



## Logic, Community, and the Taming of the Absolute

Leslie Armour et Suzie Johnston

Volume 51, numéro 3, octobre 1995

Phénoménologies de l'ange

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/400938ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/400938ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Armour, L. & Johnston, S. (1995). Logic, Community, and the Taming of the Absolute. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 51(3), 507–528.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/400938ar>

## LOGIC, COMMUNITY, AND THE TAMING OF THE ABSOLUTE

Leslie ARMOUR and Suzie JOHNSTON

*RÉSUMÉ* : Hegel a parlé de l'État comme de « la marche de Dieu dans l'histoire » et il a dit que « la fin rationnelle de l'homme est la vie dans l'État ». Certes, il avait ses propres idées sur la liberté humaine et sur la dignité. La tension dans sa pensée provient du double mouvement de son Absolu — un Absolu qui doit tout absorber et peut encore exprimer tout ce qui est exprimable. Le problème, selon nous, est que Hegel a fait du devenir une catégorie qu'il a intégrée à un système de détermination croissante. Le devenir devrait plutôt être une propriété de tout le système — un système qui révélerait l'absolu comme un procès infini dont les potentialités ne pourraient jamais être sommées dans ce que Lévinas nomme une « totalité ».

*SUMMARY* : Hegel spoke of the State as “the march of God in history” and said “the rational end of man is life in the state”. Yet he had his own ideas of human freedom and dignity. The tension in his thought is caused by the twin pulls of his Absolute — an Absolute which must absorb everything and yet express all that can be expressed. The problem, we argue, is that Hegel made “becoming” a category which was integrated into a system of growing determinateness. Becoming should rather be a property of the whole system — one which would reveal the absolute as an infinite process whose potentialities could never be summed into what Lévinas calls a “totality”.

---

### I. HEGEL THE AUTOCRAT & HEGEL THE DEMOCRAT

Hegel's political philosophy involves a puzzling, perhaps paralysing, tension between the idea of a community of free agents like Kant's Kingdom of Ends and the idea of an all-embracing Absolute which draws us through a universal history toward a final goal in which everyone and everything will have a fixed and determinate place. Hegel can be made to seem the advocate of the most repressive tyranny. Yet, in other lights he seems the defender of the idea of a community of reasonable men and women who must understand how to live together in a kind of constitutional freedom without destroying one another. Overall, though, the Absolute Idea, conceived as a final all-embracing unity, overshadows everything, and so the balance is tipped toward coercion. Thus, Jean-Luc Nancy says it is “up to a point established”

that Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is "the thought of the Totalitarian State itself".<sup>1</sup> Hegel's insistence that "man must venerate the state as a secular deity"<sup>2</sup> and his claim that "the rational end of man is life in the state"<sup>3</sup> would seem to bear him out, even if he would also claim that the state is the protector, somehow, of human "freedom",<sup>4</sup> and the Hegelian monarch is supposed to be a constitutionalist for whom there is an objective law.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper we want to examine the logic of this predicament, and along the way we will make some proposals which would dissolve the tensions. Perhaps even the word "Absolute" — at any rate the Absolute with a capital "A" — should be abandoned. Yet we will also argue that there *is* something left of the concept of the absolute that is not (finitely) relative. It is best described as an overflowing and inexhaustible infinite which, though aspects of it emerge constantly in the world, can never be summed to a simple totality. Hegel, too, thought of the infinite as without bounds, but, as Charles Taylor has argued, his infinite turns into a closed circle.<sup>6</sup>

Though the assault on the Hegelian Absolute has been revived in our time by thinkers as diverse as Emmanuel Lévinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, the attempt to discover the logic of the problem goes back at least to the British, Canadian and American idealists of the turn of the century, and we shall use arguments and ideas from George Holmes Howison, John Watson, and J.M.E. McTaggart (who were all involved in the California debates over Josiah Royce's Absolute)<sup>7</sup> and relate them some

- 
1. Jean-Luc NANCY, *The Birth of Presence*, tr. Brian Holmes and others, Stanford, The University Press, 1993, p. 111.
  2. *Philosophie des Rechts* (referred to in subsequent notes as *PR*), note to 272. References are to the numbered sections of *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts, oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, 1821. There were posthumous German editions in 1833 and 1854. We have used a modern edition: *Werke*, vol. 7, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1970. Quotations are generally taken from the English translation, *Philosophy of Right*, tr. T.M. Knox, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1952.
  3. *PR*, note to 75A.
  4. But notice how freedom becomes twisted into determinateness: "the bond of duty appears as a restriction only on indeterminate subjectivity or abstract freedom [...]. The truth is, however, that in duty the individual finds his liberation [...]" (*PR*, 149A).
  5. *PR*, 280A. The issue is not about what Hegel intended or about whether one can find passages which weigh against totalitarian readings. The issue is about the tensions in Hegel's system. Those who want to see Hegel in another (perhaps less troubling) light may find what they seek in the essays in *Hegel Reconsidered: Beyond Metaphysics and the Authoritarian State* (ed. H. Tristram Englehardt, Norwell MA, Kluwer, 1994). In a similar vein Robert B. PIPPIN in *Hegel's Idealism* (Cambridge, The University Press, 1989), really turns Hegel into a neo-Kantian. But he has to admit "the Kantian non-metaphysical language I make use of [...] is not what the historical Hegel 'would have said' or 'really had in mind'" (p. 13). Our aim in this paper is to seek the sources of one important tension and to ask how it could be dissolved.
  6. Indeed, TAYLOR argues that Hegel really turns the infinite into the finite. Hegel's view is that the true infinite is the "boundless". But it cannot be apart from the finite, for then it would be bounded by it. Thus the infinite must be a finite which is self-contained and forms a kind of circle. The examples, Taylor says, are "[...] the categories which make up his [Hegel's] logic, the circle of levels of being which make up the philosophies of nature and spirit, the circle of roles which make up the state." Thus, he says "the infinite only exists in the order of the finite." (*Hegel*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1975, p. 240.)
  7. Many of the ideas presented during the "great debate" — as the *New York Times* called it — over the Absolute were published in 1897 as *The Conception of God* by Macmillan in New York. The debate itself took place in Berkeley, California, in 1895 and involved Howison, Royce, Joseph Le Conte (a deeply conservative geologist and a racist biologist) and Edward Mezes (a young philosopher who later became President of the University of Texas). The *New York Times* went on to call it "the battle of giants" and the *New*

currently canvassed ideas. Howison's unpublished notes and manuscripts play a special part in the development in our own ideas.<sup>8</sup>

## II. HEGEL, KANT & THE UNDERLYING ANTI-NOMIES

Hegel's ambivalent tension is caused, we argue, by underlying logical antinomies which cannot be resolved without rethinking their bases. There is no surprise in the claim that rethinking Kantian problems may provide the clue, for one can regard all of Hegel's philosophy as the identification of such antinomies and as their transformation into dialectical structures which allow them to be resolved.<sup>9</sup>

Hegel's "system" — his moral, social, historical and political philosophy as much as his epistemology and his metaphysics — centres on the concept of the Absolute. For Hegel the Absolute is the concept necessary to put an end to the dissolution which begins with the clash of being and nothing. Pure being and pure nothing are concepts which collapse into one another because each lacks determinateness. Being is whatever there is that isn't anything in particular. Taken literally, what isn't anything in particular is no-thing. Yet the identification or "sameness" of being with nothing is nonsense, and so Hegel fleshes out the conflict in a long dialectical process which promises not to end with a collapse into contradiction. Hegel hopes to move us from the abstract to the concrete, and, therefore, from the less to the more real. Indeed, as our knowledge grows, he contends that the very relationship between concept and thing or state of affairs changes.

