



A Reply to Professor Royce's Critique of Instrumentalism

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DISCUSSION.

A REPLY TO PROFESSOR ROYCE'S CRITIQUE OF INSTRUMENTALISM.

THE republication by Professor Royce of his important address at the International Congress of Philosophy at Heidelberg, upon the Problem of Truth,¹ will set many persons to reviewing the problem, and some, perhaps to considering it for the first time. Its criticisms of the instrumentalist position are so searching and its statements of that position so eminently fair—that is to say, intelligent—that, as one of those expounded and criticized, I should feel at once professionally stupid and personally unappreciative if I made no effort at response. I shall not attempt, however, to traverse the entire field but shall, in the main, confine myself to one point which Professor Royce has made peculiarly his own: The indispensableness to the instrumentalist theories of truth, even as working empirical theories, of a recognition of the social implications of ideas and beliefs. This indispensableness appears, to Professor Royce, fatal to the instrumental conception; to me it seems its essence.

In gist, Mr. Royce contends that if one admits the instrumental conception to be sound "as far as it goes," one is thereby bound to go a good deal farther—all the way to absolutism. Or, in his own words: "Instrumentalism, consequently, expresses no motive which by itself alone is adequate to constitute any theory of truth. And yet, as I have pointed out, I doubt not that instrumentalism gives such a substantially true account of man's natural functions as a truth seeker. Only the sense in which instrumentalism is a true account of human life is opposed to the adequacy of its own definition of truth."² There is a sense in which—so Professor Royce repeatedly states—instrumentalism is (or better, "contains") a correct "report of the truth about our actual human life, and about the sense in which we all seek and test and strive for truth, precisely in so far as truth-seeking is indeed a part of our present organic activities."³

It is obvious (is it not?) that when a criticism is made from the standpoint of the acceptance of a certain conception, and when the critical

¹ William James, and Other Essays, Essay IV. New York, 1911.

² P. 222.

³ P. 218.

procedure tries to show that acceptance in logical good faith is quite incompatible with the version of the conception bruited abroad by those most actively engaged in circulating it, it is then obvious, I say, that everything depends upon *what* meaning is attributed to the conception that one accepts, upon *how* one conceives the conception that he announces himself as accepting. If the conception of instrumentalism that is 'accepted' is after all one's own conception rather than that of those who hold the definition of truth in question, what one has demonstrated at the end is that one's *own* conception of instrumentalism is logically compatible only with absolutism—a conclusion not entirely surprising at the hands of such an accomplished dialectician as Professor Royce.

My first task, accordingly, is a churlish one. I have to show that the logical success of Professor Royce consists in attributing to the instrumentalist certain ideas which are indeed Mr. Royce's own pre-suppositions, but which are quite foreign—in fact and in logic—to the instrumentalist's position. In short, Professor Royce has not, after all, adequately 'accepted' the instrumentalist account even as an empirical account of truth-seeking and truth-testing, for in accepting it he has read into it things so obvious, so self-evident to him that it has not occurred to him that the instrumentalist makes his way, for better or worse, precisely and only because he has rejected and eliminated them. I call this task churlish. And so it is. When one considers how often the pragmatist and instrumentalist have been refuted by denying to them any vestige of sense, to say nothing of truth, how often they have been refuted by attributing to them wilful perversity of facts evident to any sane apprehension, it would be a grateful task to acknowledge the sympathetic and just version—in every point save one only—of instrumentalism rendered by Professor Royce. But alas for one's natural piety; for present purposes it is just this one point that enters into the reckoning.

I.

Let me quote at length a statement which an instrumentalist at once recognizes to be a sympathetic and just (if not complete) version of his own intention. "Human opinions, judgments, ideas, are part of the effort of a live creature to adapt himself to his natural world. Ideas and beliefs are, in a word, organic functions. And truth . . . is a certain value belonging to such ideas.¹ But this value itself is

¹ The omitted words are, "in so far as we men can recognize truth at all." The phrase thrown into an exposition made professedly from the standpoint of the

simply like the value which any natural organic function possesses. Ideas and opinions are instruments whose use lies in the fact that, if they are the right ones, they preserve life and render life stable. Their existence is due to the same natural causes that are represented in our whole organic evolution. Accordingly, assertions or ideas are true in proportion as they accomplish this biological and psychological function. This value of truth is itself a biological and psychological value. The true ideas are the ones which adapt us for life as human beings."²

