No Soft Doctrine: Royce on the Problem of Evil

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Abstract

Because of the ubiquity of evil, religious systems, which aim to influence the way we live our lives, must answer three questions: what is evil, why does evil exist, and how can we eliminate, or at least manage, evil? Call this the *broad* problem of evil, as opposed to the traditional *narrow* problem of evil. I reconstruct the answer to the broad problem of evil found in Josiah Royce's later writings in the second section of this paper. Then, I explain why traditional theodicies are deficient answers to the narrow problem of evil. I argue that Royce's answer to the broad problem of evil merits a response from philosophers in the Abrahamic traditions because, while it is theistic—and even teleological—in nature, it does not presuppose the Abrahamic conception of God, nor does it suffer from the deficiencies of traditional theodicies.

No Soft Doctrine: Royce on the Problem of Evil

I. Introduction

The problem of evil presents one of the most serious challenges to the Abrahamic conception of God. The problem arises when two statements are conjoined: (1) if God exists, God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, and (2) evil exists. If God is omniscient, then God must know if evil exists. If God is omnipotent, then God has the power and ability to eliminate that evil, given the desire to do so. And finally, if God is omnibenevolent, then God must desire to eliminate evil, or, at the very least, all unnecessary evils. Yet, evil exists. This seems to imply that God either does not have the three traditional attributes as defined or does not exist.[2] Call this the *narrow problem of evil*.

However, evil—henceforth denoting *undesirable states of affairs*—affects everyone, no matter their religious beliefs. Since evil is a major aspect of the human experience, religious systems must shoulder the theoretical burden of explaining it. Three major questions stand out:

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1. Michael Tooley, "The Problem of Evil," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed. accessed July 16, 2015, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/evil/, Introduction.

what is evil, why does evil exist, and how we can eliminate (or at least manage) evil? All religious systems should provide answers to these questions, which may collectively be termed the *broad problem of evil*, whether or not they presuppose the Abrahamic conception of God.[3] One system that answers these questions persuasively and does not presuppose the Abrahamic conception of God is the philosophy of religion proposed by Josiah Royce (1855-1916).[4]

In the next section, I reconstruct the answer to the broad problem of evil that Josiah Royce offers in his later writings.[5] In the third section, I outline two traditional theodicies[6] and argue that they are deficient responses to the narrow problem of evil, drawing inspiration from Royce's mid-career essay "The Problem of Job." I then argue that philosophers in the Abrahamic traditions should address Royce's answer to the broad problem of evil because it seriously challenges the status quo in Western philosophy of religion. First, it does not presuppose the traditional conception of God, while remaining theistic. Second, while it does not suffer from the deficiencies of some traditional theodicies which try to justify God's decision to create a world with evil, it still provides a teleological account of the existence and resolution of evil.

II. Royce's Answer to the Broad Problem of Evil

I mentioned that Royce does not presuppose the traditional conception of God and that this has major implications for his answer to the problem of evil.[7] We will discuss Royce's conception of God toward the end of this section, after laying the foundation of Royce's views on evil. Royce understands evil in the typical sense but with a pragmatic twist. According to Royce, "evil" denotes any undesirable state of affairs which serves to undermine the purposes of a rational agent.[8] We can also derive a definition for moral evil from this: *any undesirable state of affairs caused by an agent's willful action or inaction which serves to undermine the purposes of a rational agent.* Royce's commitment to pragmatism complements, rather than

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[3]. Philosophers who attempt to answer the narrow problem of evil will find themselves answering the broad problem along the way, though they may simply take the answers to the "management" question for granted from the particular tradition they are working in. For example, a Christian philosopher who proposes a soul-making theodicy will certainly define evil and say why it exists (i.e., to facilitate the soul-making process). That same philosopher may then implicitly or explicitly defer to the Bible for its teachings on coping with evil.

[4]. I will not speculate as to whether or not Royce's conception of God can be considered a non-traditional, but still *Christian* conception of God, though Royce seems to indicate that he thinks this is the case.

[5]. For the reconstruction of Royce's answer, I limit my inquiry to *The Sources of Religious Insight* (1912) and *The Problem of Christianity* (1913).

[6]. See Tooley, Section 4. A *theodicy* is an attempt to give a reason why God (traditionally construed) might allow evil to exist, and how God could remain omnibenevolent in doing so. This is in contrast to a *total refutation*—an attempt to prove that the existence of evil does not offer even *prima facie* ground to argue for the non-existence of God. Also, a full explication of the distinction between a communal understanding of the problem of evil and an individualistic one would be much toso long for the present work. Instead, this discussion will focus on the first novel feature of Royce's answer: the non-traditional conception of God.