## III. THE PROBLEM OF BECOMING

Curiously, Hegel regards "becoming" as the first synthetic *category* — *the category* which provides the initial synthesis of being and nothing, which forces "becoming" rather uncomfortably into the stasis of the realm of "determinate being." However, if Hegel's logic is to be regarded as *consistent*, becoming must be the dynamic pulsion of the whole system and as such is manifest in every phase of the development of the world. Thus becoming is not a concrete manifestation which presages determinate being but rather is a principle that is continuously in play. Hegel

---

*York Tribune* said it was "the most noteworthy philosophical discussion for many a day". After the debate John Watson was summoned from Queen's University in Canada to sort out the issues. Watson took a strong stand against the "moral monster" of the Absolute as Howison called it. Watson's Berkeley lectures were published as *Christianity and Idealism*, New York, Macmillan, 1897. Howison, in the preface to Watson's book, said that "the active and influential" members of the California Philosophical Union were "in strong sympathy" with Watson's views even though such views would cause "a large part of historical theology called Christian" to "fall away." McTaggart who shared many of Howison's views but was suspicious of his residual "God", also spoke at the California Philosophical Union though not in "the great debate".

8. Some of George Holmes Howison's notes, and many of his letters, are preserved in the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and we are grateful to the staff for their help.
9. Thus both Howison and Watson, for instance, thought that the way out of the maze is to be found by retracing one's steps through the philosophy of Kant.

concedes that it is “thoroughly restless, but unable to maintain itself in this abstract restlessness.” Hegel hints that it is not an ordinary category, and is compelled to add “insofar as being and nothing vanish in becoming — and just this is its concept — becoming is thereby itself something that vanishes.”<sup>10</sup> Ironically thus, the first category of determinate being still reduces to nothing or vanishes.

Hegel speaks in the *Science of Logic* in a way which leads Johnston and Struthers to translate “*Aufheben des Werdens*” as “the transcendence of becoming”. Indeed, the reader of the German text might well take literally S. Jankélévitch’s translation as the “*suppression du devenir*” and believe that “Becoming” had been stamped out. For Hegel adds “In Becoming Being and Nothing exist only in so far as they disappear, but Becoming exists only by virtue of their distinctness. Their disappearance therefore is the disappearance of Becoming.” In an observation which follows, Hegel explains that by *aufheben* he means a transformation which preserves as well as negates, but he insists “the more precise meaning and expression which Being and Nothing receive now that they are moments, must result from the consideration of determinate being in which they are preserved.” He says that something is preserved in the transformation from Being and Nothing to Determinate Being, but it is an element of Being and Nothing, so conceived as to provide a “base” for Determinate Being, not Becoming.

Whatever Hegel meant by *aufheben*, there is always *some* change as we move from one category to another, and it seems certain that the *openness* of Becoming must disappear in the determinateness of the next category, for Hegel insists on its unity: “Determinate Being issues from becoming. It is the single oneness of being and Nothing [...]. Becoming which mediated it is *left behind*.”<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the cate-

10. G.W.F. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1959, section 89; tr. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting, and H.S. Harris as *The Encyclopedia Logic*, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1991, p. 146.

11. *Wissenschaft der Logik*, 1812, etc., Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1967, vol. I., p. 93-96, tr. as *Science of Logic* by W.H. Johnston and L.G. Struthers, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1929, 1951, p. 118-121, and as *Science de la logique* by S. Jankélévitch, Paris, Aubier, 1971, p. 100-103. In the A.V. Miller translation (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1969), *Aufheben*, following a long tradition in English, is translated as “sublation”, but Miller’s translation employs the expression “vanishing of becoming” which seems to make the point even more strongly. W.A. Suchting, in his “minority” comments on the translation of the “Shorter Logic” he did with H.S. Harris and T.F. Geraets (see note 9 above) says “suspension” is the best translation, but in the crucial passage which concerns the transition from Being and Nothing to Determinate Being the text (following the majority verdict) reads “sublates”. The text also makes clear that Hegel speaks of the “vanishing” of becoming. “Determinate Being”, of course, is the German *Dasein*, but it is determinateness which Hegel constantly emphasises, something not so apparent from the usual French translation as *être-là* (or from the Geraets, Harris and Suchting translation which employs the somewhat awkward “being there”). Jankélévitch uses *être défini* in Hegel’s crucial delineation (p. 105.)

For an extended discussion of Hegel and of becoming as a *category* see Leslie ARMOUR, *Logic & Reality*, Assen, Royal Van Gorcum and New York, Humanities Press, 1971, ch. 2. As for *aufheben*, the usual English verb “sublate” has a technical meaning in Sir William Hamilton’s logic. “Sublation” is the denial of one member of a pair of incompatible terms when the other is affirmed. Hegel wants to describe a relation in which one concept is incorporated in another in such a way as to preserve something essential in the transformation. The term “ablation” often used for glaciation (in which the glacier incorporates even though it transforms its objects) might be better although some dictionaries give it too negative a connotation (“wearing away”). In the particular case of “becoming” all the negative ideas seem well justified, but that may be the extreme case. “Suspension” surely suggests something left hanging. “Translation” conveys

gories which succeed becoming, from determinate being onwards, represent a sequence of states which are ultimately static and which culminate in a tensionless and completed Absolute. The significance of this “transcendence” or “transformation” for logic, thought, and politics will emerge as our story unfolds.

#### IV. ACTUAL LIFE, UNITY, HEGEL’S GOD & THE STATE

The search for a completed Absolute is closely connected with Hegel’s determination to preserve the eternal, immutable and all-encompassing God of one strand of the Christian tradition, and to make his Absolute God — though a God “shorn”, as one recent commentator puts it, of “its anthropomorphic connotations”.<sup>12</sup> To avoid this chilling “totalization” (to use Emmanuel Lévinas’s expression) one must accept that the relation between whole and part, or the Absolute and its expressions, implies reciprocal influence. It seems that Hegel ultimately wants to deny this, as in fact did Josiah Royce. John Watson, along with Howison, argued consistently against this view on the grounds that it is logically absurd both to suppose that human beings are inherently *loci* of values and also that they contribute nothing to the ultimate shaping of reality. The idea of God or the Absolute as a “power” or “force” which shapes everything else is essentially the idea of “a negative activity which manifests itself in overcoming some other power which is opposed to it.”<sup>13</sup>

The logical problem is closely tied to the assumption of an ultimate dependence on an intellectual measure of unity, in which coherence serves as the ultimate test of rationality. If unity is not to become a totalizing tyranny what needs to be shown is that what is in the background is an understanding of reason which makes of it a creative and co-operative project. Indeed we shall argue that the logic of the case makes necessary the replacement of static unity by the notions of “creative co-operation” and “reciprocal implication”.

In Hegel’s own thought there is a counter-weight to the notion of a static unity because, although we could see from the problem about Being and Nothing that the Absolute must be logically necessary, the Hegelian enterprise does not centre *immediately* on the Absolute. On the contrary, the meaning of the Absolute itself is to be discovered in the richness of the vistas which successive dialectical approximations to it produces. Hegel insists on the pertinence of this logic in the “actual”, admitting that “If thinking were no more than that abstract identity it would have to be declared the most otiose and boring business in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

---

something of the Hegelian idea, but the process is neither that of turning one language into another nor is it like the “translation” of bishops from one see to another. In the end, perhaps, “transformation,” understood with care, is best.

12. Michael J. INWOOD, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1992, p. 27.

13. John WATSON, *Christianity and Idealism*, p. 198.

14. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie*, Section 115, addition. The translation is from *The Encyclopedia Logic*, Indianapolis, 1992, p. 181.