Alas, for that little—or big—word 'psychological.' How great, indeed, are the oaks that little acorns start; what a cataract the little crack in the dam finally lets through—and like samples of proverbial philosophy! Surely the unprejudiced reader would infer from the above statement that, though the term psychological is undefined, the criterion for its definition lies in the conceptions of "life," of "organic functions," of "adaptation to [better *in*] a natural world." And the inference would correctly represent the point of view of the instrumentalist. But, as Professor Royce proceeds, "psychological" is employed to designate the merely private, the merely personal, and, at times, even the internal, transient "states of consciousness." Then the "psychological" swells and swells, till it swallows up the "live creature," the "natural world" and "biological functions." And if the instrumentalist wants them back (and he must get them back if he is to carry on his business) he must go to the Absolute to take out a license.

The instrumentalist "account of human organic and psychological functions may be—yes, is—as far as it goes true. But if it is true at all, then it is true as an account of the characters actually common to the experience of a vast number of men. It is true, if at all, as a report of the objective totality of facts which we call human experience. It is true, then, in a sense which no man can ever test by the empirical success of his own ideas as his means of controlling his own experiences. . . . If instrumentalism is true, it is true as a report of facts about the general course of history, of evolution, and of human experience—facts which transcend every individual man's experience, verifications and successes."¹ The logic of this passage gives a narrow and ex-instrumentalist is significant. Even Mr. Royce cannot wholly free himself from the notion that instrumentalism's account of truth is a statement of what truth is "for us" as distinct from some absolute truth or truth for itself. Of course, from its own standpoint, it is a statement about truth, about the sole intelligible meaning of the term truth.

¹ Pp. 193-4.

² Pp. 221-2.

clusive sense to "individual man's experience," "his own ideas, his own experiences," a sense so narrow and exclusive as to throw between personal experience and "objective human experience" or the historic experience of the race, a gulf so deep and wide that only the Absolute *ex machina* will bridge it and bring the objective human experience and the individual's experience together.

The contrast is explicit in such a passage as the following: "For no man experiences the success of any man but himself, or of any instruments but his own; and the truth, say, of Newton's theory consists, by hypothesis, in the perfectly objective fact that generations of men have really succeeded in guiding their experience by this theory. But that this is a fact no man, as an individual man, ever has experienced or will experience under human conditions."¹ Here we have the logic exposed. Men are individuals; therefore whatever is experienced is one's own individual experience; or, individuals experience only themselves, and their exclusive possessions, which are, in fact, parts of themselves. The ground I plow is my own ground; I plow it with my own instrument, my own plow; the harvest—the success—is my own. Therefore the ground was never anybody else's; it is impossible for me even to see from it any other person's land (unless I secure a transcendental telescope); it is impossible for my plow to plow other persons' land; and the harvest, being mine, must be mine only, and therefore unsharable by others.

To my mind there is just one interesting question about such a view as this of the "individual" and of "his own"—the historic question. What ever led intelligent human beings to such a conception of human individuality and of its acts and states? What led to the identification of the individual with the private, and of the private with the merely private, with the absolutely exclusive and isolated? We are not now concerned however with a question of fact, but with a question of logic. Only as he assumes that the instrumentalist does and must presuppose this monopolistic, all-swallowing octopus of an individual and "his own," does Professor Royce "accept" the instrumentalist account, and argue to its necessary implication of the Absolute. Speaking for myself, I may say that if I had any such nihilistic, anarchistically egoistic notion of the individual man, of his doings, states, tools and results, I should probably be willing to resort to an absolute to escape my "own" awful isolation and selfishness. For selfishness is agreeable only when it involves others. But even so,

¹ Pp. 220-1. Yet Professor Royce, an individual man, knows this objective fact!

such atrophied logical sense as may be supposed to survive even in an instrumentalist would haunt me with a suspicion that this Absolute was but another of my purely personal belongings, the most precious of my private possessions in appearance, and, in fact, a huge joke that some peculiarly private part of my private being was working off on my more accessible private properties. For, to consider the matter logically, it is passing strange that the private nature of my experience makes it impossible for me to be aware of such a prosaically limited matter as the existence of Sir Isaac Newton while it absolutely warrants the absolute truth of my belief in something which includes Sir Isaac Newton along with everything else past, present and future. Surely the proverb concerning straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel should be brought down to date.

