

Kelly A. Parker  
Department of Philosophy  
Grand Valley State University  
Allendale, MI 49401  
email: <parkerk@gvsu.edu>

American Academy of Religion Meeting  
Denver, Colorado  
17 November 2001  
Panel Session: Philosophy of Religion

### **The Spirit of Two Communities: Charles S. Peirce and Josiah Royce on Scientific and Religious Community**

My fellow panelists and I are generally searching for what Robert C. Neville calls a "high road around modernism," a road that leads out of the (hyper-) modernist morass while avoiding the pitfalls of Euro-style postmodernism. We seek a way toward genuine community, and toward the kind of meaningful individualism that can exist in such communities. We stake quite a lot on the Roycean model of community as perhaps the most promising path on this "high road."

In the next twenty minutes, I propose to do three things.[1] The first is to outline C. S. Peirce's model of the working scientific community, which he proposed as an alternative to the Cartesian-modernist model of scientific investigation. The second is to identify the ways in which Josiah Royce developed and extended Peirce's original model to apply to other communities--particularly religious communities. Finally, I want to draw attention to some possible problems with such extensions of the basic Peircean model of scientific community.

#### **I. Peirce on the Community of Scientific Investigators**

Peirce sought an alternative to the Cartesian model of scientific investigation, whose solitary knowing subject and narrowly rationalistic method are central to what we call modernism. As a working scientist himself, Peirce found this modernist account of science wanting in at least two respects: it failed as a description of how scientific investigation actually proceeds as a social effort, and it failed to adequately characterize the norms that guide successful scientific investigation. Descartes proposed to build science upon the individual investigator's doubt--a methodological or feigned skepticism--and subsequent discovery of certain clear, distinct, and indubitable concepts (including the *cogito* and a certain concept of God). The whole edifice of knowledge was then to be built in an extended process of rational argumentation. Peirce, too, began with the individual investigator, whose genuine doubt starts the process of inquiry. Unlike Descartes, though, Peirce found that no privileged method for settling doubt is given to investigators at the outset. "The method of science is itself a scientific result" (CP 6.428). Scientific method must be discovered and developed, as a response to genuine doubt concerning the question of appropriate method.

Peirce's 1877 article "The Fixation of Belief" traces the logic by which the initial "irritation of doubt" (EP1, 114) concerning any matter would lead the most persistent investigators to join into a community of inquirers, to adopt as a "fundamental hypothesis" that "there are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of [their] opinions about them," and to develop a self-correcting scientific method for investigating these realities (EP1, 120-21). Peirce gives due consideration to other methods of settling belief: the method of tenacity (stubborn insistence that one's current beliefs are true), the method of authority (institutional enforcement of an orthodoxy concerning key beliefs), and the a priori method (uncritical belief in what seems agreeable to reason--Descartes' uncritical

preference for rationalism in his own method may serve as a convenient example). Each of these methods has its advantages in the proper circumstances. Those who follow the method of tenacity are notable for their strength of opinion and their decisiveness. The a priori method ensures that beliefs will feel comfortable. And the method of authority tends to minimize social strife, at least in the short term (EP1, 121-22). As valuable as decisiveness, comfort, and harmony may be, they are no guarantee that truth will be served. Only a scientific method makes the discovery of truth its central aim.

Peirce devoted a lifetime to investigating the details of scientific method and the kind of community that can pursue it. These investigations spawned his pragmatic theory of meaning, his development of semeiotics, and his groundbreaking work in logic, among other things too numerous to detail here. A quick summary of the main distinguishing features of the Peircean community of scientific inquirers will have to serve.

First, the members of a Peircean scientific community recognize that inquiry is a social task, and that complete knowledge is possible only for a community of minds. The impulse toward community actually arises from a failure of the method of tenacity: "Unless we make ourselves hermits, we shall necessarily influence each other's opinions; so that the problem becomes how to fix belief, not in the individual merely, but in the community" (EP1, 117). Members of the community are thus in communication from the outset. To put it in terms that become central to both Peirce's and Royce's models of community, all are in semeiotic connection to one another as fellow-interpreters of their various experiences.

Second, the inquirers' unifying aim, and hence the purpose or telos that guides the community and defines its method, is to discover the truth. Members of the scientific community, unlike others, are not content with any substitute for truth as the thing that settles doubt--however convenient or comfortable such substitutes may be.

Third, all members of the community of scientific inquiry embrace the same "fundamental hypothesis" of realism (EP1, 120), which Peirce considered a necessary hypothesis for the possibility of rational thought (NEM 4:343). Each individual is taken to be confronting the same reality, and all are seen as attempting to interpret its meaning together.

Finally, in order to ensure the possibility (but by no means the certainty) of progress toward truth, all members of the community adopt the principle of fallibilism. Fallibilism is the methodological principle that any belief, however well established, may be incomplete or even completely mistaken.