This tension between necessary plurality and the final unity is one of the difficulties in any such theory, but it was part of Hegel's thesis that, as our knowledge grows, we become more involved in the being of the world.<sup>15</sup> Hegel tells the same kind of story about human beings. The individual is intelligible only in the context of the family, the family in the context of civil society, and civil society in the context of the State. At each stage one moves from abstraction toward reality, and as our understanding grows so our practical reason sees how to act. So long as we think of ourselves as abstract individuals we are puzzled about how we ought to behave. As the context grows our courses of action are supposed to become clearer. It is here, however, that the logic of Hegel's case becomes most entangled. As experience grows so ideas of reason grow with it and, as individuals grow more distinct, rationality itself requires a plurality of expressions. But Hegel sees society becoming more organic and more amenable to unitary government with a single monarch who can express the will of all. This conflict besets all his morals and politics.

No one seriously believes that *The State* — Hegel's State which would actually instantiate as much of Absolute Idea as could emerge in objective being — exists<sup>16</sup> though of course "states" in various more ordinary senses do exist.<sup>17</sup> If the "real state" did exist, Hegel claims it would be the end of all tensions, overcoming even the distinction between subject and object: "In the State, self-consciousness finds in an organic development the actuality of its substantive knowing and willing [...]"<sup>18</sup>

Actual life is full of tensions, puzzles and contradictions. Hegel is most reasonably read as holding both that The State is coming to be, and that we have a duty to its current (limited) manifestations rather than to a future utopia because its current manifestations exhibit the degree of rationality of which we are now capable.

This leads to a radical ambiguity in Hegelian thought. If the state which now exists is the best that can be had, then there is a totalitarian absolute already in existence. It cannot be honoured relative to its own dead past or to its own unactualized future. But if the state we live with is not absolutely the real state then we may lean toward the future and we may regard the tensions within the current political order as

---

15. Thus Hegel would have denied the Marxist contention that he was mired in an abstraction of ideas or that his system could not reveal the real causal forces which move human history.

16. The relation of the State and the Absolute is not ultimately clear. If one compares, for instance, the categories in the *Science of Logic* to the passage at the end of the *Philosophy of Right*, one is tempted to conclude that the actualization of the real state would be the coming of the Absolute into reality. For Hegel speaks in *PR* of "the reconciliation and resolution of all contradiction" (*PR*, 359). He also speaks of overcoming the categories of morality and the union of the "realm of fact" and the "realm of truth." This pattern continues up to the Absolute Idea in the *Science of Logic*. But Hegel's association of the Absolute and God suggests that the Absolute must be beyond the State unless he intends the ultimate totalitarian notion that the *State is God*. (And he does say that it is "the march of God in the world", *PR*, 258.)

17. It is important to notice that Hegel distinguished between the German words *Wirklich* and *Real*. "*Wirklich*" is translated by T.M. Knox as "actual" and "*Real*" as "real". The "actual" is what appears in the world as the absolute unfolds and essence and existence come together. Standard German dictionaries, e.g., Langenscheidt's *Concise German Dictionary*, show little difference between the two words.

18. *PR*, 360.

disclosing the edge of the future. Against this is Hegel's insistence that "the Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."<sup>19</sup> Then it is too late.

Should we say, then, if we are really to follow Hegel's dialectical logic which keeps sweeping back from the conceptual or abstract to the immanent, that we should suppose that each and every state is ideal and reflects the moment? In the ordinary senses of "state" (which Hegel often enough uses)<sup>20</sup> every state is undeniably actual. And indeed, the *actual* is always "rational" in the sense that it represents what reason demands of its moment in history. If so the state is always beyond criticism — a possibility which figures in the wariness both Lévinas and J.-L. Nancy exhibit in the face of Hegel's writings. Lévinas' metaphysical ethics is, in fact, a developed system that seeks to allow for the perpetual contestation of history.

One may even argue that the totalitarian state is precisely the end of the subject-object distinction — that every subject is transformed as an object of the state, to be determined by a higher political logic. Does the merging of subject/object imply only that all subjects are integrated as objects into the state? Of course, Hegel might have considered the possibility that all things become subjects — a condition imagined by the "deep ecologists" of our time who notice the manifest degradation of forests, the wilderness and wildlife that surrounds us and arguably should be sacred. He did not do so because it was his thesis — in all his works — that subjectivity must develop into objectivity.

There are many explanations for this, but underlying all of them is the Hegelian conviction that the order of development is the order of growing objective determinateness. Being and nothing are perfectly indeterminate. Each step in the dialectic develops more structure and more perfect determination. The development of subjectivity into objectivity is a development from openness (an openness which in the early stages of the dialectic is more radical than the traditional Aristotelian potentiality) to the determinateness of actuality. In this process of determination, where the self becomes increasingly closed, we again face the consequences of Hegel's mistaking "becoming" for a category — the category which follows pure being and nothing — rather than a constant feature of the whole system. In the *Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel develops a story in which the self, at first only a shadowy background to the presentation of sense certainty, develops through the Stoic detached self into the fully concrete — and thus, in Hegel's view, determinate and objective — self which can appear in moral life and gradually exhibits itself in the unfolding of the Absolute Idea.<sup>21</sup> The pattern is repeated in each of Hegel's writings. Humanity appears in all its concrete determinateness only in "the German world" revealed in his philosophisings about history.<sup>22</sup>

---

19. *PR*, Preface.

20. See Michael J. INWOOD, *A Hegel Dictionary*, p. 277-280, for a catalogue of Hegel's uses of the term.

21. This is basically the story unfolded in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, first published in 1807.

22. See HEGEL, *Werke*, vol. 19, Stuttgart, Friedrich Frommann, 1965. The English translation as *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* by E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simson, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, and Trubner, 1895, may have been the single most influential work in forming the Anglo-Saxon view of Hegel. The



In the end, for Hegel, *the Idea* is not just absolute in the sense that it serves as what Kant called the “ideal concept”,<sup>23</sup> that is, a concept that it is not relative to any other concept. It is also absolute in the sense that it shapes everything and nothing shapes it. Since it appears to us only in the way in which reality manifests itself to us, it appears in our experience as relative to what it shapes. But the relation is not, in Hegel’s view, reciprocal. Whether there is ultimately a latent contradiction insofar as the Absolute itself must be understood even at the end of the world’s history as relative to its own manifestations is an interesting question, the answer to which hangs partly on the vexed question of the ontological status of the appearances.

Applied to politics, the Absolute Idea is expressed through the Hegelian monarch who, as the focus of the community, must finally have the capacity for the reconciliation of all conflicts.<sup>24</sup> In this reconciliation the freedom of everyone was supposed to be guaranteed, but this freedom amounts, after all, to the mere freedom to occupy one’s most appropriate place in the system.

## V. TWO READINGS OF THE ABSOLUTE

Faced with this ambiguity, critics have painted Hegel as facing a choice between two readings of the Absolute, either of which spell ruin for his system. Either the Absolute becomes an oppressive all-encompassing force (the generic type of Emmanuel Lévinas’ totality) or, as earlier critics like McTaggart complained, it becomes an empty, featureless blank, incapable of providing any guidance to moral, political, or social action.<sup>25</sup> If the Absolute is a totality within which everything has a determinate place and which optimally expresses the common good through a system in which each component plays its fixed part, then we have a picture of a society which, though in some sense benign, destroys all creativity and leaves no options. It is this picture which leads Jean-Luc Nancy to conjure visions of “the Totalitarian State itself”.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, McTaggart’s absolute “blank” leads to what Howison aptly calls an “Inane [...] unfathomable Void” where nothing at all could make a difference; absolute unity logically dissolves all differences whatsoever.<sup>27</sup>

In the transcendence of all possible distinctions the Hegelian State is not merely an all-inclusive system of rights, duties and benefits managed to perfection by an all-knowing bureaucracy. The world, led to its ultimate metaphysical perfection by the Hegelian state, must become the dwelling place of the Absolute which absorbs, trans-

---

lectures are generally conservative in outlook and deterministic in theory but they went through a number of forms, and we do not know just how Hegel himself would have wanted them finally to appear.