But we are getting too far away from the instrumentalist's position as he himself "accepts" or conceives it. Let us try, with a more unbiased sympathy, to take that point of view from which "human opinions, judgments, ideas, *are part of the effort of a live creature to adapt himself to his natural world,*" where beliefs are organic functions, and experiences are organic adaptations involving such functions; and where the issue—the success or failure—of these adaptations constitutes the *value* of the beliefs in question. Is there any conceivable way in which a person who had adopted (with however moderate an understanding of what he was about) such a position could still hold that the natural world was merely his own idea; that a live creature was just one of his own private entertainments or conceits, and that organic functions in their tools and results were confined to his own insides?

It is not necessary to enter into a definition of "psychological" upon the basis of the instrumental conception. But it must be conceived in accordance with the fundamental position of the live creature adapting itself to a natural world. And one of the most rudimentary traits of a live creature is its continuity with a racial organic life, just as that of an environment is its spatial diversity and its temporal perdurance. Without these features, adaptation and organic function are the most empty sort of term. Follow out the implications of *such* conceptions instead of the conception which Mr. Royce holds (and with great and fatal generosity lends to the instrumentalist) and the gulf between the objective human experience and the supposedly purely subjective individual experience disappears. Life individuates itself, and particular individuations appear and disappear. But the individuation is a trait of life; it is not the mystery

of a private, isolated somewhat which destroys all the natural traits of life to replace them with its own quite opposite traits. We are not to interpret "life" in accord with some psychological preconception of the merely personal; we are to interpret the personal in accord with the functions of life.

A particular passage may serve to bring out the difference of conception. After stating what the truth of the Newtonian conception would consist in from the instrumental point of view, Professor Royce goes on to ask about the sense in which the statement of the historic episode of the formation and success of Newton's theory is itself true. Unless the instrumentalist is quite stupid, he will, I take it, apply his own criterion. It is true by the same token; it enables predictions, it gives control, it facilitates intercourse, it clears the path of obscurities, it guides (instead of obstructing) new observations and reflections, it brings men together instead of dividing them—so far as it is acted upon and thus genuinely asserted. But this path seems to Professor Royce to be quite closed to the instrumentalist. "Newton is dead. As mortal man he succeeds no longer. His ideas, as psychological functions, died with him. His earthly experiences ceased when death shut his eyes. Wherein consists to-day, then, the historical truth that Newton ever existed at all, or that the countless other men whom his theories are said to have guided ever lived, or experienced, or succeeded?"

Such statements followed by such a question are well calculated to inspire one with a feeling of despair regarding the possibility of arriving at any philosophic understanding. Newton is dead; therefore how can I assert as truth that he ever lived? The obvious answer is so obvious and so easy that it cannot be relevant to what Mr. Royce has in mind: the answer, namely, that Newton cannot be dead unless he once lived, and that, organic life being what it is, if he lived in the seventeenth century, he is surely dead by this time. I cannot imagine any beliefs operating and succeeding as organic functions in the development of life unless such simple and ordinary beliefs as these are capable of working, and working with a reasonable degree of success. If the propositions were that Newton is dead, though he never lived; or that because he was living in the seventeenth century, he must be living now, I can see how the propositions would offer difficulties to a pragmatic theory; I confess I do not see how they could "work." Seriously, and not in levity, this seems to me the inevitable answer and the only answer that instrumental theory can make to the question just cited.

But equally I have no doubt this reply is quite irrelevant to what Professor Royce had in mind. And, accordingly, I shall have to make a guess as to what presuppositions underlie the question and address a reply also to them. There are a number of phrases in the discussion which lead me to infer that Professor Royce identifies truth with existence. Now if the truth about Sir Isaac Newton's existence is the same thing as that existence itself, it is quite sure that no possible present experience will yield truth. For the working in experience of a belief or conception for its control, guidance, clarification, for social intimacy and emancipation, will not operate to raise Sir Isaac Newton *in propria persona* from the grave; it will not in short constitute (or reconstitute) his *existence*. But instrumentalism never pretended to encroach on the idealistic privilege of creating natural existences by formulating truths about them. It is content with the humbler task of describing how men do as matter of fact recreate, transform, *some* natural existence by intellectual formulations about *some other* existence. (The successful transformation of some things by use of intellectual formulations about other things being what instrumentalism calls the truth of these formulations.)