This, then, is our sketch of Peirce's model of the community of scientific inquirers. He maintained that this model is preferable over all others, and particularly over the Cartesian model, both as a description of actual scientific life and as a normative model for science. It is important to note certain limits to Peirce's project. Peirce recognized that there are relatively few scientific communities to be found among our many existing social institutions. Of course any community falls short of its highest ideals, but Peirce's deeper point is that very few institutions even identify truth-seeking as their purpose, or attempt to follow the norms of scientific inquiry. Beyond this, Peirce seems to believe that there will always be relatively few people who possess the combination of temperament and desire for truth that would suit them for membership in a scientific community. Peirce is thus an elitist, but (unlike many intellectuals) his elitism centers on attitude rather than on intellect or acquired knowledge. He says that what sets

scientific inquirers apart is "their being seized with a great desire to learn the truth, and their going to work with all their might by a well-considered method to gratify that desire. The man who is working in the right way to learn something not already known is recognized by all men of science as one of themselves, no matter how little he is informed" (EP2, 130).

One last feature of Peirce's model of community is worth noting before we turn to Royce. While Peirce was primarily concerned to develop a philosophy of science rather than a philosophy of community, he did explore the possibility of extending his model to non-scientific communities. The irritation of doubt that may give rise to science can, after all, arise in any area of human experience whatsoever. Any group that encounters doubt and sets out to address it with a scientific method would be a scientific community, in Peirce's view. In several places, Peirce makes it clear that he regards such a change in certain kinds of community as not only possible but desirable. Religious and legal communities, specifically, might benefit from adopting the structures and methodology of science.[2] In 1893 Peirce directly considered the possibilities of a "religion of science," embodied in a church that would courageously embrace the findings and method of science: "it is a religion, so true to itself, that it becomes animated by the scientific spirit, confident that all the conquests of science will be triumphs of its own" (CP 6.433). Elsewhere Peirce comments on the service that would be done if the law courts would embrace the ideals and methods of science, rather than trusting to the adversarial system and the power of mere zealous advocacy to discover truth //still seeking the reference//.

## II. Royce's Extensions of the Peircean Model of Community

While Royce did maintain an avid interest in science, and did attain advanced competency in logic, the communities that interested him most were religious and "social" or civic communities. Unlike Peirce, whose model of community was developed as an adjunct to his philosophy of science, Royce was interested in the philosophy of community itself. Peirce's influence is most apparent in Royce's last major works dealing with religious community, *The Sources of Religious Insight* and *The Problem of Christianity*. Both of these works present fascinating parallels to Peirce's thought about community and the norms of scientific inquiry.[3] In making use of Peirce's model in his own late works Royce established himself as Peirce's first, and perhaps most daring, major interpreter.

Just as Peirce used Descartes as his foil in developing a model for the community of scientific inquiry, Royce had his own foil in William James. *The Sources* and *The Problem* are in part a belated response to James's tremendously influential 1901-02 Gifford lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Royce finds fault with James's account of religion in much the same way that Peirce faults Descartes. James is no Cartesian, but Royce's criticisms of James are criticisms of what can be called modernist tendencies in James's thought. First, James overemphasizes the role of the individual in religious experience: "For James, our sense of religious need is an experience which mysteriously wells up from the subliminal self, from the soundless depths of our own subconsciousness. . . . we are actually aroused to religious interest by spiritual beings whose level is higher than our own" (SRI, 47). The sources of religious interest are simply mysterious, and, save for possible mystical awareness of such beings, the Jamesian "religious genius" is every bit as solitary as the Cartesian scientist in his armchair. Second, the method of personal religious inquiry that James describes in his subjects is

precisely the non-method of romanticism and radical empiricism--the nineteenth century's modernist rejection of rationalism. Royce seems to regard James's position as the result of a dialectical movement against excess rationalism: "In the ultimate decisions of life, inarticulate intuition, mere faith, and that alone, can save you. . . . [but] Must one choose between inarticulate faith and barren abstractions? Must one face the alternative: Either intuition without reasoning, or else relatively fruitless analysis without intuition? Perhaps there is a third possibility" (SRI, 89). Royce's "third possibility" is his model of a religious quest arising from "much less mysterious" sources than James recognizes, to be carried forward in communities rather more mundane than the mystic's ecstatic union (SRI, 47).

