

APPRECIATING THE MIND OF A FRIEND: A JOSIAH ROYCE AUTOGRAPH INSCRIPTION ABOUT WILLIAM JAMES

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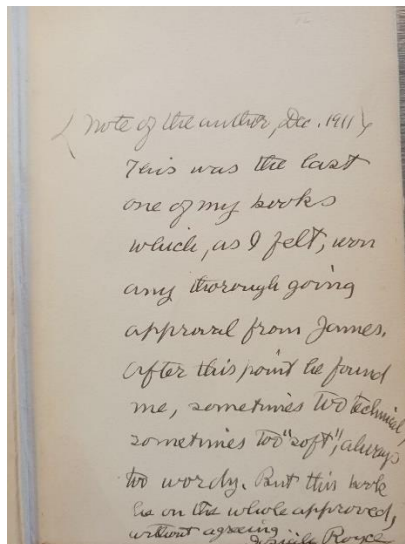
I provide a transcription of an inscription written by Josiah Royce in a copy of his *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* which pertains to William James' opinion of that book and of Royce's work in general, followed by some brief remarks thereon.



In this short note, I provide a transcription of an inscription written by Josiah Royce in a copy of his *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*,¹ which pertains to William James's opinion of that book and of Royce's work in general, followed by some brief remarks thereon. Though not containing anything revelatory, I believe it is worthwhile for scholars to have access to Royce's comment, as it sheds additional light on what we already know about their personal and intellectual relationship.

The copy of *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* that contains the inscription is of the first edition, copyright 1892, published by Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston and New York. The printing must have been no earlier than 1900, however, as opposite the title page is an advertisement for other books by Royce from the same publisher, the first listed being *The Conception of Immortality*, which was published in 1900.

The inscription, located on the recto of the front endpaper, is dated 1911. Comparing it to an autograph letter of Royce's to Hugo Munsterberg in 1893 in possession of the Boston Public Library,² the inscription appears genuine. In particular, the letter and the inscription both have Royce's signature rather squished in at the bottom of the page, an unusual feature of the inscription, and the cramped signature appears the same in both. This helps to authenticate it, in my mind, in addition to the obvious similarity of the hand in the body of both the letter and the inscription. (See photograph.)



The text of the inscription is as follows (retaining the line breaks as written):

{Note of the author, Dec. 1911}
 This was the last
 one of my books
 which, as I felt, won
 any thoroughgoing
 approval from James.
 After this point he found
 me, sometimes too technical,
 sometimes too “soft,” always
 too wordy. But this book
 he on the whole approved,
 without agreeing.
 Josiah Royce

Another unusual aspect of the inscription is that it is not addressed *to* anyone, merely prefaced by a statement (also in Royce’s hand) that the note is written by him. This suggests perhaps that it was a copy of the book that Royce himself owned, and in which he desired to record a reminiscence of his still somewhat recently deceased friend. It is also possible that the book was given to a close friend or colleague to whom he felt he need not inscribe it.

I received this book from my uncle, Brian Beasley, in the spring of 2022, who acquired it from a rare book seller in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, several years before. The seller, unfortunately, had no further information on its provenance, and there is little other evidence to go on in the book itself, which, apart from the Royce inscription, is devoid of any other markings which might indicate ownership.

As for the date of the inscription, it is notable that Royce’s book *William James and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Life* was published in November of 1911, just prior to the date of the inscription, and that book contains a Preface dated October 5, 1911.³ It is clear that at this time James was very much in Royce’s thoughts; perhaps the inscription was prompted by the recent publication of the book bearing his friend’s name and containing a tribute to him, and one imagines that the emotions of the Christmas season may

have played a role. Of course, this is conjecture, and somewhat fanciful conjecture at that—we cannot know exactly why Royce wrote what he did, when he did.

