Some excellent work has been done on the relationship of Royce’s philosophy to phenomenology—the general trajectory of this scholarship has moved from the question of similarity to the question of influence—the influence of Royce upon Husserl!(1) There are many topics by which one might attempt to link Royce with existentialism, such as—play, homecoming, action, will, individuality, the person, mood, emotion, and the irrational.(2) This paper will focus mainly on a single neglected text, Royce’s “Self-Consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature.”(3) The main existentialist theme we are considering is the primordiality of being with others with regard to the sociality of the self and the sociality of the the natural world. We will come to see, perhaps with surprise, that Sartre’s praise for Husserl might well have been directed at Royce:

We are . . . delivered from the “internal life” . . . since everything is finally outside, everything, even ourselves. Outside, in the world, among others. It is not in some hiding-place that we will discover ourselves: it is on the road, in the town, in the midst of the crowd, a thing among things, a man among men.(4)

But isn’t idealism the philosophy of the “internal life” par excellence? Doesn’t it dwell in aery, speculative regions far removed from the lives of real individuals? No, for Royce, philosophy begins with this individual in the midst life.

Philosophy, in the proper sense of the term, is not a presumptuous effort to explain the mysteries of the world by means of any superhuman insight or extraordinary cunning, but has its origin and value in an attempt to give a reasonable account of our personal attitude towards the more serious business of life. You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world. What you are doing is of course, in the first place, is living. And life involves passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean is philosophy.(5)

Opening Moves

One, two, three . . . where’s number four, Timaeus? —Plato, Timaeus

Royce begins “Self-Consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature” by noting some divisions in the order of philosophical inquiry. The first “great division” is between the theoretical and the practical. He lets us know that his paper concerns theoretical philosophy. Theoretical philosophical questions can be further divided between very general (important and never absent) metaphysical
and epistemological questions and special issues of a more limited scope. Here he is dealing with a limited, special question in the philosophy of nature, or cosmology—the question of the relation of “finite minds” to nature. So far, we seem faced with a rather neatly defined question in a nicely circumscribed region of philosophy. But Royce is going to add some twists and turns, and venture down some unexpected paths—for philosophy begins in a sense of puzzlement and disorientation which upends our normal modes of thinking.

The relation of man to nature—this, then, is our immediate topic. But why, you may ask, if such is the purpose of this paper, have I chosen my actual title? Why does a study of the relations of Self-Consciousness and Social Consciousness seem adapted to throw light on the cosmological problem of the relation of human beings to natural processes?

I think Royce may have Plato’s great cosmological dialogue, the Timaeus, in mind here. It also begins far from cosmology and wanders many byways before reaching its “likely story.” As the epigraph at the beginning of this section shows us the Timaeus begins “one, two, three,” and there is an absent fourth. Here we have the triad self-consciousness, social consciousness, and nature; there is an absent fourth as well, the Absolute.

A further analogy can be drawn to Plato’s Timaeus—namely that the road to cosmology passes through politics and ethics. As one commentator wrote concerning the Timaeus: “Why is the greatest philosophic work on the cosmos framed by politics?” Royce begins his cosmological musings with one of the great ethical quandaries of his day—the Darwinian aporia—egoism versus altruism. Royce tells us why this is an appropriate starting point: “For nature we know as a fact only through our social consciousness and the social consciousness is ethical before it is physical . . . .”

Royce often contrasts genuine philosophical insight—always a result of philosophical labor—with the attitudes of common sense and science. It isn’t that the views of naïve common sense and uncritical natural science are false; they are simply inadequate, partly true—‘on to something’ but unable to make coherent sense of the whole. Royce begins by pointing to the “abstract” assumptions made, by common sense and educated ethical thinking alike, with regard to “altruism,” and “egoism.” The common assumption being that man is naturally selfish and that the challenge is to make him social, to somehow get him to be altruistic. Royce concedes that common sense has grasped a glaringly obvious truth when it notes that selfishness and evil are rampant and regnant in the world. It misunderstands the true nature of what is going on. It falsely believes that we are first self-conscious and selfish and then later, via socialization, socially conscious and capable of altruism. Royce contends that egoism is a twisted and misguided forms of altruism, or at least, a form of conduct derived from social interaction and not a natural, pre-social inclination.

For you, as a man, exist only in human relations. Your aims have to be more or less social, just so far as you clearly define them. The ethical problem is not: Shall I aim to preserve social relations? But: What social relations shall I aim to preserve.