23. *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, A642, B670.

24. *PR*, 285, speaks of the “absolute universality which subsists subjectively in the conscience of the monarch [...]”

25. See J.M.E. MCTAGGART, “The Further Determination of the Absolute”, in S.V. KEELING, ed., *Philosophical Studies*, London, Edward Arnold, 1934, p. 210-272.

26. Jean-Luc NANCY, *The Birth of Presence*, p. 111.

27. See HOWISON’s essay “The City of God and the True God as Its Head”, in ROYCE *et al.*, *The Conception of God*, p. 133.

forms, and transfigures everything, leaving no distinctions. McTaggart argues thus that it must be a completely featureless blank. (Just how, indeed, are we to conceive, much less picture, the final overcoming of the tension between subject and object ?) If McTaggart is right, the Absolute succeeds in its aim like Lewis Carroll's Bellman<sup>28</sup> who, having heard that all maps are made up of mere conventional signs, and having decided that all such signs provide ambiguities and conflicts, determined that the best of all possible maps was a complete blank. McTaggart is not thinking of a condition like the nothingness which afflicted some of the philosophers who worked their way past the Hegelian categories and into the schemes of existentialist and Heideggerian thought, but of a drearier nothingness. He is thinking of what is simply not there.<sup>29</sup>

What does the "absolutely nothing" view of the Absolute Idea imply for the less than perfect manifestations of the Absolute in the moral, social, and political realms ? If the aim of political theory is the removal of all tensions between individuals, then, of course, there will be nothing left of us ; we would be ciphers who respond perfectly and frictionlessly to the social situation. Similarly our personal, particular and quirky identities would dissolve also, for the person brings "absolutely nothing" to the concept : "Generally speaking, the highest independence of man is to know himself as totally determined by the absolute Idea [...]"<sup>30</sup> Furthermore this critique of Hegel could continue, and call into question the logical validity of a dialectical process that ends with such statements as that our highest freedom is our complete determination, and that there should be no friction between persons within the state.<sup>31</sup> The logical coherence of this dialectic acknowledges its victory is to be bought at a cost high in human lives (Nancy says the Absolute barely buries its dead, and the shallow graves of war witness to this truth).

The Hegelian may want to respond that what transcends all possible distinctions is not a featureless blank, but is rather akin to the positive non-totalizing infinity which Emmanuel Lévinas derives from the options presented by Descartes in his *Third Meditation*.<sup>32</sup> Such an infinity surpasses all that can be said, but it does so in richness, unlike McTaggart's blank which allows only for a final autism where nothing can, logically, be said (it is a whole that allows for no determination whatsoever). But, for the orthodox Hegelian, a more serious problem may be that one cannot draw from the overflowing (Lévinasian) infinity the final ordering of history and knowledge on which Hegel pinned his hopes. It will turn out that there is a response, but it is not one which a Hegelian would have preferred.

28. See *The Hunting of the Snark*.

29. This is the final truth, as Gertrude Stein said, about Oakland, California. When you get there, there isn't any "there" there.

30. HEGEL, *Enzyklopädie*, Section 158 ; *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Indianapolis, Hackett, p. 233.

31. Hegel often draws such logical consequences himself, but they make him uneasy. Though in *PR*, 155A, he says "In the moral sphere, the right of my private judgement and will, as well as of my happiness, has not, but only ought to have, coalesced with duties and become objective." If they do "coalesce" we have all lost our freedom. But in a note to this section (Addition 99), Hegel reminds us that "A slave can have no duties [...]"

32. Emmanuel LÉVINAS, *Totalité et infini*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, Kluwer Academic, 1971, fifth edition, Paris, Livre de Poche, 1992, p. 231-232.

## VI. THE LOGIC OF THE CASE — THE ANTINOMIES OF MORALITY & KNOWLEDGE

Before we can entertain solutions we must attend more seriously to the logic of the situation. At this point we can at least begin to see the first antinomy — one in which Kant would have revelled had he lived to read Hegel and his critics. If the Absolute is somehow the sum of all there is (however transformed, ablated, or transfigured) then it would seem that it absorbs everything. It is itself without limit but it limits everything else since everything else exists only in so far as the Absolute is expressed through it. But it cannot be the “sum” of everything else and still have a role to play, for if it had a distinct role to play it would have to be something other than one of the elements it sums ; but by definition, there are no such things. Therefore it is either nothing at all — whether one means this in the sense that to talk of this totality is a mere logical mistake, or in the sense that it is truly empty — or it transcends the distinctions which go into the “summing up.”

Kant himself had noticed that there is a problem about the “ideal concept” (usually conceived as the idea of God, the perfect, omniscient and omnipotent being). There needs to be a regulative concept which fits all the supposed pieces of knowledge together — otherwise we would have the paradox of Protagoras : If claims to knowledge are independent of one another, then both sides of a contradiction can be true. But if both sides of a contradiction are true *all* propositions are true. (From P & not-P, Q follows, whatever Q may be, for the evident reason that P and not-P are everything.) Knowledge, if there is any, therefore requires unity. But morality requires a plurality. If there is only one moral agent, no moral problems arise except those which are concerned with the duties of that moral agent to himself or herself, and if such an agent is omnipotent and omniscient it is difficult to know how anything can go wrong or error would be possible. It is also difficult to know how anything can go right. For one might think that love and truth are the highest moral values, but love is impossible if there is only one agent — a difficulty raised with passion as we shall see, by Howison against Josiah Royce. And truth is meaningless in a world where there is only one agent whose every thought expresses truth just *because* it is thought, for then there would be no meaningfully independent objective world.

In our lives we are inevitably much interested in questions of moral responsibility, but such responsibility requires a world in which each person may make some decisions. If we are simply facets of the one Absolute we are none of us sufficiently independent — or so it must seem — for there to be any moral responsibility at all. The all-inclusive Absolute would seem to lead to the ethical fatalism of “what will be will be” where no act on our part would be significant enough to change the course of the Absolute’s development and concretization in History.

The antinomy between the demands of knowledge and the demands of morality is only one of two. The other antinomy arises within the moral sphere itself. Morality requires a community which we all share and in which we demand that no one should be wholly independent of the actions of the others, for anyone who cannot possibly

be influenced by one's acts for better or for worse has no claims to make on one. But morality, as we have seen, also requires that we be independent.

Evidently a significant part of the difficulty involved in these discussions does indeed go back to problems raised by Kant. That the Absolute should either absorb everything or float wholly free as a mere expression of nothingness seems to be a problem which has its roots in the Kantian distinction between transcendental and empirical concepts. It is this notion, Howison realized, which had to be attacked if any progress was to be made.

Unfortunately, though Howison grasped the point, he never quite managed to think it through to a clear solution. His failure to complete his own system combined with his regular sniping at Josiah Royce (whose totalizing Absolute seemed to Howison a moral disaster) at times led Royce to near despair.<sup>33</sup> However, by tracing some of Howison's steps we can see how the central question — the ways in which the individual functions in experience and in knowledge — can be developed so as to make it possible to have the requisite unity of knowledge without having the tyrannous totalization of experience. Notice that both these difficulties remain logical issues. The logic of knowledge requires one side of the antinomy; the logic of moral discourse the other.