[7]. Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus,* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2008), 80.

[8]. Josiah Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight,* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 216.

conflicts with, the standard definition of evil since God is a rational agent and acts of moral evil ostensibly undermine God's will in the world (or at least, God's intentions *for* the world). Royce does not defend the Abrahamic conception of God from the narrow problem of evil. Still, he agrees with traditional monotheists that people exist in a fallen state, fall short of a definite, ideal life, and need a savior to achieve that life.[9] However, on Royce's view, people are not evil by nature. They perform evil actions because they are morally-detached individuals. In other words, each individual has interests, goals, and desires which can objectively conflict with those of others.[10] If left unrecognized and unattended, moral detachment leads people to ignore the needs of others and to take so much pride in their own strivings that they fail to see the value in other's conflicting strivings.[11] Royce calls this unhappy state "social blindness."[12] In order to find the cure for the affliction of social blindness, we must investigate the origin of the morally-detached individual.

People are morally individuated in three ways: by the distinctness of their experience, the outward inaccessibility of their thoughts and intentions, and by the presumption that "deeds and their doers stand in one-one correspondence,"[13] or, in other words, people presume that collective action is merely the sum of individuals' actions. Royce argues that this last idea is of recent vintage and is not supported by experience in daily life.[14] On his view, a community is a superhuman being that is composed of, but not reducible to, its members. By extension, that being's actions are more than the sum of its members' actions.[15] Members of a community overcome their moral-detachedness by uniting in the "spirit" of their community. That is, by taking up shared values and purposes and acting in the world together as one. These Roycean communities come in various sizes and persuasions, so we have plenty of candidates to choose from for an illustration. A hypothetical youth soccer league will do nicely.

Imagine that, some years ago, a group of parents decided that the local neighborhood children should have more opportunities to play together and get to know each other. They pitched in to buy a vacant field and soccer equipment and started holding games every weekend. Those parents formed a community by acting together for the sake of a shared purpose. Each member now considers the past actions of the league as events that belong to their own past, and the future actions of the league as part of their own future. For example, Bill and Sarah both remember painting the lines on the field before the very first game, and look forward to the day when the league can afford a scoreboard. Like an individual person, a community acts in the world presently, has a past, and will have a future. The sum of all those shared and anticipated experiences—and the meanings those events hold for the members—

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[9]. Ibid., 28-29.

[10]. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 194.

[11]. Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus*, 93.

[12]. Royce, *Problem of Christianity,* 378.

[13]. Ibid., 238.

[14]. Ibid., 240.

[15]. Ibid., 123.

constitute the "self" of the community.[16] Yet, not every community has the same peaceful existence as our hypothetical soccer league. Often, the purposes of a community are subverted by—or existentially opposed to—instances of evil, and members must thwart that evil. Royce calls people's practical devotion to a higher communal life—including struggling together against evil— "loyalty,"[17] and it is to that concept that we turn now.

Recall that an instance of evil is any undesirable state of affairs that undermines the purposes of a rational agent. Under this heading, we would do well to include pain, disease, and pestilence. Finite beings can only survive within a very narrow range of acceptable conditions and are severely limited in their abilities to maintain those conditions. Since human beings are limited in their individual experience and knowledge of the world, they form communities to survive. As a matter of course, those communities create and follow moral codes that vary widely. This means that the practices of one community are often considered evil by another. How can we reconcile competing and diametrically opposed loyalties that are equally moral on their own terms? And how can we do so without embracing relativism? Toward this end, we will need a regulative principle: a principle which is logically prior to the moral code of any particular community, but that every community can act upon. Furthermore, no community should have reasoned grounds to reject our sought-for principle, no matter how fiercely they might oppose any other particular community.

That principle is this: recognize "the spiritual unity of all the world of reasonable beings" as the true cause of loyalty. [18] Then, seek to actualize that unity through the particular causes that make up one's communal life. It is necessary and honorable to devote oneself to one's community, but it is necessary to ensure that one's community contributes to the overall growth of loyalty. Communities that are rooted in hating and destroying other communities are not objects of genuine loyalty. Those communities retard or reverse the overall growth of loyalty, because they exist solely to divide people from one another. They explicitly undermine the true cause of loyalty, which, as we will see, is divine in nature. On the contrary, so long as a person is loyal, and that loyalty is not given to a hateful cause, that person is doing their moral and spiritual duty.[19] At this point, it would be tempting to infer that the highest moral life is a single-minded campaign to rid the world of evil. Yet, Royce's keenest insight into the experience of evil is that this is blatantly false.