I know of no *a priori* compulsion to formulate conceptions or beliefs regarding Sir Isaac Newton; it is a safe guess for instance, that many an Oriental potentate has gone to his grave about whom no belief will ever be entertained, just as the vast majority of natural happenings go by without being reflected upon. But when there is a specific need for thinking, and a specific hypothesis emerges in response to the need, it is needful that we should have some way of testing its value, of developing it to the point of being true or false. And acting upon the hypothesis to select and collate data, to predict, to guide new observations and reflections, to organize the seemingly discrepant and to illuminate the hitherto obscure is the way. The success of the hypothesis upon and along this way is its truth.

If, however, the death of Sir Isaac Newton, and the cessation of his experiences, carried with them the absolute interruption of organic life, of all experience, if his experience, in other words, operated in absolute discontinuity in matter and method from mine and mine from yours, I can well see that the instrumentalist would be put to it to frame any idea about Newton, to say nothing of verifying it. But the difficulty would not be confined to the instrumentalist. Even the absolutist would, in such a situation, be unhelped by the Absolute. And if instrumentalist and absolutist alike do make judgments about Newton and, within certain degrees of approximation, arrive at suc-

cessful outcomes, it is because life, experience, has its own continuities and sociable relationships.

And this brings me to my second guess about the difficulty which Professor Royce feels his question to involve. He presupposes, again, the completely egoistic, exclusive nature of Newton's experience—his life, his acts—on one side, and of mine on the other. "His ideas, as psychological functions, died with him." But did they? And if they did, what are we going to do about it, even with the help of the conception of the Absolute? For so far as they "died with him," the problem is not that of some eventual verification of our ideas about his ideas, but of our having any idea about his ideas.

In short, we come again to our basic statements: one about the instrumentalist, the other about Professor Royce's position. (a) By calling Newton's idea, his theory, a *function*, instrumentalism means to emphasize precisely that it *was* a function—to insist upon the need of reinterpreting the adjective "psychological" from the standpoint of function—an organizing and organized act, public, objective, impersonal just as surely as private, individual, personal. Certain images, a certain emotional tone of inward landscape, may be said to have "died" when Newton died. But to say that his idea of gravitation, as a vital *function*, died with him is to traverse the facts. Newton acted through it, lived it out, so adequately, that it became an integral part of the activities of educated men and scientific inquirers throughout the civilized world. Since this transmissive operation is just one of the things that is included in the conception of "success" of a vital function, one is not accepting the standpoint of instrumentalism when one conceives the vital function as something which renders impossible this transmissive operation. That the idea was made true means precisely that as a *function* it did not die.

(b) As to the logic of Professor Royce's own conception. Professor Royce says of certain statements about Newton: "No doubt all these historical and socially significant statements of mine are indeed substantially true" (p. 219). Professor Royce would doubtless also hold that there is a countless multitude of doings and sufferings of Newton about which we cannot now make any intelligible statements. So far as the "substantially true statements" are concerned, does not Professor Royce (and everybody else) fall back upon the procedure of which instrumentalism is simply a generalized description? And as far as the other to us non-existent "truths"¹ are concerned, does the conception (or the Being) of the Absolute

¹ Not "truths," but events, on any except a preordained idealistic basis.

help us one bit? Upon the Absolutist theory, what explanation can account for this partiality on the part of the Absolute? Why has it rendered certain events so opaque and silent and others so transparent and communicative? Is there any explanation that does not take us back to the instrumentalist terms—terms of vital doing under conditions of natural and social need, adaptation and success? And so far as our belief in the existence of the Absolute is concerned, why should we adopt a different logical procedure from that which has brought us to believe certain things about Newton? If the continuities, the transmissive bearings of life, of experience, suffice in the case of Newton to enable certain intellectual formulations—reflections—to prosper while dooming others to defeat, why, if the Absolute exists, should we not, *a fortiori*, wait till conditions have made the conception of its existence one that works out under tests? And, lacking these instrumental tests, what right have we to assert the truth of what, by Mr. Royce's own hypothesis, is a purely private, personal idea?¹

II.