We must review the issues for ourselves before we can focus more clearly and closely on the disputes between Howison and Royce. Kant's original problem with the "perfect concept" was simply that it does not and cannot, in the ordinary way, appear in experience, and so is "beyond" our capacity to validate or invalidate it, despite its importance *vis-à-vis* our speculative powers, which posits and supposes the "perfect concept" as necessary to claims to knowledge.

Kant's distinction between empirical and transcendental concepts will prove too arbitrary. But first notice that "transcendental" concepts are transcendental in two traditional senses. One of them is that concepts or properties are transcendental if they apply to everything (such concepts traditionally included being, goodness, and truth). The other is the sense in which transcendental concepts lie outside the domain of experience.

Kant distinguished between intuitions (sensations) and the structures which serve to organize our intuitions. Thus space, time and cause figure in all our experiences even if, as Hume thought, no one ever experiences at least some of the ingredients in causal necessity and no one ever experiences space as opposed to various properties in space.

Howison attacked these distinctions in a paper entitled "The Origin of Concepts from Percepts".<sup>34</sup> He begins by noticing that "concept" has two meanings — a

---

33. ROYCE wrote "Why do you forever put us off with fragments?" ; letter of December 2, 1885, in John GLENDENNING, ed., *Letters of Josiah Royce*, Chicago, The University Press, 1970, p. 338-339.

34. Originally published in the *Public School Journal*, September, 1892. It was revised for a round-table discussion at a National Education Association meeting in Saratoga later in 1892. The revision is dated July 13, 1892. The revised version was printed by the N.E.A. Copies are in the Bancroft Library (C-B 1037), University of California, Berkeley.

general one and a particular one. Particular concepts he associates with sensory images. In so far as concepts of both sorts are founded on experience he calls them empirical concepts. But he wants to distinguish between empirical and transcendental concepts. These latter he describes in Kantian fashion. While one sense of transcendental in Kant concerns the elements common to all concepts and percepts — the categorical elements — Howison wants to use “transcendental” to cover every concept which is formed by the use of the categories. This he believes will help him to explain how percepts get transformed into concepts. That is, if we realize that the categories involve what Howison calls “thought acts” we can see that such acts are present both in perception and in conception, and that we form our world by an activity through which the transcendental elements figure in things.

## VII. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF TRANSCENDING BECOMING & THE NEED FOR DYNAMIC CONCEPTS

The significance of this is that it turns out that there are not pure transcendental concepts, but that transcendental concepts are intelligible only in so far as they do organize experience. Thus the Absolute as a concept is intelligible in so far as it organizes experiences which must always, in fact, be the ordinary experiences of individual perceivers. There is thus not a distinct concept apart from all “our” experiences.

Similarly, the concept of an individual is not something which can be abstracted. Consider Duns Scotus’s worries about the “thisness” of things. What could “thisness” be like?<sup>35</sup> In reality, “thisness” can only appear in and through particulars. Individuality, thus, is not a transcendental concept leading perceivers to a transcendental ego which floats far above the world, but is only the organization of the pool of experience in which each of us lives. But so it is with a community. Just as individuality is a concept which has to issue in a specific life, so the concept of community has to issue in a specific community. It is, after all, something which the participants potentially “possess” in common which is in question — the shared stock of communal ideas, not nobody’s ideas.

The whole can be unified in a morally acceptable manner, not through abstraction, but only through a dynamic co-operation which is intrinsically pluralistic. We know ourselves and others as *human* subjects but the domain of subjectivity may be much wider as Whitehead and Hartshorne suggest. Yet, whatever the subjects who take part in the development are, then, unless their potentiality can be exhausted in a finite set of acts — and we presume they cannot — becoming has to be unending. Thus “becoming” can never be transcended. The reason that Hegel’s Absolute becomes a “totality” in Lévinas’s sense is that it ultimately does transcend becoming (in its look to the “elsewhere” of “perfect reality” in the “absolute” that may lead, ac-

35. Royce did consider Duns Scotus in a way which annoyed Howison. See *The Conception of God*, p. 223-257. Royce’s account fails to take account of the many subtleties which Scotus introduces into the individuation question, for instance those in *Quodlibetal Questions*, II. Royce and Howison were led by Charles Peirce to read Duns Scotus but neither do justice to him.

ording to Lévinas, to “apostasie et extase”).<sup>36</sup> The transcendence of becoming freezes creativity. If, however, becoming can never be transcended, the only “ideal” one can strive for is creative co-operation. Kant never spells out his Kingdom of Ends principle, and it is sometimes imagined as a society in which everyone occupies the place for which he or she is ultimately best fitted and in which each is an end in himself or herself in the sense that none of his or her capacities are sacrificed to the others. But this would still be literally a totalitarian state in the sense that the place of each person would be fixed forever. If each person is really free and the process is creative, there has to be continuous mutual adjustment.

One may well ask how one chooses between the thesis that each individual is finite and endowed with finite capacities which can be actualized and the position that the potentialities of each agent are infinite. The phenomenology of the infinite, as Lévinas suggests, offers intriguing concrete possibilities,<sup>37</sup> but our concern here is chiefly logical.

### VIII. THE INFINITY OF INDIVIDUALITY

Most importantly, the idea of individuality which makes the logical analysis possible is itself a dialectical notion which permits an infinity of potential developments. In order to follow the long march from pure being to any even tolerable characterization of the concrete world one must know that there are indefinitely many ways of conceptualizing reality and one must know that finding oneself in the world — and so being in a position to make rational decisions on what one is doing — is a matter of postulating oneself in the world and then reflecting. But the reflections are never, *in principle*, fully adequate. For any “vision” of oneself as fixed makes one an object in the world (and so is at best only arbitrarily associated with the ongoing process of rational reflection).

Of course, we do manifest ourselves as objects in the world. There must be something to reflect upon. And we make decisions about and with respect to ourselves in terms of some vision of “how things are”. But then we must understand that these objects are provisional, that we and others are never exhausted by them. We can reflect that we are reflecting on dynamic processes and entities, i.e., ourselves as both subjects who act and as objects in the world. We all have bodies whether we like it or not, and we are also dynamic subjects. Yet our bodies don’t stop us from being dynamic, any more than the nature of reflection stops us from reflecting on a dynamic process. And any vision of oneself as a kind of pure transcendental ego separates one from one’s basis for factual judgement — one’s appearance in the world. To opt for either side is to lose one’s capacity as a thinker, as a being who legitimately manifests the logic itself. Between the abstraction of pure being and any concretization there are indeed an infinity of stopping places, but none is permanent.

36. *Totalité et infini*, fifth edition, p. 32.

37. Lévinas identifies the infinite in at least two concrete experiences : we have contact with the infinite in each act of thinking and saying, as we also contact the infinite in the concrete approach of the other.

To freeze the process is always to lose whatever it is that makes *anything* a real subject. Thus one must opt for infinity.

This is one way to understand what is legitimate in the deconstructionist revolt against the idea of the subject as a fixed entity and against the notion of a simple author behind every text or, ultimately, every act. Texts, acts, and communities are all the outcome of interaction. Deconstructionists tend to forget that each of us remains the moving centre of a field of experience. Left and right never change and there are never two fields of experience — or none. What varies and is unpredictable is the *content* of that field. Unfortunately, the opponents of deconstruction tend to forget that the field can be filled with anything whatever and that the continuity is given by connections within the changing field of experience. (Thus Howison's own vision of human selves as eternal entities, while in one sense perfectly correct, seriously misleads because it fails to make a crucial distinction between the field of experience and its endless development.)