So far, we have been treating evil as something that simply should not exist. That seems intuitive. After all, curing 100% of malaria cases is necessarily better than curing 99% of malaria

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[16]. See Chapter 2 of Kegley's *Josiah Royce in Focus* for a thorough explication of Royce's views on the self.

[17]. Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, 269. See also: Frank Oppenheim, Royce's *Mature Philosophy of Religion*, (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1987), 142. "Higher life" here is meant in two senses. First, in the sense that devotion enriches a person's life, and, second, in the sense that the person's life becomes more attuned to the divine life.

[18]. Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight*, 205. Emphasis removed from the original.

[19]. More precisely, that person is doing their moral and spiritual duty *as well as a finite being can.* On Royce's view, no finite being can fully live up to the demands of morality. See Dwayne A. Tunstall, "Royce's Ethical Insight: Its Relevance for Today", Paper presented at Josiah Royce: Pragmatist, Philosopher of Religion, Ethicist, Hamburg, Germany, October 2, 2015.

cases.[20] Still, on Royce's view there truly are experiences of evil that no one would wish to remove from their lives.[21]

Whether they occur through conscious separation or accidental death, the evils that often cause the most psychological, emotional, and spiritual damage are the losses of loved ones.[22] Supposing that one can forgive an unfaithful spouse or a friend-turned-enemy, that person's betrayal can never be forgotten. Even so, that grief is not something we would want to dispose of entirely. One might wish to numb oneself to the pain if it is unbearable, but not to the sensitivity or connection that causes the pain. For example, a person may wish to no longer grieve a departed loved one, but that person would certainly not wish to lose all the memories of their loved one, nor would they hope to never love another person again. Spiritual strength is acquired by recognizing and retaining social sensitivity through the grieving process and using it to deepen relations with others.[23] The result of that struggle is *sorrow*.

In order to recognize the strength that sorrow offers, we must take a step back from the pain of grief and recognize why it exists. A severed tie between intimately connected people gives rise to the worst imaginable pain. This implies that humans are profoundly social beings who have the capacity to intimately connect with others. Sorrow's unsettling prevalence presents a religious insight: spiritual strength is not won by merely avoiding possible suffering because, in this world, everyone will have sorrows. Neither one's world nor one's fellows are perfect. Individuals gain spiritual strength by developing the patience and courage to face a future full of meaningful relations without bitterness or resentment.

With this in mind, the next step is to endure the hardship. Finally, it is necessary to draw upon the insight of sorrow and reinvest oneself in the social reality. One must deepen relationships or form new ones while remaining aware that sorrow in the future is guaranteed.[24] There is no pain-free way to restore balance to life, but life can become much more meaningful in the process. By spinning grief into sorrow, one can enjoy new and renewed loyalties—the dedication to vital communities and causes that enrich one's life. However, this solemn work becomes especially difficult when one's grief is caused by betrayal.

When a person betrays their community, they set off a grieving process which is often fatal for the community. The losses incurred by the betrayal are permanent because the betrayer cannot undo the destructive deed. As much as the betrayer may wish they could turn back time, punishment only reminds them that their deed is irrevocable. Moreover, the community's memory of the evil deed scars any remaining affection or sympathy that the community can extend to the betrayer. However, as traumatic as it is, the aftermath of a betrayal is fertile ground for the creative power of communal action. Members who are willing

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[20]. Assuming, of course, that eliminating the remainder did not involve doing anything terribly imprudent.

[21]. Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight,* 239.

[22]. These cases of personal loss may be categorized as either moral or non-moral evils. An elderly grandmother dying in her sleep is obviously not committing a moral evil, since the grandmother did not choose to devastate her family. However, if that same grandmother was intentionally given a fatal dose of medication by a twisted attendant, her death would be an instance of moral evil.

[23]. Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight*, 252.

[24]. Ibid., 253.

to bear the sorrow of betrayal and work to reestablish their community bring about goods that would have been impossible had the betrayal not taken place, by manifesting the spirit of their community.[25] To illustrate this point, we need to outline the process of atonement.