Why does Royce begin here? Why not go straight to the point? The point being that “I am not first self-conscious, and then secondarily conscious of my fellow,” because the ethical realm is less abstract than worries about the nature of the self. This is a more concrete starting point. Man is, first and foremost, a being who acts in the world with practical and ethical ends in sight, and not, as Aristotle would have it, one who, above all else, desires to know. The ethical starting point leads Royce’s reader from issues he is familiar with (altruism vs. egoism) to analogous yet less familiar ones, like
self-consciousness and social consciousness. This is an Aristotelian way to proceed—from the familiar to the less familiar. In essence, this reversal of common sense ethical notions is going to repeat itself with regard to common sense views of the self and nature.

**The Emergence of Self-Consciousness**

We will begin by briefly sketching the argument Royce gives for why it must be the case that social consciousness is the condition of the possibility of self-consciousness. This argument is similar to the one in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* by which he argues that absolute truth is the condition of the possibility of error. Here he will argue that solipsism has other finite experience as its condition of possibility. Royce begins by trying to answer a would-be critic who argues that the notion “other finite experience than my own” is itself but a mental presentation of my own experience. Royce will grant this premise and then see where it leads. So, one has an experience of experience other than one’s own, and this experience is really not what it seems to be; it is merely my experience. Hence, this experience of other experience than my own is false. Royce points out that this false experience is experience of experience other than my own. But for this contrast we could not distinguish truth from falsity, and hence could not maintain the truth of solipsism—other experience than my own is the condition of the possibility for experience that would be only my own.

If an experience, viz., here the conception of other experience than mine, presents itself as meaning something beyond the moment, then this very experience itself is really other than the experience as it is presented, and once more one gets a real contrast between my experience as presented, and related experience which is not presented. The conception of other experience than mine must, therefore, in any case, have relation to a real experience which is other than my presentation. Thus, then, that there is some experience not individually mine, is an assertion precisely as sure as the assertion that my own experience is. For neither assertion has meaning apart from the other.(11)

Next, we will turn to some of Royce’s conclusions as to how self-consciousness depends for its emergence on social consciousness, and what this means for the nature of self-consciousness. Royce emphasizes, again and again, that we are taught—in very practical, active, and bodily ways to be our selves: “a child is taught to be self-conscious just as he is taught everything else, by the social order that brings him up. Could he grow up alone with lifeless nature, there is nothing to indicate that he would become as self-conscious as is now a fairly educated cat.”(12) How do we have meaningful experience? We do so by socializing with others in act not merely by observing some mental stream of representations. Like the later Wittgenstein, Royce realized that much of this training involved the learning of rules or of games, “If I see you playing cards, or chess, I can only make out what your inner experience is in case I learn the cards, the pieces, the rules, or the moves of the game and proceed to play it myself.”(13) One must be a chess player or a lover before one can understand chess or love. The important point is, but for a pre-existent social world and learning the language and norms of that world—the self would be little more than a feral child.

Royce then takes on the myth of private experience and of consciousness as a stream of merely private representations. This is the Kantian notion that consciousness is in each case mine—that we are tethered, like the Emperor’s dog, to the ever moving cart of our private presentations. This is true, in part, but Royce shows that when we attend to what is present to consciousness there is very little presence there. Rather we find, “the oncoming, the sought, the wished for, the absent, so that
the inner eye gazes on a flowing stream of events, but beholds rather what they hint at than what they present.”(14) Here we can clearly make out the existentialist theme of temporality. Human beings are beings who live in anticipation of events that are not yet from the standpoint of meanings and interpretations that are no more. The seemingly all important present disappears into an ecstatic tension between two absences, the past and the future, “that the present is, he alone can say who regards the past and future as real.”(15) Royce’s point is that in asserting the primacy of the inner and private we are thrown towards the public and the other.

There is, then, a universe of other actual experience than my own finite experience, presented or remembered. Were this central truth not known to me, I should have no means of being conscious of myself as this finite ego.(16)

*The Retention of Existential Individuality*

Does this priority of social consciousness swamp any sense of individual free choice so as to render Royce’s view incompatible with “existentialism?” First, remember that Royce is an idealist and remember that *aufheben* “has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cease, to put an end to.”(17) So, individuality is preserved even as common sense prejudices about it are annulled. Secondly, Royce is here trading on the distinction between the order of knowing and the order of being. In showing that self-consciousness is grounded in social consciousness as the condition of its possibility, Royce is not abolishing the truth of self-consciousness—he is making us appreciate it as a result. This has been forgotten in the Darwinian era in which common sense assumes that radical autonomy is a natural and permanent state, rather than an accomplishment. Royce is clear that the fundamental fact of our individual freedom is ever with us.