A community of creative individuals is the best approximation to the infinite process of becoming. Creative co-operation does not in itself, of course, imply a single culture. One must suppose that it may well take an infinity of cultures to express all that is expressible. Cultural unity is not a desideratum, though, on such a view, it is not true that "anything goes". Cultures within which there are elements that insist on totalization, on mutual destruction, or on oppression remain without justification. This does not mean that we should make war on Islam or blow up the Vatican because we object to some view about the status of women or that those who indulge in "politically incorrect" talk should be hustled off to jail. It does mean — obviously — that views which if adopted would lead to actual oppression or discrimination must be subjected to a constant critique, and every effort must be made to provide adequate recourse against *overt* acts of oppression.<sup>38</sup>

Howison ultimately wanted to say that the solution to this dilemma lies in the notion of a Kingdom of Ends. This is certainly true if one is prepared to insist that such a kingdom must be much more radical than that envisaged by people who want to say that all that is needed is to fit each of us into an optimal place. For there is no optimal place and no optimal totality. There must be an open society.

---

38. There is much to be said for such devices as the "clear and present danger" test used by the United States Supreme Court. The normal recourse is always to honest argument and to that end freedom of speech must be maximized, but we do not allow people to cry "fire" in crowded theatres. If a fundamentalist clergyman preaches sermons telling congregations of deeply believing men that they have the right to beat their wives (and such sermons *are* preached) the result is surely a clear and present danger. Some issues posed are harder to decide than these. For example, in France there is a current debate about whether Islamic girls should be allowed to attend school wearing distinctive clothing which seems to many people to symbolise the subjugation of women. The question is partly about whether they are really free to choose their distinctive clothing and about what effect such choices have in the normal processes of democratic socialization. But it is also over how one decides in which culture the symbols are to be read. Beyond that there is the question of whether, even if one is free, and acts within a culture which understands one's choice, one should be allowed to choose subjugation.

## IX. MORAL PLURALITY AND THE UNITY OF KNOWLEDGE

The difficulty at once arises, however, that such a radical plurality may seem to conflict with the possibility of the knowledge which is necessary to achieve it, and, indeed, with the very unity of knowledge which is necessary to avoid the paradoxes of Protagoras. Howison believed that, of these two principles, moral pluralism is more important. He understood well enough that the unity of knowledge is a presupposition from speculative reason whereas the need for plurality is anchored in the concrete reality of our moral lives. And yet neither can be denied.

Royce had insisted that there can be no error if there is no truth and that, therefore, there must be a single all-encompassing truth. Otherwise a single proposition could be both true and false. Ultimately two true propositions might contradict one another. This worried Howison; he realized that he would need to rework the concept of knowledge itself. He began to explore it in a paper he published in the *Philosophical Review*. There, he insists squarely that the real issue is over the question of whether or not the Kingdom of Ends is the "only sufficient condition of knowledge."<sup>39</sup> His reason for believing that it is the "only sufficient condition" begins with the claim that knowledge cannot be contained within the domain of a single mind.

The claim for the all-encompassing Absolute was based, in Royce's arguments, on the belief that the unity necessary for knowledge can only be found in a single mind. Howison believed this to be false because the conditions for knowledge are the constituents of the rationality which each individual mind possesses. The true meaning of the Kantian analysis of experience, he says, is that each and every mind acts in a way constitutive of knowledge, and indeed, that each mind must think for itself.

Howison does not fully develop the argument, but it seems evident that objectivity in a world in which a plurality of agents plays a creative part can be found only in a system within which each constituent member is able to understand the others. Each mind thus in some measure depends on the insights of other minds, and so the formula of mind as a microcosm of the universe alters subtly but radically so that, while in principle each mind is open to the entire cosmos, that openness does not determine a totalizable grasp of all of reality. Notice also that this formula for the coherence of knowledge based on a multiplicity of observers also undoes the specious philosophical "problem of other minds", for minds only know their distinctness through their interactions with others. To doubt the existence of others would then be a form of philosophical insanity that effectively undoes our ability to participate within a universe of reason: the doubt itself would be, in other words, unreasonable, for to doubt anything at all, as Wittgenstein had argued, presupposes a minimal amount of "knowing", but if in knowing we imply the knowledge of others, the "other mind doubts" would be themselves without epistemic foundation.

This is the same — at least minimal — mutual understanding which is required for love, friendship, and community. Mutual understanding by definition cannot be contained within a single mind. Kant himself appears to make this point in his

---

39. "The Real Issue in *The Conception of God*," vol. 7, September, 1898. p. 518-522.



discussion of the ways in which we find our directions in thought and in morals in his essay on orientation in thinking. He uses examples about compass points, but large elements of mutual creativity go into all our knowledge. The choice of common symbols to objectify subjective experiences creates a world of knowledge into which individuals can assert themselves without loss of their personal reference points and while sustaining their own experiences as the tests for the validity of the logical structures erected on the symbols. Most vitally perhaps, we all learn to use the same first person pronoun and to create common sentence "types", but as logicians know the sentence "tokens" which employ these symbols still refer uniquely to one and only one person.<sup>40</sup> By understanding how the pronoun is used and following the twists of language we come to have public knowledge of the private lives of others. Here the point is that each of us, by making an individual choice of symbols, can nonetheless create a real correlation.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to note that John Watson believed that Royce had misunderstood this critical issue and had supposed that subjectivity must always play a crucial role in measurement. Watson thought that this led Royce to believe that for objectivity there was a need for an over-arching mind, Royce's Absolute.<sup>42</sup> In reality measuring is something one does validly for oneself, but by using the same symbols we can compare and create our own "objectivity" without recourse to the Roycean Absolute.

## X. HOWISON'S CRITIQUE OF ROYCE

The crucial issue can be seen in another way if we now turn to Howison's critique of Royce. He wrote a set of notes entitled "Steps in My Critique of Royce" in which he tried to summarize his whole dispute with Royce's thought. The notes are undated and exist in a holograph and in a single typescript of 10 pages.<sup>43</sup> The claim is that, while Royce thought he was founding a morally adequate philosophical system on a single unified notion of universal reason, he in fact failed to do so. Royce's failure consisted of a basic inability to reconcile what Howison (following Royce) calls "religious" and "moral" consciousness. Royce left the two states of consciousness in a final deadlock, and Howison notes that Royce's "ingenious and still more consistent reasoning" led unfortunately to a "morally shocking 'Omniscient Whole'".<sup>44</sup>

40. "I live in Ottawa" is a sentence type. It can be said by many people. But when someone says this, what he or she says is a sentence "token" and then the "I" refers to one and only one person.

41. *Was heißt sich im Denken orientieren?*, Immanuel KANT, *Werke* (German Academy of Sciences), vol. VIII, p. 134ff.; tr. by Gabriele Rabel as "What Does it Mean [or Signify] to Orient Oneself in Thought?", in *Kant* (Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 168ff. Kant's account is simple. One notices that one hand feels different from the other. One stands and faces the sun at noon and decides that one hand points east. But everyone can use this approach once we are agreed on left and right. Thus "there really is an east". Gradually we create maps which use their "orientation points" (literally to "orient" oneself is to know which way is east). The map contains objective knowledge even though it is wholly composed of symbols over which we have complete control.

42. Untitled ms., Watson Archives, Queen's University, Kingston. Some numbers on this ms. suggest that the date may have been 1929, but the numbers more likely refer to the ordering of lecture notes.

43. Bancroft Library, C-B 1037.

44. "Steps in My Critique of Royce," Bancroft Library, C-B 1037, typescript, p. 7.