In the *Problem of Christianity*, Royce illustrates his idea of atonement through an interpretation of the Biblical story of Joseph.[26] Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because they were jealous of the preferential treatment he received from their father. Years later during a time of great famine Joseph's brothers travelled to Egypt, where Joseph served as Pharaoh's trusted advisor, to buy supplies. Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers and sent them back to their father with ample provisions. On Royce's view, when Joseph provided for his family he was engaged in a creative reversal of his brothers' betrayal or, in other words, an act of atonement. There are three central elements to such acts of atonement. The first is that the act is performed by some person other than the betrayer. The second is that the act is made possible by the specific betrayal for which it atones. The third element is that the act of atonement makes the world better than it was before the betrayal.[27] In this case, Joseph could not have helped his brothers if he were not sold as a slave. Joseph chose to see through his grief, endure it, and make it part of a process of reconciliation. Coincidence may have brought them together spatially, but only Joseph's actions could have reunited the family spiritually. Now that the foundation of Royce's views has been laid, we can make the divine thread running through the discussion explicit.

Recall that, for Royce, a community is a superhuman being. As such, communities can be afflicted by a kind of social blindness like the one that we discussed at the beginning of the section. When members set out to do things on behalf of their community, they are expressing love for one another and for that being that unites them: the spirit of their community.[28] However, the love for a community can, itself, become a stumbling block on the path toward creating more inclusive communities. I do not need to regale the reader with horrific stories from our species' past. Suffice it to say that people are in constant danger of allowing the love they have for their community to become obsessive and exclusionary.[29] When members refuse to recognize the value of external communities, their own communities stagnate, ossify, or turn malignant. This is social blindness scaled up to the communal level. The members mistake their finite, fallible community for the highest human good and do not seek to actualize any higher community. On the contrary, Royce's view is that the greatest good is the struggle to actualize the *highest* community, i.e., the Universal Community.

The Universal Community is precisely that "spiritual unity of all the world of reasonable beings" mentioned above.[30] Finite communities and their members work toward actualizing this ideal by guarding against encroaching blindness and remaining inclusive, uplifting, and

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[25]. *Royce, Problem of Christianity*, 180.

[26]. Ibid. 204.

[27]. Ibid. 180.

[28]. Ibid. 265.

[29]. Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus*, 93.

[30]. Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight*, 205. Emphasis removed from the original.

faithful to the Spirit of the Universal Community, which guides the community-building process. The Spirit of the Universal Community, which is Royce's quasi-analogue to the Abrahamic God, is the divine being who calls upon individuals to conquer evil by exercising their loyal devotion to communities—especially through atoning deeds—and calls upon communities to seek common ground and solidarity with each other.

The community-building process is also the "evil-overcoming" process because community-building harmonizes the wills of rational beings and unites them under common causes. This means that all individuals and communities are tasked with the temporal, yet endless, process of overcoming evil. The task is temporal because it takes place within the processes of the world as the Spirit overcomes evil step by step through the triumphs of its members. The task is endless because, while individuals can work toward actualizing the ideal of the Universal Community, they will necessarily fail. As long as there are finite beings there will be inhospitable conditions and conflict.[31] Even in principle, we cannot atone for every instance of evil. However, those who *act toward* that ideal state of atonement, and strive to bring lasting peace to this fallen world, take up the Spirit's cause as their own, and thereby find their place in the divine life.[32]

Readers who are familiar with the argument from evil and the typical rebuttals it draws will wonder what Royce's answer has to offer to the discussion. In the next section I will offer a preliminary answer to that question.

III. Two Traditional Answers to the Problem of Evil

In this section I will argue that Royce's answer to the problem of evil has distinct advantages over two traditional theodicies because it does not presuppose the traditional conception of God. To make the advantages explicit, however, we will need to acquaint ourselves with those two traditional theodicies: soul-making and free will.

Soul-making theodicies presume that human spiritual development, culminating in the achievement of a spiritual ideal ordained by God, is supremely valuable. In fact, they presume that God created human beings for the express purpose of attaining that ideal and earning the right to dwell with God.[33] That being said, spiritual development comes at a price. People must endure evil in order to acquire the character traits necessary to develop according to God's plan. Since God created a world where people can develop through their struggles with evil and—at least potentially—achieve the spiritual ideal set out for them, God remains morally perfect. With this understanding, the existence of God is consistent with the existence of evil. Now we move to free will theodicies.

Free will theodicies presume that libertarian free will, when it is used to worship God and when it is in accordance with God's moral dictates, is supremely valuable. These theodices

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[31]. Indeed, there could be no *finite* beings at all without there also being some conditions which undermine their existence.

[32]. Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, 186.

