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SYMPOSIUM ON TOMMY J. CURRY'S
ANOTHER WHITE MAN'S BURDEN

Introduction to the Symposium

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IN EARLY 2019, THE JOSIAH ROYCE SOCIETY arranged two Author Meets Critics sessions on Tommy J. Curry's *Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire*. The first was held in New York City, at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting. The second was at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, in Columbus, Ohio. The sessions were vibrant and well-attended. With the exception of a few tendentious questions at the close of the second meeting, however, our sessions lacked the element of controversy that is customary in discussions of racism in the history of philosophy. The panelists and the audience alike rather accepted Curry's historical theses about the racial underpinnings of Royce's social philosophy. Our responses were mainly elaborations on his work, rather than fundamental challenges to it. In this introduction, I hope to explain something of how this circumstance has come about. How, namely, have historians of philosophy in general, and Americanists or Royceans in particular, altered our orientation toward the racial ideologies that underlie our field of study?

Josiah Royce's vast philosophical corpus includes a number of essays about race, some of which appeared in his 1908 collection *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*. These works, however, played a fairly marginal role in the revival of Royce scholarship that began in the 1980s and 1990s. The late Frank Oppenheim published four books on Royce between 1980 and 2005, which were overlapped by Jackie Kegley's first book (in 1997) and a new biography by John Clendenning (first in 1985, expanded in 1999). The scholars in this cluster emphasized Royce's pragmatism, his philosophy of religion, his ethical theory, and his emphasis on community. They also practiced a style of scholarship that borrowed much from Royce's notions of community and loyalty: they were interpreting Royce's philosophy, to be

sure, but they were also advancing it and defending its place in the American canon. Oppenheim's argument laid the groundwork. He emphasized a strong distinction between the early idealist Royce and the mature pragmatist Royce, and he placed his hero in explicit conversation with Peirce, James, and Dewey. While Clendenning (see "Two Royces") disagreed with Oppenheim's chronology, these scholars held in common with Kegley a certain spirit of advocacy. They hoped to promote—and to some extent they succeeded in this—Royce as the fourth great pragmatist.

Mention of *Race Questions* was by no means absent in this earlier scholarship, but Royce's racial philosophy did not receive focused treatment until 2005. In that year, Kegley published an article in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* in which she extended the interpretive framework of her book to address questions about racial identity. She made a fairly straightforward argument regarding Royce's position on race: since that philosopher rejected biological essentialism about race concepts, he thus had "a nonracialist understanding of race" ("Is a Coherent Racial Identity" 216). Whether Royce's rejection of biologism entails a progressive position on race later became a key point of contention among Royceans, and it is one that we take up throughout the symposium.

A few years later, Shannon Sullivan joined Kegley in the vanguard of the Royce-as-anti-racist scholarship. Her trio of articles on the topic appeared between 2008 and 2012, whereas Kegley released a second piece in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Pluralist*. Kegley summarized the agreement between her and Sullivan:

Shannon Sullivan and I agree that Royce stands out in the history of classical American philosophy in taking an antiracist focus on race questions when very few philosophers—especially white male philosophers—took scholarly time to think about these issues. (Kegley, "Josiah Royce on Race" 1)

At the time, Tommy Curry and Dwayne Tunstall were fresh PhDs from Carbondale. They were versed in Royce, of course, but they were also Black philosophers and experts in the philosophy of race. *The Pluralist* printed essays in the Fall 2009 issue by each of them, alongside Kegley's "Josiah Royce on Race," with Tunstall in the role of mediator between Kegley and Curry. Tunstall's position was sympathetic but critical, and he situated Kegley alongside some distinguished philosophers such as Alain Locke and Cornel West. All these thinkers, he claimed, saw in Royce's philosophy of loyalty a racially progressive ideal. Tunstall nonetheless argued that it was a mistake to read

Royce as an anti-racist, though he allowed that the mistake was an understandable one. The error in question consists in the presumption that we could divorce Royce's ethics from his "concrete social philosophy," and that we can ignore Royce's "tacit acceptance of early twentieth-century, British-style racialized colonialism" (Tunstall 40). Tunstall's position thus oriented on the question of how tightly knit Royce's ethical and religious ideas are to the colonial practices of the British administration in places like Jamaica.