Nevertheless, if what Royce reports is indeed true, it is interesting to consider the nature of *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* as a work, and why it may have met with James's approval where his later works did not. *Spirit* was written for a popular audience, and indeed is made up of material originally given as lectures. Perhaps this contributed to James's approval of the work, as James himself was notable for the popular orientation of his philosophical work. But it is also noteworthy that *Spirit* predates the more intellectually acrimonious period of their relationship, which began around 1895.⁴

In the inscription, Royce states that he felt that James considered his post-*Spirit* work to be “sometimes too technical, sometimes too ‘soft’, always too wordy”. The criticism is an interesting mixture of what seem to be mostly stylistic comments, but the contrast between “too technical” and “too ‘soft’” might remind one of James's contrast between “tough-minded” and “tender-minded” from *Pragmatism*. This isn't quite right, though—for James, intellectual “tough-mindedness” is not a matter of technicality, but rather a matter of focus on “hard facts,” on the empirical, and a tendency to scepticism or pessimism. Indeed, he associates Royce with the “tender-minded” philosophers, though nevertheless of the “radical and aggressive” strain of commitment to the Absolute. In being radical, these philosophers avoid the wishy-washy compromise of the less-radical religious philosophers, who seek a mere *modus vivendi* between religion and science on whatever terms they think will carve out at least some special space for religion. The “radical” tender-minded philosophers, however, “dwell on so high a level of abstraction that they never even try to come down”.⁵ “Absolutism,” James goes on, “has a certain sweep and dash about it, while the usual theism is more insipid, but both are equally remote and vacuous.”⁶

As we know, James goes on to argue that what we require is a philosophy which combines the best of both attitudes, and that pragmatism is such a philosophy. But his comments about Roycean types of philosophies are telling: it suggests that he sees Royce's technicality not as part of a “tough-minded” appreciation for rigor

or scientific exactness, but rather as part and parcel of the remote and removed “abstractness” of a philosophy that is too disconnected from everyday life and everyday experience. That is why James criticizes Royce as being both too technical *and* too soft: both evince his tendency to favour abstraction over concrete detail and engagement with things as they are.

Indeed, in a letter to Dickinson S. Miller in 1899, James gives explicit voice to this criticism, saying some of the very things Royce would later discern in his friend’s attitude towards his work, if in harsher terms:

I have come to perceive what I didn’t trust myself to believe before, that looseness of thought is R.’s essential element. He wants it. There isn’t a tight joint in his system; not one. And yet I thought that a mind that could talk me blind and black and numb on mathematics and logic, and whose favorite recreation is works on those subjects, must necessarily conceal closeness and exactitudes of ratiocination that I hadn’t the wit to find out. But no! He is the Rubens of philosophy. Richness, abundance, boldness, color, but a sharp contour never, and never any perfection. But isn’t fertility better than perfection?⁷

While James here begins by summing up, in a seemingly unkind way, many of the thoughts that Royce knew his friend had about his work, he ends on a positive note: Royce’s work is “rich,” “abundant,” “bold,” and “colorful,” and, while it lacks both sharpness and perfection, he closes with the pregnant question, “isn’t fertility better than perfection?”

Strangely enough, I think the same must be said of James, whose work, while certainly aspiring to “tight joints,” and which is itself rich, abundant, bold, and colorful, is nevertheless often undisciplined and lacking in precision. He often does not rigorously distinguish between ideas which are similar but distinct, and seems to overflow at times with a plurality of notions, all of which are interesting, but only rarely are they clearly delineated and precisely argued for. Perhaps James saw much of himself in Royce, but put to work towards ends he did not endorse.