As respects certain truths, some instrumentalists—Professor James particularly—have made much of the significance of vicarious social verification. In Mr. Royce's words: "Since we are social beings, and beings with countless and varied needs, we constantly define and accept as valid very numerous ideas and opinions whose truth we do not hope personally to verify. . . . If we personally do not verify a given idea, we can still accept it then upon its credit value. We can accept it precisely as paper, which cannot now be cashed, is accepted by one who regards that paper as, for a given purpose, or to a given extent equivalent to cash."² This procedure Professor Royce accepts as an actual procedure, while he holds that reliance upon it is inconsistent with the instrumental conception of truth,—that, consistently, instrumentalism must identify the act of giving credit with truth itself, that is to say, anything is true to which we find it expedient to give credence at a given moment. Mr. Royce disclaims being an intellectualist of the rationalistic type, but he employs the good old rationalistic device of rigid alternatives. Either the assertion which I accept on credit *is* already true (truth belongs to the assertion anyway) or else by its truth I mean simply that I give credit to it. The former alternative surrenders instrumentalism; the latter puts

¹ "Instrumentalism in so far correctly defines the nature which truth possesses *in so far as we ever actually verify truth*," p. 224 (italics mine).

² Pp. 224–5.

it in the position of making truths offhand, while you wait—the sanctioning of caprice, whim, etc.

For reasons which I hope will appear presently, I am particularly interested in the implications of the “credit” notion with respect to its content. Before dealing with this phase of the matter, it seems necessary, however, to devote space to the formal dilemma. Upon close inspection it will be found, I think, to resemble most cases of formal alternatives in philosophic discussion. Two extremes are set up as exhaustive, while as matter of fact multitudes of other alternatives glide freely through wide-open intervening meshes. What *should* it mean upon the instrumental theory to accept some view or idea as true upon social credit? Clearly that such an acceptance itself works. And if the environment, the medium of action, be social could any other method save that of accrediting the results of experience in others be expected to work? There is nothing so licentious about the matter as Professor Royce’s abstract logic would make out; the acceptance upon credit is subject to precisely the same sort of tests—of working under conditions—as acceptance on the basis of more direct personal verifications. What is indicated is that the social medium of life is as continuous as we have seen life itself to be. One has verified in innumerable cases that under certain conditions one can trust to the experience and the reports of others; one has found out that the limits between one’s own experience and that of another are quite arbitrary and elusive. Besides this general verificational background, there is the specific verification, through working, of *acceptance* of this particular belief upon the credit and authority of some particular group of persons. And besides, there is frequent verification through the experiences of others who have given credit to these assertions—a method which could be made to appear vicious by the logic of abstractionism, but which, in inductive logic, is independently cumulative and hence confirming. In short, one doesn’t, as an instrumentalist, accept arbitrarily on credit; he accepts on probation, hypothetically, just as one accepts his own hypotheses when they first occur to him. As this acceptance is confirmed by his works, the acceptance becomes a genuine accrediting; it has received the kind of trying by experimental tests in life that the conditions permit. That this is the way in which sensible men proceed can be shown by an argument *ad hominem*, indicating that even an absolutist must *actually* so proceed. Let us admit with Professor Royce that to the assertion in question truth or falsity already inherently belongs. Now, being unable to verify the matter directly, what shall be my attitude?

I cannot, by hypothesis (Professor Royce's own hypothesis), be sure whether it is true or false, although I am sure it is already either one or the other. According to Professor Royce the only recourse possible is to accept or reject, just arbitrarily, by whim, by what seems agreeable at the moment. In short, the dilemma is one which applies only to those who hold Mr. Royce's view, and for them it takes the form of a choice of the two alternatives: Complete scepticism as to what is the truth or falsity of most things in history and nature, or else the loosest go-as-you-please most wayward opinionatedness. Other people employ the cautious testing of the kind and amount of credit to be given to others' ideas and reports that is described in the instrumentalist account.