So far as moral values are concerned, it is therefore indeed certain that no ethical doctrine can be right which neglects individuals, and which disregards I will not say their right, but their duty to centralize their lives and so their moral universe about their own purposes. As we seem to be at the center of the starry heavens, so each of us is indeed at the center of his own realm of duty. No impersonal moral theory can be successful. Individualism in ethics has therefore its permanent and, as I believe, its absolute justification in the nature of things. . . . Only your own will . . . can determine for you what your duty is. . . . I myself, in defending loyalty . . . am speaking as an ethical individualist. My whole case depends upon this fact.(18)

The above quotation might suffice alone to make the case that Royce has an existentialist sense of individualism, but I want to make the point even more strongly. Royce, again and again, returns to the fact that the self is a project of will and of acts that is incomplete until death. There really is no self, but just a self in the making—just as existentialism would have it.

As a fact, your self is not an affair of this moment. Your self, like your happiness or unhappiness, like your failure or success, is a history, a drama, a life quest. There is a most excellent reason why you cannot get coherent or satisfactory knowledge of the self through any intuition, through any direct acquaintance, through any mere hiding away in the interior of your own personality, through any direct perception. Your own true self simply does not
now exist to be known. It belongs to the past and the future, as well as to the present; and your whole life is needed to embody and to live out what it means.

Royce insists, as existentialism does, that we are fully responsible for our acts and choices—their is no escape from owning up to them as our own: “Let one consider that when my present judgment, addressing my future self, counsels: “Do This, “this counsel, if followed, leads to an individual deed, which henceforth irrevocably stands on the score of my life, and can never be removed therefrom.”(20) Royce is explicit that death is what completes each individual human life—a narrative of acts.

This is one of death’s deepest and most impressive teachings—that when the past and death have done their work, we stand in the presence of the irrevocable. “I did this and henceforth I cannot undo it. It belongs to my life. It is a part of me . . . .—my deed, my choice that I cannot undo.” Such is the discovery that death and the irrevocable bring to us.(21)

What of the self’s relationship to concrete history? Surely Royce does not share this with existentialism? Not true, Royce had a keen sense of history and how it provides us with the situation in which we live out our choices, “a stupendous moral catastrophe has suddenly taken place. Vast results of this catastrophe are already part of the irrevocable past . . . . When this war is over, large regions of Europe will be a house of the dead . . . . Most precious hopes, fondly cherished, will be shattered forever.”(22) This is the context in which Royce speaks of our duty and our free choice.

He does not trade in the vague and abstract history one often associates with idealism, e.g., Hegel’s “Master-Slave dialectic.”

We have clearly demonstrated that Royce retains an existentialist sense of individuality. Here we will offer a Roycean critique of a well know existentialist anecdote. Sartre offered, as an example of existential choice, the story of one of his students during the Nazi occupation who could not decide between taking care of his elderly mother (who would die without his help), and joining the resistance. Sartre told him: “you must simply choose.” Yes, but choose what? Choose between two roles—dutiful son or patriot, that are really essences—both in the sense of a role understood before any choice is made, and as a kind of irrevocable deed that will be completely yours at death. Even not choosing, choosing the role of Hamlet—involves ideals and hence essences. Without these ideals there would be no way to choose—Sartre could only offer, “flip a coin,” but even chance is an idea: “For idealism . . . there is an intimate connection between essence and existence. For idealism the reality of things consists in the fulfillment of certain purposes. . . . Whenever you form a deliberate plan . . . you define and understand an essence for whose existence you hope.”(23)

The Sociality of Nature

We now turn to the sociality of nature. Royce argues that there is a priority to be given to the human, and to our social interactions with one another with regard to our relations with nature. We are not first non-problematically in a world of natural objects and, only then, find one another. In fact, the most proximate natural beings are beings like ourselves: “And, as a fact, the non-Ego that I am accustomed to deal with when I think and act, is primarily some real or ideal finite fellow-being. . . only secondarily to be turned into anything else . . . a natural object that I regard as a mere dead thing.”(24) This “first” is first in the order of being not necessarily first in the order of cognition for ordinary consciousness now. Common sense and scientific opinion interpose beliefs about the
reality of nature that hide this true origin, which it is philosophy’s task to lay bare. Our fellow human beings and their bodily communicative gestures are the first glimpse we get of other experience, “the only possible way to get at the existence of a finite non-Ego is through some form of the social consciousness. What a finite non-Ego is, your fellow teaches you when he communicates the fact that he has inner experience.”(25) It is very important to note that an important shift has occurred with regard to what it means to be real. We have left behind Descartes’ twin notions of reality—thinking and extension—to be real now means to be experience like our own, social experience, interior experience in communication with other like experience.