Following Peirce's model, we must ask about the problem at the root of religious life and the method appropriate to religious "inquiry." [4] The problem that gives rise to religious interest is stated quite simply in the *Sources*: "Man needs salvation" (SRI, 12). More specifically, we humans are caught in a bind between a) knowledge that there is a *summum bonum* to be sought, and b) knowledge that man is "in great danger of so missing this highest aim as to render his whole life a senseless failure" (SRI, 12). The earthly realization of this *summum bonum*, the universal community, is a brotherhood of man that "is itself an instance of a superhuman conscious reality," the promise of which is to bring all its members "into harmony with the purposes of the universe" (SRI, 272). This general account of the human situation is revisited in specifically Christian terms in the *Problem*, in terms of three central Christian ideas. [5] This Christian version of the religious problem reflects a theme that runs throughout Royce's work, that the problem of evil, and above all our awareness of our own propensity for evil, is at the root of the need for salvation. [6]

The *Problem* and the *Sources* represent Royce's best attempt to address the problem of method in religious life. He offers no systematic analysis of alternative methods for addressing the religious problem, but he does offer several hints in that direction. In a comment that parallels Peirce's survey of methods in "The Fixation of Belief," Royce says that he cares not whether his reader has tried to solve the religious problem (characterized here as "the pathetic need and cry of man for salvation") "by scientific or by sentimental or by traditional means." (SRI, 17). This religious problem, on Royce's model, sets one on the way of religion just as the problem of doubt, on Peirce's model, sets one on the way of science. Royce implies that it is enough that the reader be familiar with the problem; the appropriate method for addressing it will come soon enough. In his discussion of method Royce rejects both the "attitude of the expounder and defender" of orthodoxy, and the attitude of "the opponent or the critic of Christianity" (PC, 59). Royce thus rejects both the methods of tenacity and authority, though his position concerning the a priori method is here unclear. Royce's own intended method is to conduct a sympathetic but philosophically rigorous critique of Christianity (PC, 74).

Royce notes that this is the method he has already adopted throughout his first chapter; it is also precisely the attitude and method that he ultimately recommends to the religious inquirer. It reflects the aim of the Peircean scientific inquirer whose foremost concern is to arrive at truth, and it would seem to indicate that the Roycean religious community shares a telos very similar to the Peircean scientific community. Indeed, a quick survey shows their similarities, but we must also highlight important Roycean additions. First, having rejected the method of tenacity, the Roycean religious inquirer seeks a method of settling belief in society with others. Second, the religious community is unified by a common overarching

aim--salvation. Note that this is related to but not identical with the unifying aim of the scientific community. In the scientific community, discovery of truth settles the irritation of doubt; in Royce's model of Christian religious community, the discovery of the truth of the universal plan for salvation settles the irritation of doubt about one's own condition. Third, Royce insisted on the principle of realism even more forcefully than Peirce. Peirce regarded it as necessary hypothesis that is likely to be true, or at least to become true. Royce famously argued from the possibility of error to the actual being of a completed perspective on reality (BW1, 321-355). Finally, Royce's passing rejection of the methods of tenacity and authority appear to commit the religious community to the principle of fallibilism. We must note that the principle of fallibilism is apparently limited in principle, however. There are certain fundamental beliefs (that "man needs salvation," for example) without which the Roycean religious community would cease to exist; within a particular religious tradition, there are still others, specific to that tradition, without which the tradition would apparently cease to function. This limited fallibilism occurs in any specific kind of inquiry and does not necessarily render that inquiry invalid--it is hard to imagine a science of biochemistry in which biochemists feel free to cease their belief in molecules, for example.

Peirce was concerned primarily with a model of scientific community. In his extension of the basic Peircean model of community to other areas, Royce contributes much toward a robust philosophy of community. Perhaps most notable is his introduction of the term "loyalty" to name the chief virtue necessary for community. His statement of the three conditions for community in the *Problem* is also of crucial importance. Peirce had certainly grasped the need for individuals to interpret and extend their sense of self to include the broader interests that unify the community. In the true representation of reality that would hypothetically be produced at the end of infinite inquiry, he identified a unique and ultimate future event that unites a community of truth-seekers. However, Peirce paid too little attention to the role of the past and of the more immediate future in community formation. Royce supplies the missing pieces with the ideas of the "community of hope" and the "community of memory" (PC, 248). Royce also adds immeasurably to the philosophy of community with his introduction of the three degrees of community consciousness: Peirce barely looked past the unifying power of a single common event in his model of community. Royce carried the question of what actually unites communities considerably further, with his recognition that not only events, but also common deeds and common love are necessary for genuine community (PC, 260ff.).

### **III. Possible Problems with the Extension of Peirce's Model**

This brings us to a point on which Royce may be accused of overextending his model of community in a way that Peirce did not. Earlier I noted that every community has some fundamental principles that function, for the members of that community, as "indubitable" propositions. One cannot deny molecular theory and still work as a biochemist; to abolish all belief in these theories would apparently just end this kind of scientific community. Few biochemists, however, would think to present their community of inquiry, together with its special fundamental beliefs, as the model or type for community in general. Business, education, family, law, and other communities existed before the development of the biochemistry community and its special beliefs, and these other communities would continue to exist largely unchanged if, for example, the periodic table of elements were found to be

fundamentally wrong-headed.