As I have already stated, I find my significant interest attaching to the conception of social credit, and to the implied analogy of belief with credit in business, for this suggests that my *personal* experience is itself social in origin, matter and outlook. In good business, it is intimated, there is some value behind the *credit*; namely, in the philosophic analogy, truth. In purely speculative business, on the contrary, there is nothing but credit behind the credit: the instrumental theory of truth in the philosophic analogy. Now that business, modern business, is done so largely on credit seems to me a significant fact, and one which is peculiarly important for the instrumental theory. For so far as modern business proceeds upon a credit basis, it does *not* rely upon equating credits to values preëxisting; modern manufacturing and commerce would go into wholesale bankruptcy were such its basis. It proceeds upon the basis of the *potentialities* of what already exists, upon the *future* operation of industry, good faith and consumption to realize these potentialities. Only in times of panic is there a falling back upon the past, upon the already existent store. And the immediate effect of the insistence upon backing *from behind* of already extant values is to restrict business. There must, indeed, be something behind—fields, woods, mines, human labor, human intercourse, mutual trust, desires, etc. But the credit is not measured by them—not by them just as back there, behind. It is measured by an anticipated future use of them. It is not a matter of their being there in a finished state; it is a matter of their expected consequences, when something is done to them and with them. Credit operates for the more effective and varied use of what is there; not to reduplicate it in some parallel series. And it is the outcome, the actual consequence, that confirms or condemns any particular **giving of credit**.

I have no wish to base conclusions or theories on a possible analogy. I do wish, however, to secure its full suggestive force. Credit exhibits a possible future outcome operating as present factor to guide and enrich the conditions whose possibilities it relies upon. So does intelligence. Both involve a risk, an uncertain speculative element; both involve, therefore, the need of check and test, of responsibility to the achievement of ends, the production of consequences. Both involve something "behind" them, prior existences; but neither of them is a reiteration or reinstatement of the prior; both are concerned with the potentialities of things, and take effect in endeavor to make potentialities real. And as credit is distinctly a social phenomenon, so is the accrediting which marks the life of thought. Social verification is not, taken by and large, a *pis aller*, in default of "personal" verification. It, and it alone, *is* verification; personal verification is but a step on this social road—an encouragement, an authorization to go ahead. Experience, life—just as is that phase of experience called business—*is* social, and it exhibits this sociability nowhere more than in the continuity, the interpenetration, the reciprocal reinforcement of meanings and beliefs. Instead of an Absolute being required to substantiate this social phase of the life of intelligence it is much more probable that the Absolute is a somewhat barren and dry isolation and hypostatizing of the everyday sociality of experience. The accrediting of others' experience is the fact that our personal experience is so much other and more than the narrow personal private matter upon whose "acceptance" Mr. Royce founds his dilemma.

If then, I were to try to gather together the significant strands of instrumentalism in opposition to Professor Royce's welcome of it as a convenient road to absolutism, I should say that as method for philosophy it indicated a more severe intellectual conscience; less free and easy use of the concept of Truth in general and more careful use of truths in particular to designate such conceptions and propositions as have emerged successfully from the test conditions that are practically appropriate. In substance, as distinct from form or method, I should say it meant recognition of intelligence as the way in which future possible consequences became effective in the present—the recognition of real time and real potentiality—and a recognition of the utterly false character of the prevailing notion of the sheer privacy, the egotistic isolation, of experience, of conscious life. The case is immensely understated when we restrict ourselves to the possibility of pragmatic verification of acceptance of beliefs on credit from others—adequate as is the noting of this possibility for the pur-

pose of securing exemption from Professor Royce's dilemma. The fact is that the life, the experience (including the organic acts of ideas, opinions, judgments, etc.) of "individual man" is already saturated, thoroughly interpenetrated, with social inheritances and references. Education, language and other means of communication are infinitely more important categories of knowledge than any of those exploited by absolutists. And as soon as the methodological battle of instrumentalism is won—as it will be, not by instrumentalists, but by the constantly increasing influence of scientific method upon the imagination of the philosopher—the two services that will stand to the credit of instrumentalism will be calling attention first, to the connection of intelligence with a genuine future, and, second, to the social constitution of personal, even of private, experience, above all of any experience that has assumed the knowledge-form.

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