Next, Royce points out that our scientific theories are for the most part our own constructs, and express the limitations of our cognitive and temporal capacities.

As a fact, I take it that our scientifically conceived laws of nature are largely phenomenal generalizations from very superficial aspects of of the inner life of nature, and that very much indeed of what we now call nature has existence only for human perception and thought, as a matter of the similarities of the experiences of various human observers. (26)

Royce emphasizes the indispensable role of community and social training in the practice of science. Science is a community of interpretation. He sounds a lot like Duhem and Quine when he holds that experience can probably be wrapped up in different and revisable theoretical packages, “We know that Nature tolerates our mathematical formulas. We do not know that she would not equally well tolerate many other such formulas instead of these.”(27) Of course, criteria of simplicity, elegance, practicality, efficacy, or explanatory breadth might allow us some means of choosing between packages.

Finally, Royce offers the doctrine of panpsychism—a hypothesis that restores life and value to nature and natural beings. Some may think that by the mere mention of such a preposterous thesis we are crossing into a region of obscurantism only possible for idealism. I refer any harboring such thoughts to Galen Strawson, a philosopher in a tradition not known for its love of the obscure, who writes: “panpsychism is not merely one possible form of realistic physicalism, real physicalism, but the only possible form, and, hence, the only possible form of physicalism tout court.”(28)

I will attempt a very brief synopsis of Royce’s version of panpsychism. Royce considers it a hypothesis that has some degree of probability, and not some great metaphysical certainty. It begins with Royce’s belief that to be real is to have what we might call communicative interiority. If there is going to be reality to nature it must be animate and communicative. Nature testifies to the sheer presence of experience other than our own. We can see in nature various levels of communication from dolphins and chimpanzees, through plant life, and on to lower levels that are normally described as inanimate life. Royce speculates that the relatively uncommunicative forms of life have vastly different aperceptive time spans—and so communication is near impossible. The main point to take home here is that nature is everywhere animate, and yet, relatively bad at speaking to us, hence our science is largely our own affair. Evolution is for Royce a kind of Tower of Babel story—with life evolving from a more monolithic and communicative state to a more diverse one with significant language barriers.

We ought not to speak of dead nature. We have only a right to speak of uncommunicative nature. Natural objects, if they are real at all, are prima facie simply other finite beings, who are, so to speak, not in our own social set, and who communicate to us, not their minds, but
their presence. For, I repeat, a real being can only mean to me other experience than mine; and other experience than does not mean deadness, unconsciousness, disorganization, but presence, life, inner light.(29)

The ethical ramifications of such a move are easily seen. Non-human animals and even the so-called inanimate environment are really just other beings like ourselves, other finite experience that presumably should be accorded like respect, “Nature would be thus the sign of the presence of other finite consciousness than our own, whose time span was in general very different than ours, but whose rationality and dignity . . . might be equal to or far above our own . . .”(30)

Nature is social in two senses. In our scientific theories and ordinary interactions it is largely our social construct. In another sense, we have reason to believe that it is social in itself—beings like ourselves communicating, to some degree with us, and presumably enjoying fluent communication within their own aperceptive time spans.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The fundamental point of this entire paper is to show that for Royce the social grounds our individual selfhood and our relations to the natural world. We truly are, in a sense perhaps deeper than Sartre or Heidegger saw, “a man among men, a thing among things.”