Royce applied his model of community-seeking-salvation not only to religious communities, but also to scientific communities (SRI, 287), social or civic communities (SRI, 58; *Philosophy of Loyalty*, passim) and even business communities (SRI, 275). Royce ultimately extends his basic model to the ideal "universal community." This great extension retains the religious community's initial problem (that man needs salvation), together with the fundamental belief both in the need for divine intervention and in the actual availability of the means for achieving salvation. Note that this Roycean aim and its underlying principles are somewhat more specific in content, and are presented as coming with a better guarantee, than the Peircean aim of settling doubt by attempting to discover truth if it exists. In extending his model of community to the universal community, Royce effectively renders any community a nascent religious community.

Peirce also extended his model, after 1903, to apply to any community seeking the good (Peirce conceived the *summum bonum* as the growth of reasonableness). However, membership in the Peircean Community of Infinite Inquiry requires only those conditions he regards as essential to rational inquiry itself: living doubt, a desire to discover truth, the hypothesis of realism, and the principle of fallibilism. While he would agree that the attitude of such truth-seekers is accurately described as "religious," it lacks the specific references to evil and the divine that are central to Royce's Beloved Community.

Peirce sought to make rationality and desire for truth the only requirements for membership in the community of inquiry: to reject the principles of this community is to reject the conditions necessary for rational inquiry. Royce's extension of Peirce's model may be turn out to be right, but we must recognize that his move toward explicitly religious themes goes significantly beyond that model. Royce's move must be challenged. As long as it appears possible to adopt a contrary set of fundamental beliefs about the human condition, and thus to skirt the religious problem without falling into self-contradiction, Royce's model of community may be regarded as resting on his own application of the a priori method. It seems agreeable to Royce's reason to posit that all are not merely susceptible to doubt, but are in need of salvation, but I can find no internal inconsistency involved if someone feels it to be more agreeable to their reason to adopt a differing view.

## Notes

1. Due to time constraints I will draw primarily from only three major sources: Peirce's early article "The Fixation of Belief," and Royce's two late books *The Sources of Religious Insight* and *The Problem of Christianity*.
2. At the end of the last article of the series that included "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce wrote, "No man need be excluded from participation in the common feelings, nor from so much of the public expression of them as is open to all the laity, by the unphilosophical narrowness of those who guard the mysteries of worship. . . . People who do not believe what are really the fundamental principles of Christianity are rare to find, and all but these few ought to feel at home in the churches" (EP1, 184-85).
3. In the *Problem* Royce makes explicit his reliance on Peirce's ideas of semeiosis, as it was presented in several essays published between 1867-1869 (PC, 275). Though our best accounts indicate that Royce did not turn his full attention to Peirce's early works until after he had written the *Sources*, the Peircean themes are to my eyes unmistakable and more than coincidental.
4. Interestingly, the first chapter of the *Problem* is entitled "The Problem and the Method," though Royce is there referring to the problem and method for interpreting the significance of religious life. I understand this to be the scholar's second-order question rather than the primary issue of the quest Royce identifies as the center of religious life.
5. First, "There is a certain universal and divine spiritual community. Membership in that community is necessary to the salvation of man" (PC, 70). Second, "Both because of what has technically been called original sin, and because of the sins that he himself has committed, the individual is doomed to a spiritual ruin from which only a divine intervention can save him" (PC, 73). Third, "The only escape for the individual, the only union with the divine spiritual community which he can obtain, is provided by the divine plan for the redemption of mankind" (PC, 73).
6. In the Peircean community of scientific inquiry, it is not evil but inevitable error that is the great danger to be avoided. Peirce is confident that persistent application of the proper method of inquiry will deliver us from error; Roycean religious inquirers cannot be delivered from evil without divine help.

## Works Cited

Peirce, Charles S. *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. 8 vols. Vols. 1-6 ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Vols. 7-8 ed. Arthur Burks. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-35, 1958. Cited as CP.

-----, *The Essential Peirce*. Vol. 1. Ed. N. Houser and C. Kloesel. Vol. 2. Ed. The Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, 1998. Cited as EP.

-----, "The Fixation of Belief." In EP1. 109-123.

-----, *The New Elements of Mathematics*. 4 vols. Ed. Carolyn Eisele. The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1976. Cited as NEM.

-----, "The Order of Nature." In EP2. 170-185.

Royce, Josiah. *Basic Writings of Josiah Royce*. 2 vols. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969. Cited as BW.

-----, *The Problem of Christianity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968. (First published 1913.) Cited as PC.

-----, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995. (First published 1908).

-----, *The Sources of Religious Insight*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923. (First published 1912.) Cited as SRI.