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INTERPRETATION AS A SELF-REPRESENTATIVE PROCESS

PROFESSOR ROYCE'S doctrine of interpretation has received as yet but little appreciation. Recent critics of the *Problem of Christianity*, which contains the first formulation of that doctrine, have either failed to understand its significance or have been unable to relate it to Professor Royce's earlier teachings. This note is intended to call attention to interpretation as a self-representative process.

What interpretation precisely means must first be made clear. In agreement with the late Charles Peirce, Professor Royce rejects the traditional dichotomy of the cognitive processes into perception and conception, and of the objects of knowledge into particulars and universals, appropriate to these processes. There are objects which can be called neither 'things' nor 'universals' and which are known by neither perception nor conception. Such objects are meanings, aptly called by Charles Peirce, 'signs,' *i. e.*, signs of meaning.¹ The term sign may be taken literally. The sign 'Keep off the grass,' for instance, is both a datum which can be perceived, and it has a general or abstract character which may be conceived, yet as a *meaningful* sign it appeals to a different mode of cognition. The sign addresses itself to one who can read and understand its meaning. One not familiar with the English language can upon seeing the sign still perceive a *thing* and conceive a *universal* quality or character belonging to it, but the *meaning* of the sign will escape him, despite adequate perception and conception. The knowledge of the sign *qua* sign, *i. e.*, *qua* meaning, is, according to Professor Royce, a knowledge *sui generis*. It is interpretation.

Interpretation not only differs from perception and conception in that its objects are meanings, but it is distinguished from them

¹ Professor Royce's definition of a sign: "A sign is an object whose being consists in the fact that the sign calls for an interpretation." *The Problem of Christianity* New York, 1913, Vol. II, p. 283.

in other respects. While perception and conception involve but two terms—the traditional subject-object relation—interpretation requires three terms. The triadic form of interpretation makes of the knowledge of meanings a social enterprise. A 'sign' must be interpreted *by* some one *to* some one. The interpreter 'mediates' between the sign calling for an interpretation and the one to whom the interpretation is addressed, who, by analogy with an addressee, may be called the 'interpretee.' The three terms may represent three different mental states within the same individual, or sign, interpreter and interpretee may be three different beings or groups of beings.¹ Interpretation is a name for a complex process constituted by a triadic non-symmetrical relation. This 'social' theory of knowledge which requires three terms of a different kind and order for the cognition of any meaning has led Professor Royce, not indeed to alter any of his earlier views concerning the 'world' and the 'individual,' but to deepen and to clarify them.

In yet another important respect interpretation differs from the two traditional cognitive processes. Both perception and conception terminate in their objects, while interpretation is interminable. When perception meets its particular and conception its universal, the knowing process has come to an end. A new particular and a new universal are required for the further operation of perception and conception. Interpretation, on the other hand, is endless, for the accomplished interpretation is itself a 'sign,' a meaning, which requires a fresh interpretative act, the result of which is in turn a new object for still further interpretation, and so on *ad infinitum*.

It is not mere endlessness, however, which constitutes the nature of interpretation. Its endlessness is one which any self-representative process exemplifies. It is the endlessness of a determinate infinite which Professor Royce has expounded in the "Supplementary Essay" to *The World and the Individual*. Professor Royce has himself not emphasized the self-representative character of interpretation. He merely hints at it when,

¹ This doctrine maintains—perhaps no other can—that the knowledge of the 'alter' is as certain or uncertain as the knowledge of one's 'self,' and *vice versa*.

for instance, he says, "By itself, the process of interpretation calls, in ideal, for an *infinite sequence* of interpretation."¹ That any interpretation when once initiated generates by virtue of its own nature an infinite series of interpretations having the relational structure of a self-representative system is implied, however, in the very meaning of the process.

The development "of an infinite multitude out of the expression of a single purpose"² which characterizes a self-representative system is precisely what the single purpose of interpreting a 'sign,' *i. e.*, knowing a meaning, exemplifies. The 'sign' which it is my purpose completely to interpret gives rise to a "recurrent operation of thought" such as, "*if once finally expressed*, would involve . . . an infinite variety of serially arranged facts corresponding to the purpose in question."³ Let it be my purpose to interpret completely the meaning of any 'sign.' The result of the triadic process of interpretation—the expression of the purpose—is a new object of knowledge, a 'sign,' calling for the same interpretative act, the result of which as a new object of knowledge, a 'sign,' requiring once more the same interpretative act, etc., etc.⁴ The self-representative character of interpretation may be expressed symbolically thus:—

Let x = any sign;

" y = " interpreter;

" z = " interpretee.⁵

Then $R(x, y, z)$ = any interpretation, *i. e.*, the triadic relation which unites the sign, the interpreter, and the interpretee into a complex.

But the triad, $R(x, y, z)$, is in turn a sign, requiring interpretation.

¹ *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. II, p. 150. The italics are mine.

² *The World and the Individual*, New York, 1912, Vol. I, p. 503.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

⁴ It must here be noted that Professor Royce uses the term interpretation to indicate both the *act* of interpreting and the *result* of such act. To say that interpretation as a 'sign' calls for a fresh interpretation is to say that the *result* of an act of interpretation requires a fresh interpretative act. This result, though now a single 'sign,' is logically the compound of previous sign, interpreter, and interpretee.

⁵ It should be borne in mind that y and z may be the same individual.

The new complex will be $R[R(x, y, z)]y', z'$. This again requires a new interpretation which can be represented $R\{[R(x, y, z)]y', z'\}y'', z''$. This process goes on indefinitely. The whole series will run: $R(x, y, z)$. $R[R(x, y, z)]y', z'$. $R\{[R(x, y, z)]y', z'\}y'', z''$. $R\{[R(x, y, z)]y', z'\}y''', z'''$¹ Each term is a triad one of whose terms is the term preceding the triad in question in the series; thus the series is self-representative. Or, the 'chain' of interpretations thus generated is a self-representative series, each of whose members is a triad, one term of which is the triad's preceding term in the series. It will be readily seen that this self-representative series fulfills all the conditions of self-representation demanded in the "Supplementary Essay" to *The World and the Individual*, Vol. I, pp. 508 ff.

The self-representative character of interpretation shows at once that Professor Royce's new epistemology is no radical departure from his previous theory. The novelty of his doctrine consists in his insistence that the knowledge of meaning is different from the knowledge of 'things' and the knowledge of 'universals.' The knowledge of meaning is a triadic process, but the triadic process as *one* purpose requires for its expression an infinite manifold. Thus, Professor Royce's earlier solution of the problems of the One and the Many, of the Infinite, of the World, and of the Individual receives from his theory of Interpretation additional confirmation.

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¹ This is mere symbolism; there is no proof, no rigid logical definition attempted.