Royce’s existential analysis starts from elemental sociality. He would have said that our being-in-the-world, or to-be-with-others—our Mitwelt—is first and foremost a social world. We are individuals only in social relations with others, with physical nature, even with ourselves. The social is so primordial that even our conceptions of nature, as well as of the individual self, are not initiatory, but socially grounded.(31)

From the social constitution of the self it is clear that for Royce, as for existentialism, the problem of solipsism is an illusory one. The self is not a stream of mental representations. The self is radically temporal and finite. Temporality means an ecstatic projection of acts from a past towards a future. As in existentialism the self is an incomplete project unto death, “the self isn’t given; it is expressed in a life.”(32) It is important to note that the body plays an important role in Royce’s discussions of sociality and selfhood. This sociality in no way eliminates individual freedom and responsibility understood in a sense fully compatible with existentialism. Finally, the self is enmeshed in a precognitive world—in Royce’s case one of selective attention and social and historical accretion. Royce was keenly interested in actual history and not vague historical abstractions. He took history seriously.

What of nature and things? First, it is clear that there is a priority to be given to humanity. We are to a certain extent trapped by the perspective of our species and its categories. For Royce there is a technological impetus to the natural science aims at control, and not merely theoretical comprehension, “our science is a kind of theoretical extension of our industrial art.”(33) This view resembles the one the later Heidegger criticizes when he discusses ta mathemata—a kind of measuring and control that is imposed in advance.(34) At first glance, it appears that Royce has taken the Sartrean/ radically humanist pole of existentialism; man is in some sense the measure of all things.
In a sense, certainly, man is the only being by whom a destruction can be accomplished. A geological plication, a storm do not destroy—or at least they do not destroy directly; they merely modify the distribution of beings. . . . In order for destruction to exist, there must first be a relation of man to being . . . . (35)

There will be no later Heideggerian “listening to being.” This would be, for Royce, a descent into mysticism. We can “listen to being” only to discern some grounds for the hypothesis of panpsychism. Nature does communicate with us, but less adequately than our fellow beings. Royce’s solution is an appealing one. Our science is our own affair, and we acknowledge its endless revisability and fallibilism. We do not have to rest content with the silent, one note agenda of mysticism. Royce’s panpsychism usefully limits the logic of unbridled dominance and control. Nature is reanimated—it isn’t simply parts outside of parts, or sheer extension staring across an ontological gulf at a mind that is a representational machine, or tabula rasa.

What I am really pleading for, as you will see in the sequel, is a form of philosophic reflection that leads to a very definite and positive theory of the universe itself . . . a theory not at all mystical in its methods, nor yet, in its results, really opposed to the postulates of science, or the deeper meaning at the heart of common sense. This theory is that the whole universe, including the physical world also, is essentially one living thing, a mind, one great spirit . . . . I don’t assume the existence of such a life in the universe because I want to be vague or seem imaginative. The whole matter appears to me . . . to be one of exact thought.(36)

Animals will have rights. The environment will need to be respected. Natural beings, even mere things, are real, that is, they have interiority and they communicate.

What of the objection that Royce is outside of the existentialist orbit because he repudiates “any existential alienation,” and insists on the “transcendental reach of moral reason.” (37) This brings us back to Royce’s “missing fourth,” God or the Absolute. Royce would not say, as Sartre did, that man is a “useless passion.” His position is more akin to that of the Christian existentialism of hope and loyalty of Gabriel Marcel sans the mystery of being. The absolute does not abolish our freedom, but it does apprise us of our duty to something beyond ourselves—loyalty to loyalty, and love of the “beloved community.

Endnotes

2. We must begin with a preliminary *caveat* about the very term, “existentialist.” It has been a very slippery one in the history of philosophy. Some have worn it as a badge of honor. Some have tried mightily to slip out from under its aegis. It encompasses a vast plurality of philosophical positions. Within French existentialism alone we have the atheist, individualist, prophet of despair, Jean-Paul Sartre, and the theistic, communitarian, counselor of hope, Gabriel Marcel. Here we will simply dodge the problem and say that we will take the term in its broadest possible sense leaving its conflicts and contradictions for someone else to sort out. We did need to point to the problem.


10. Ibid., 426.

11. Ibid., 438.

12. Ibid., 431.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 432.

15. Ibid., 437.


22. Ibid., 92. There is no question that it was the First World War, rather than the Second, that has had the farthest reaching consequences. We need only look at Soviet communism, events in the Near East and Balkans (all consequences of the dissolution of three empires (Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman). The Second World War itself was but a consequence of the first. It was the First World War that led to nihilism, surrealism, the irrational, despair, angst. Existentialism was already in place in France in 1940, and before any guns were fired in September of 1939.


25. Ibid., 446.

26. Ibid., 447.


34. Royce in many places sounds a lot like John William Miller when he discusses “measurement,” and “control,” and even “talk.” See the entirety of his final lecture (X) in Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1919).