That said, it remains for us to wonder why *Spirit* nonetheless met with James’s approval (if not agreement, as Royce notes). Was it a matter less of the book itself, and more of the nature of their

relationship at the time? Is this inscription the result of Royce looking back and thinking fondly of the time prior to their more intense disagreements? We cannot know, but it is nonetheless important, I think, to be able to read, in Royce's own words, his sense of James's thoughts on his work, however colored by wistfulness and grief. Indeed, we know that Royce was self-aware enough to appreciate the nature of his relationship to James as both a friend and as a philosopher:

No other philosopher in our country compares with James, I think, in his effectiveness as a man who has helped active and restless minds not only to win their own spiritual freedom, but to express their ideals in their own way. Sometimes critical people have expressed this by saying that James has always been too fond of cranks, and that the cranks have loved him. Well, I am one of James's cranks. He was good to me, and I love him.⁸

Crank or not, Royce felt that in *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, at least, however much a "crank" he might have been, he had written something which won James's approval in a way his later works did not.

If I may venture a hypothesis, in the light of the above, to explain this fact, it would be that in *Spirit* Royce's approach was motivated by an attention to "the great concerns and issues of humanity," and in particular "certain significant spiritual problems of our own day,"⁹ concerns and problems which are an inescapable part of the human experience. It is not merely to reveal The Absolute that Royce wrote the book, but rather to ensure our philosophical entitlement to the reality of our everyday experience of a world, and people in it, about which we *care* deeply. In the present context, it is fitting to see that in the later stages of the book, Royce writes about encountering a friend, not as a mass of molecules in relations describable by physical law, but as a being with a meaningful and conscious inner life whom one can *appreciate*, and whom one knows is also an appreciating being. "Here in my world of daily experience is my friend. In what sense is he real to me?"¹⁰ One could elaborate a description of the observable physical facts and the unobservable physical particles and forces that determine those facts. Would we have found, as "a fact in space and time," his friend? "Nay, I have

as yet found him not at all. I did not *mean* this maze of molecules by my friend”.¹¹ It is his ideals, his will, his approval, which are *facts* for us, but which are each person’s unique possession and so not describable in the language of physical law. But they are nonetheless real for all that. While Royce does go on to argue for the existence of “the one Self” that can encompass and know us all, in order to guarantee our individual selves, the argument is rooted in our everyday experience of others and of our own, and their, spiritual concerns.¹² The Absolute is what guarantees our concrete individuality and the very real mutual appreciation of individuals for one another.

Royce’s engagement with the thought of the historical philosophers he considers, and the positive view he goes on to sketch on that basis, is grounded in both that appreciation as well as a real sympathy for and empathy with the philosophers whose work he examines¹³—in a sense, a recognition that what the “tender-minded” philosopher cares about is always embodied in the “tough” facts of a real person and their life. Perhaps James liked *Spirit* because it placed its softness within the hard world, and eschewed technicality and abstraction in favour of direct appeal to the genuine concerns of a reflective human life—for example, in the palpable appreciation of one friend for another.

Acknowledgements

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NOTES

¹ Royce, Josiah. *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy: An Essay in the Form of Lectures*.

² Josiah Royce to Hugo Münsterberg, Cambridge, Mass., 13 December, 1893. Ms. Acc. 2091-2110 Box 16, Hugo Münsterberg Collection, 1890-1916, Series 1: Correspondence, n.d., 1892-1916. Accessed online at <https://ark.digitalcommonwealth.org/ark:/50959/b8516v011>, on January 4, 2024.

³ Royce, Josiah. *William James and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Life*. His tribute to James, included as the first essay in the book and titled “William James and the Philosophy of Life,” was composed, however, in June (*William James*, v).

⁴ Oppenheim, Frank M. “How Did William James and Josiah Royce Interact Philosophically?” 85.

⁵ James, William. *Pragmatism*, 16.

⁶ James, 17.

⁷ Perry, Ralph Barton. *The Thought and Character of William James*, quoted in Oppenheim, 86.

⁸ Royce, “A Word of Greeting to William James,” *Harvard Graduates Magazine*, 631. Paragraph break deleted. I thank Daniel Brunson for bringing this quotation to my attention.

⁹ Royce, *Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, 473.

¹⁰ Royce, 405.

¹¹ Royce, 405-406.

¹² Royce, 405-408.

¹³ Cf. Kevin J. Harrelson, “The Ethics of History in Royce’s *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*,” 134-152.