, he has his phenomena and noumena, he could very easily identify the latter with the "others" of Royce and the result would not be fatal to his system, under an explanation of meaning like Royce gives. Kant wants to emphasize the fact that it is only in attempting to establish the reality of the noumena that failure and fallacy ensue - and that is just what he wants to do. He impresses the assertion that "Experience never supplies any necessity of thought, much less the concept of absolute unity". But this is no detriment to either thought or experience. Experience may be real - is real to us - and reason ~~is limited~~, though unlimited in range is confined to experience for its validity. Who then must concede the point? If Kant were to do so he would admit that his marvelous system had lost its authority by affirming a real evidence of what could not be known in actual experience, as a

result of reason. If Absolutism were to adopt Kant it would be no more absolutism in the lively sense which Royce gives it, for it must then confess the illegality of the claim of reason to the reality of what is not experienced and must agree with Kant that this is only a "regulative principle".

What is the mooted point which causes these contentions? we may ask. And when we have asked that, we are trying to fulfill that demand that is ever with us, the demand for a consistent unity in our world, vital and rational. There is one main point of contention, which if it were admitted by all contenders would clear up many difficulties. The trouble of course is to secure the admission, for men will think as they please that point is, that the God of religion is not identical with the "absolute". And this has been already championed by Pragmatism under the leadership of Prof. James, who has recently delivered such a stinging criticism against the attempts to make the concept of the absolute, as fathered by idealism either understandable or comprehensible, that the followers of that belief have been compelled to assume the defensive. James states the problem thus "Absolutism thinks that the said substance becomes fully divine only in the form of totality and is not itself in any form but the all-form, the pluralistic view which I wish to adopt is willing to believe that there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made and that a distributive form of reality, the each-form is logically as acceptable and empirically as possible as the all-form commonly acquiesced in as so obviously the self-evident thing".

He then goes on to show for what reasons he rejects the idealistic theory. Under such a theory the world cannot be a collection of individuals but is one great all-inclusive fact, outside of which is nothing - nothing is its only alternative. We are parts of the absolute and the absolute is then but a grand total thinking through us, or rather the absolute thinking us produces our individuality - differentiation of itself. We are not eaches, but a part of the all. We revolt against such an argument which has just as little reason in it as that the world is pluralistic, and no argument that makes individual finiteness <sup>to be</sup> finally swallowed up in a whole can bring satisfaction.

Absolutism also has the problem of error to contend with. Royce has probably met this the most efficiently, but still, on the face of it, it is not enough to credit our evil and our immorality to our ignorance. Even if we grant that much we are only putting in an intermediate link to connecting evil of whatever kind with the activity of the absolute. What the idealist has gained in system, he has lost in its comprehension. What he has made by unity he has lost to individuality. His pantheism leaves no freedom of individual human beings, and his theory of knowledge is necessarily intellectualistic. The absolute is belittled if he sees only through human avenues. He is loaded down with the responsibility of all the imperfect, the fruitless and even the silly thoughts which mankind has, for it is as rational to say that such thoughts are the absolute's thoughts as those which are progressive and noble - and perfect, since the absolute is an all-form. Absolutism has no ethical basis if such is the case, no matter what the argument leading to the conclusion, because whatever the absolute does must be alright and we need not trouble ourselves about the morality of our deeds and

thoughts, it will be all very well in the long run anyway. No, to give ourselves a moral responsibility and an individual freedom we must beware of this doctrine, which to be consistent must savor of the workshop.

We have seen how through all the history of philosophy there has been the demand for completeness and unity, and always a tendency toward absolutism, and now that a theory which expressly states itself in absolutistic terms is perfected, to hear these powerful indictments against it is almost disheartening. The contention, as has been said, is on the identity of God with the absolute. But need we lose either to conceive them as apart from each other? May not the "absolute" be a regulator of reason and its only objectification the total of the universe but yet a plurality of individuals with God as one of them. "The Absolute", as one writer says, "even if not proved actual must be believed in somehow". True. But isn't the tendency to believe in a plurality of individuals just as mandatory? Must we not just as thoroughly believe the contrary to have moral freedom for ourselves? If that is also allowable then God may have his independence and we ours, then he may be no longer responsible for our deeds of evil or other acts of any kind and we have more laid at our own doors.

Philosophers seem to have taken it for granted that the absolute unity must be the Supreme Being himself, because, as Spinoza thought, such a conception would be insulting the power and all-efficiency of God. But the contrary cannot be as great an insult as crediting him with all the sorrow and weakness, ignorance and murder, shallowness and lewdness, that is manifest to us in our finite existence.



In this assembling of theories pro and con there has been criticised each of the theories in some point. Materialism has been laid low by the theory of knowledge of Berkeley Fichte and Royce and by the exaltation of reason by Kant, but materialism is materialism for fear of losing the reality of the world and the establishment of a succession of appearances in its stead. Yet everything may be only as it appears to some mind. Spencer has given us an intricate puzzle of many colored threads which we hope to disentangle, but which - let us be plain - is not solvable. But, carrying the analogy still farther it could be said according to Royce, that we are making progress with this puzzle and each bit gained opens up the way toward making a further procedure. What the mystic says is comprehensible without logic, Royce says we shall be immediately aware of when a complete concept is obtained. While the pragmatists like all empiricists, hold it against the idealists that they are intellectualists, we are all intellectualists, who set the absolute as something to be worked toward and try to find the logical connection between our point of view and that of an absolutely perfect one. The logical absolutist has his ground for claiming rational logical coherence - it must be so, else we would not have coherence in the realm of reason. But the absolute, if comprehensible at all, would not be so because of any syllogistic attempt to reach it. Kant has a right to his agnosticism, because, as we shall have to admit, we at least do not know the absolute whether we can or cannot. But the discrepancy of agnosticism is minimized if we do not identify God and the absolute. The agnosticism ~~of~~ which can be held against them - of Kant and Spencer is their almost tacit agreement that there is in all probability an unknowable - which is God.

The pragmatist, who claims to have given us a philosophy with a provision for moral strenuousness, has, it may be said, tired of the attempt to attain the ultimate ~~by~~ and is following the line of least resistance. But there is a vitality and an every-dayness about pragmatism which gives it a superior reception by the common man and by others who cannot endure the stretch of religious imagination to understand a pantheistic god. What the outcome of it will be remains to be seen. But whatever it will be the wholeness and freshness of pragmatism give it more life than logic and fewer props than prospects.

Set the absolute then be simply the unlimited prospect which the mind has set before itself, and let the mind not become discouraged but take its joy in the progress of accomplishment. We may speak of knowledge of our present world either as of appearances or reality; we consider it known what is still unknown may be discoverable and our work in pursuit has individual value. What we take as known certainly "responds very beautifully" to our life and whether appearances or realities things lend themselves to a life which we tenacious in holding to as real.