[33]. René Van Woudenberg, "Chapter 12: A Brief History of Theodicy," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil,* ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Somerset, NJ.: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated 2013), 177.

posit that God created people with free will so that they could worship and act morally of their own accord.[34] Although people may misuse their free will and act immorally, the great value of its proper use more than justifies the existence of evil. Therefore, God must have created people with free will in order to create a morally perfect world and the existence of God is not inconsistent with the existence of evil.

Royce would argue that on both views, God is responsible for the existence of unnecessary evils.[35] An all-loving God who is responsible for necessary evils can remain all-loving, but a God who allows *unnecessary* evils to transpire cannot be considered all-loving. Therefore, the theodicies are inadequate answers to the narrow problem of evil.
To delineate these unnecessary evils, we will begin with the soul-making account. On this view, God is responsible for the suffering required by the developmental process as it exists now. It may very well be the case that persons develop spiritually by struggling with evil and eventually earn the right to dwell with God. But if that is the case, it is only so because God designed the world in such a way that suffering is necessary for spiritual growth. All other things being equal, a world where people do not have to suffer to acquire godly character traits is better than one in which they must. Any attempt to justify the soul-making process by appealing to the goods afforded by that process fails because

> [T]alk of medicinal and disciplinary evil, perfectly fair when applied to our poor fate-bound human surgeons, judges, jailors, or teachers, becomes cruelly, even cynically trivial when applied to explain the ways of a God who is to choose, not only the physical means to an end, but the very *Physis* itself in which path and goal are to exist together.[36]

Being omnipotent, God could have just as easily designed a soul-making process that did not involve the experience of suffering but chose not to do so. Now, we consider the free will account.

If someone watched a man stumble out of a bar, fumble with his keys, and proceed to drive away clearly intoxicated, we would hold that person accountable for not intervening if they were able to do so. Of course, an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God is perfectly able to intervene whenever, wherever, and in whatever fashion that God desires. So even if the value of free will is granted, God could ensure that innocent people do not die when drunk people take the wheel. Driving under the influence need not cause anyone but the driver and, perhaps his willing riders, to suffer. Yet, there are many innocent victims every year. The theodicies propose that God tests the innocent by letting them suffer at the hands of the guilty and purifies their souls through pain. Those are not expressions of omnibenevolence. Because of this, neither a free will theodicy nor a soul-making theodicy can rescue the traditional conception of God from the narrow problem of evil.

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[34]. Van Woudenberg, "Brief History of Theodicy", 185.

[35]. Josiah Royce, "The Problem of Job", in *Studies in Good and Evil*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898). See also: Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus*, 79-80.

[36]. Royce, "The Problem of Job", 9.

Unlike the traditional conception of God, the Spirit of the Universal Community does not create the world, but expresses itself through the existing processes of the world.[37] This means that the Spirit cannot conceivably bear responsibility for the existence of evil. Furthermore, while the traditional God allows evil to exist to suit its own salvific tastes, the entire aim of the Spirit is to overcome evil by bringing finite beings together in community.

A full comparison of Royce's answer to the traditional answers will have to wait for another work. However, I have shown in this work that Royce's answer is in no way deflationary or dismissive of the problem of evil, so long as the problem is properly understood. Royce does not concede that "evil" is, say, a non-cognitivist ascription in the way some philosophers have tried to argue that "murder is wrong" can translate to "boo murder!" Nor is evil reducible to a naturalistic truism such as "evil is whatever *homo sapiens* do not prefer in their environments or condone in the behavior of their fellows." Royce provides a teleological answer to the problem of evil that has clear advantages over traditional theodicies, but which does not suffer from the attendant difficulties of those theodicies. His answer merits scholarly attention because it poses a serious challenge to the Abrahamic status quo in the philosophy of religion.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I introduced the narrow problem of evil and Josiah Royce's answer to the broad problem of evil. After I reconstructed Royce's answer, I gave some preliminary reasoning as to why two traditional answers to the narrow problem of evil fail. Then I showed that Royce's conception of God does not face even a *prima facie* existential threat from the existence of evil, and its sole mission is to bring about the resolution of evil by bringing finite beings into community. Thus, Royce's answer is theistic and teleological, but it does not suffer from the deficiencies found in some traditional answers to the problem of evil. For these reasons, and the fact that answers to the narrow problem of evil are fraught with difficulties, I argue that Royce's answer to the broad problem of evil merits a response from philosophers of religion in the Abrahamic traditions.

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[36]. See Kegley, *Josiah Royce in Focus*, 157-8. For a brief summary of Royce's views on the monotheistic doctrine of creation.

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