Because the fatal flaw really has to do with the way in which reason functions and the way in which the transcendental concepts become involved with experience, Howison's critique is, or so we will try to show, really a critique of the idea of universal reason. If it is sound, it demands the replacement of a "holistic" universal reason by something which is subtly but significantly different: notably, a universal reason which allows for plurality and difference.

Religious consciousness (in Royce's view) demands a single unified Absolute; an entity in the world capable of ordering everything so as to put things right, and most of all capable of ordering the world so that there can be knowledge. Such an Absolute is the antithesis of Descartes' demon because the Absolute makes error possible. Royce's most famous argument was that error was only possible because there was truth. As it is always possible to be wrong, so it is always possible to be right. Thus there must be an all-embracing Absolute.

Royce admitted that moral consciousness requires moral agents capable of entering into genuine relations with one another. Yet, if all consciousness is, as Royce suggested, simply a facet of the one consciousness of the Absolute, then no such relations are possible because no genuine individuals exist. He was aware that this problem posed difficulties for him and he tried to emphasise the various ways in which individuals could exist within the Absolute. These revisions appear first in the extended version of his Berkeley lecture and then in his subsequent lectures at Manchester College, Oxford, and in others of his writings.<sup>45</sup> But, like Hegel, he could never quite escape the seductive allure of the notion of a final unity which was perceived as necessary to sustain his argument from error and logical contradiction. At Manchester College for instance, he spoke of the "universal community", and said the central idea is that of "one beloved community". He added that "the doctrine of the community will prove to be a doctrine about the being and nature and manifestation of God."<sup>46</sup> One community expressing the unity of one God. So much for pluralism.

In summing up his own position Howison puts the issue in a way which casts an intriguingly different light on the matter: Royce's system "fails to reach the ideal of reason" because "it makes its so-called God destitute of love."<sup>47</sup> Reasoning is something one does when one is seeking understanding, and it must be done with patience and with respect for others as originators of a plurality which makes possible a world in which there are differences to be reconciled and conclusions to be reached. If reasoning in a world of becoming requires mutual creativity it also requires love, a committed determination to reach out to the other. In this Howison foreshadows Lévinas' reading of reason as the manifest measure and rule of love.

Howison's critique also presents problems for the celebrated (or infamous) yet incomprehensible "One" of the Neoplatonists (the generic concept which surely lies

---

45. The problems posed by the Berkeley lectures (*The Conception of God*) were followed up in *The Problem of Christianity*, New York, Macmillan, 1918, and Chicago, the University Press, 1968.

46. *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago edition) p. 232-233.

47. "Steps in my Critique", typescript, p. 1.

behind the Hegelian Absolute). The One overflows into creation from pure excess and abundance of love. The traditional argument is that the One emerges into the world in a process of self-revelation which Augustine was to read as God's love for the world. But if love is impossible for a single being, one must accept Howison's claim that God and the world are involved in a process of mutual creation. The argument could be made that this is precisely why there is such a creative relation — so that there can be love, so that there is something for the "One" to love.<sup>48</sup>

The lack of love in Royce's God is due, for Howison, to the ultimately solipsistic nature of the Roycean universe. Howison continues this critique to say not only is love not possible, but, more surprisingly (though it reveals the connection between reason and love) *neither is knowledge* : "With such a Sole Consciousness [...] there is never any real knowledge reached, nor any reachable ; for all the *quasi*-selves into which its spheric Whole may eternally pedunculate can do no more than passively receive and echo back the judgments issuing from its hopeless subjectivity, — the futile Self-Absorbed, incapable of testing its thoughts by the thought of other real minds."<sup>49</sup>

In these passages Howison expresses the belief that Royce's argument comes to grief because it proceeds by assumptions that are well-hidden but which reveal, when exposed, a background of Kantian critique. Royce assumes first "that no conception of God can be valid that will not, of itself, show God to be real," and then that "no conception of God except the author's can prove itself real".<sup>50</sup>

Howison claims this assumption derives from Kant's belief that no real object of knowledge can be transcendent. What Howison is getting at here is this : If Kant is right then we cannot actually *infer* the existence of other minds, God, the real world, or whatever lies beyond experience. Royce accepts this and thus must make God immanent in *our* consciousness if there is to be an argument for the existence of God. But if God is immanent in our consciousness and there is only one God, then, on Royce's reasoning, we are all parts of one great soul. Such reasoning leads us to the view that we are "each identically a part of God's experience, i.e. not similar to a portion of God's experience, but identically the same as such portion".<sup>51</sup> This "leads to just the moral and religious monster for whose reality Prof. R. so courageously and so remorselessly argues."<sup>52</sup> Howison, never one to mince words, considers that Royce

48. This involved Howison in heated theological debates — many of which filled pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Examiner* — since Howison's position would make the "One" derive its stature from an earlier principle of reality, namely, the principle or law of love. It would also, some thought, blasphemously suggest that the "One" is not entirely or completely sufficient unto itself, and thus that it lacks something from before creation. By contrast, on December 26, 1898, the *Examiner* quoted Rabbi Friedlander of the Geary Street Temple, as comparing Howison and Maimonides. Howison, he said, was fully acceptable to Judaism. The *Chronicle* went further and quoted Friedlander as saying "the professor will pardon me for saying that in defining what he thinks is Christianity he [...] is giving a comprehensive exposition of Judaism. There is not space to argue points of philosophical theology, yet from quite early times, Christianity has not been able to make do with a Unitarian solution to its problems."

49. "Steps in My Critique", typescript, p. 9.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

51. *The Conception of God*, p. 292.

52. "Steps in My Critique", typescript, p. 4.

“only substitutes the *poena damni* for all *poena sensus* in the Hell in which he and his ‘God’ delight.”<sup>53</sup> This ends, he says, “in the sublime monstrosity of the Absolute self-contradiction” and a human being becomes “a solitary homunculus self-inflated *in infinitum* [...] and then the logic vanishes in the ridiculous [...]”<sup>54</sup>

## XI. WHY KNOWLEDGE LOOKS BEYOND ITSELF

Howison insists, however, that Kant sets up a counter principle that no human mind is capable of sustaining knowledge by itself — that knowledge therefore always looks beyond itself. This leads to the doctrine of the thing-in-itself, so quickly repudiated by all Kant’s successors in the tradition drawn upon by Royce. The repudiation seemed necessary surgery on the ground that Kant’s doctrine was apparently inconsistent. Kant supposed that he knew that there was a thing-in-itself, but knew nothing about it, yet how can we, on his grounds, claim to know that there is an *x* without knowing anything whatsoever about *x* ? The amputation of the thing-in-itself by the post-Kantian idealists made Kant’s doctrine consistent but it did so by ignoring the crucial truth that each knowing mind must always look beyond itself for knowledge. If each of us processes experience and transforms it, then any single private experience must be dubious. But this is an issue which must be regarded with care. Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, considers that even identity is only what is shared, and so surreptitiously steals away any hope for the “inner life” of the individual.

The argument which we suggested about the dialectic of individuality reminds us that the self is not completely known even by itself. And this has been argued throughout the ages — by Philo, Pierre Charron, and Lévinas, for instance. One way of overcoming the problem involves a kind of spurious inter-subjectivity that makes all minds immanent in one mind ; and this is what Howison thinks happened (unhappily) to Royce. But apart from the clash which this brings with respect to the “moral consciousness,” there is the obvious fact that a solipsism within which the individual is inflated into a whole universe is nonetheless solipsism and one which does not seem to solve any problems. There is no escape, Howison says, by expanding “yourself into absolute dimensions.”<sup>55</sup>

The solution is to create for oneself the necessary conditions for being a member of Kant’s Kingdom of Ends. Here his notes end without a full development of the central idea.<sup>56</sup> One can see, however, what is intended, and develop it into a plausible thesis. We need to create a community of meaning within which each of us has a place and within which we can exchange not just information and opinion but mutual commitments — on terms which allow us to change, grow, and keep our freedom. For such a system must grow through the systematic development of its members.

53. “Sketch-notes on J.R.’s Theory of Individuation”, Bancroft Library, C-B 1037, typescript p. 5. (These were notes made at Raymond Ranch, California in July, 1897.)

54. “Steps in My Critique”, typescript, p. 4.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

## XII. A PLURALISTIC NOTION OF UNIVERSAL REASON

One immediate and crucial consequence of creating such a pluralistic community of meaning is that it changes the idea of universal reason, or, rather, compels its “transformation” into the notion of universal meaningfulness. Universal meaningfulness is the outcome of exchange and openness to other participants, combined with a determination to create common structures within which all participants can flourish. The openness to other participants must include openness to all the data of immediate experience — i.e. openness to all the structures and features of reality which come through to each of the participants — thus their individual experience is not *prima facie* “dubious”.

But such a constructivist theory of knowledge inevitably raises the question of the thing-in-itself. For it suggests that there can be nothing apart from our constructions of the world. It is true that one can no longer speak of there being an *x* of which no one knows anything. But the thing-in-itself can be retained as the notion of what one would know and understand if one were perfectly open to all experiences of one’s own, of others, and of all possible participants in the Kingdom of Ends. Such openness need not unify the diversity of experience. What one might understand is why it is necessary that there be a plurality. The “thing-in-itself,” if the logic of our argument is correct, would turn out to be the infinity which, since it can never be exhausted by any single manifestation or expression, must always be understood through a plurality. This need not be an obfuscatory notion; we already know from experience that human persons are never exhausted by any category or any single manifestation. And we do not offer this as a reason for thinking that human personhood is an obfuscatory notion.

Notice that this notion of a “universal meaningfulness” introduces a dynamic as opposed to a static notion of knowledge and truth. As soon as one tries to restore becoming to its proper place in the scheme of things (as a generative dynamic principle as opposed to a categorical stage in the development) one must turn over not only one’s ontological but also one’s epistemological notions — meaning, knowledge, and truth.

Reason historically has usually been thought of as a set of rules which all the participants must accept either because they are laid down by God or the Absolute or because there seems no rational alternative to them. But what is required here is the creative exchange of visions and of alternatives within a framework in which each participant accepts that knowledge requires the participation of others, and which accepts the legitimacy of a system in which the goals of each participant are to be maximized.

This acceptance, as we said, rules out goals which are inherently intolerant or which inherently involve the suppression of the other participants. But the point of such an acceptance is that it is as essential for knowledge as for morality.

## XIII. THREE POSSIBLE RESOLUTIONS

There are evidently three possibilities for the understanding of such a dynamic system and we can only sketch them here. One is that what we find is simply that the infinite manifests itself in the world through us and that infinity is only something more than us in the sense that it includes all the possibilities for an infinitely expanding set of understandings.

The second possibility is that the infinite which is the basis in reality for such a dynamic and pluralistic system is something like the Neoplatonic One which transcends all possible distinctions, but which must, to be anything, manifest itself in the world. The infinite is to be found in the activities of the participants (moral agents) in the world, and yet, of course, it cannot be confined to any single person or act.

The third possibility is that what is real is the community of meaning and that in so far as we can speak of an absolute at all, it is just what is manifest through the gradually developing community. The community here is to be considered as an ongoing development which is never finished and cannot be analyzed out into its component parts and is not relative to any end which can be specified; in short, "community" cannot be reified into a static or single principle. Thus such an infinity is not another "super-individual" in addition to the community. On such a view the development of history and politics can be seen as a struggle between tendencies and forces which seek to order things into closed systems and those that seek to maintain the fundamental openness of the structures of reality.

If it is true that becoming is an endless process and that the finite and infinite must always be seen as interacting and inter-implicating principles, then any attempt to freeze reality into a totality will end in disaster. It must show itself first in the distortion of the lives of the men and women who live in such a system, and finally in impending chaos. Any attempt, however, to live without the realization that we are constantly fed by the infinite will equally, in all likelihood, end in disaster. History cannot be a straight line from a Hobbesian state of nature to a Kingdom of Ends. Indeed neither the Hobbesian state of nature nor an idealized Kingdom of Ends can exist except as abstractions. But we may be able, if we understand ourselves, to work rationally toward a more open society so conceived as to stand between the totalitarian benevolence Hegel sometimes imagined and the chaotic society in which the strongest always triumph — the society Hegel feared most.

This suggests something richer than the first option but without the brooding presence of a One which is all too likely to ossify into another member of the species of "moral monsters" which Howison so detested. However, in all three readings it must be made clear that what is to be strongly resisted is the reification and ossification of any state of affairs or conceptual construct, however rosy and promising it may presently seem to be, for our primary principle in any such choice of "framework" is indisputably the notion of becoming as both dynamic and infinite.

At any rate, the vision of a moral community surely need not be wholly set aside even if the vision of a moralizing society in which everyone is locked in his or her

place is to be eschewed. Few people want a tyranny or the war of all against all and what our argument shows is that there are philosophical grounds for our resistance to both. Well beyond this, our argument suggests that any claim that we ought to submit to either of these possibilities is philosophically misconstrued, if not logically inconsistent.

If we follow Howison home with his intuitions regarding universal reason we will see that, despite the long philosophical penchant for theories which seek to exhibit communal unity by imposing a necessary epistemological and metaphysical unity, the apparent rationality of such a unity is a mirage. If we are to understand how we can get together and form communities of free beings we have to acknowledge the need to accept that — apart from our knowledge that there is an infinite which can never be confined in a simple category or limited by a human construction — knowledge must always be recognized as provisional and always open to contestation. For the only logically consistent and morally acceptable absolute is the infinite which surpasses all limits.

#### XIV. BETWEEN TYRANNY & CHAOS

Thus, all in all, what we suggest is that the “Absolute” can be tamed, but as the cliché goes, to tame something is to change its nature, and so Hegel’s Absolute is more than merely tamed, it has been veritably transformed. We argue thus that what needs an *Aufhebung*<sup>57</sup> is the Absolute, not “becoming”. This taming is not however a mundane “domestication” that makes of the previous Absolute a mere shell, stripped of its power or generative possibilities (declawed, as it were, as in Nietzsche’s reading of the taming of instinct). On the contrary, our argument has been all along that the Absolute conceived as Absolute and unitary (thus cancelling considerations of plurality and voiding moral implications) is itself a vacuous and contradictory notion that leads to the metaphysical solipsism and moral fatalism which Howison found finally entrapped Royce. What does provide for a generative framework that opens rather than closes the mind is the Absolute transformed, or tamed, as the principle of a necessarily dynamic plurality. It is pushed on not by a category but by the real pulsion of becoming or of the Lévinasian infinite. We find ourselves thus in what Howison calls a world of “mutually implicated particulars.” This compels us to accept that, in order to deal with the current data, we must understand how knowledge goes on being generated and cannot stop with any particular theory. This is something we know from our science as much as from our metaphysics and our epistemology. If Hegel could accept this, he would be acquitted of both Sir Karl Popper’s charges : the charge of undermining science, as well as the charge of promoting tyranny.<sup>58</sup>

We, at any rate, reject Absolute Autism and opt for an infinitely reasonable, responsible and continuing conversation within a plurality not merely of subjects, but also of a system that must accept a plurality of cultures.

57. The noun is often — and reasonably — rendered as “lifting”.

58. See Karl POPPER, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, George Routledge, 1945.