Curry's essay in the Fall 2009 issue of *The Pluralist* was a first pass at this last question, and *Another white Man's Burden* is its definitive treatment. The book was thus a decade or so in the making. Its overarching historical thesis is that Royce's ethical ideals of loyalty, and his religious notions of community, are shot through with a fundamentally racist ideal of assimilation. The surprising context for Royce's ethics, he argues, includes some historical observations that placed, in Royce's eyes, the more nuanced and multi-tiered racial procedures of the British Caribbean above the crude, segregationist procedures of the American South. What the South lacked, Royce thought, was a plan for making Black southerners more American. The philosophy of loyalty, which includes a rationale for assimilating non-Anglos into the liberal polity, was thus meant to correct some of the shortcomings of concrete political procedures at the turn of the century.

Curry's evidence for this reading of Roycean loyalty consists in a long chain of careful, contextual arguments. He shows how Royce derived many of the ideas of both *Race Questions* and *The Philosophy of Loyalty* from rabid supporters of British colonialism such as Kipling, Bastian, and Frazer. Royce's polemical target in *Race Questions*, moreover, was not racial theory as such but only Chamberlain's more Germanic (as opposed to British) variant of it. As Curry tells it, Royceans had concluded that Royce rejected racial hierarchy merely because he rejected a certain theory about racial hierarchy. The truth, then, is that Royce sought to replace a biological race theory with a more idealistic one, just as he advocated a brand of assimilative administration, modeled on British Jamaica, in place of southern policies during the era of *Plessy* and lynchings.

All this is merely the white-facing side of Curry's argument. To get a fuller picture of Royce's context, we need to examine also the writings of Black thinkers of the nineteenth century. Once we do so, Curry argues, we will conclude that if there are any genuinely anti-racist positions on race at the turn of the last century, they are to be found chiefly in the works of Black philosophers. While Royce was heavily engaged with both British propaganda and southern social policy, he proves to be remarkably unversed on this topic. In fact, Royce's

neglect of Black thinkers is especially remarkable considering that so many of them—not only DuBois but also William Monroe Trotter, Clement Morgan, and William Ferris—attended Royce’s lectures at Harvard prior to the period in which he undertook studies of race. To summarize Curry’s argument, then: Royce’s ethical ideal of loyalty was an adaptation of some then popular ideas about colonial administration, a point that should be evident to scholars of Black intellectual history but that remains opaque to those white scholars who focus unduly on Peirce, James, or other canonical figures.

If Curry is right in this argument, then there was a more and a less obvious flaw in the earlier genre of scholarship. The more obvious flaw pertains to the neglect of deeper historical context. Curry introduced into the debates about Royce about a dozen nineteenth-century writers with whom Royce was familiar, but his defenders were not, or at least not adequately so. The less obvious flaw concerns the kind of arguments by which scholars re-introduce canonical figures into contemporary scholarship. There is a sort of pathology, or at least a series of common errors, that causes scholars to present their deceased heroes as if those writers could “speak to the problem of anti-Black racism in America” (Curry, “Royce, Racism, and the Colonial Ideal” 10). In short, we turn to the philosophers that we study in order to answer the pressing problems in our contemporary world. But since anti-Black racism is, by all accounts, among the most pressing social ills of our day, we find ourselves imagining that figures like Royce can offer us a model of anti-racism. Curry’s deeper conclusion is that it is not enough to reckon with the historical question about the racism of a single dead philosopher such as Royce. We must also reckon with our own methodological failures as scholars, and the senses in which the historical realities of race are systemically obscured by the common genres of historical scholarship in philosophy.

The contributors to this symposium are in at least rough agreement on the historical points, but we diverge on the methodological ones. For the most part, we concede the historical case to Curry, and we accept that Royce’s philosophy was largely an idealization of a very specific moment in the history of racialized colonialism. None of us, that is to say, endeavor to defend Royce as an anti-racist thinker in the way that Kegley and Sullivan once did. The questions that we raise are rather methodological and philosophical, and where we appropriate Royce’s theory, we look rather to amend or improve it. How should scholars approach canonical philosophers, once the racial contexts of the past have been revealed to us? If Royce’s philosophy represents a deeply flawed approach to group identity and American exceptionalism, how might we improve upon it? We offer a variety of answers to these questions.

Our symposium opens with a brief account by Curry (“Penning Dissent: The Methodological and Historiographic Motivations behind the Writing of *Another white Man’s Burden*”) of his methodological concerns. Setting aside his historical arguments about Royce, he explains how the tendencies of white scholars to author revisionist accounts of our heroes impacts the study of Black thinkers of the past. If Royce is a model of anti-racism, for instance, what purpose could there be for any scholar to study fields like nineteenth-century ethnology? The point is not, however, a mere pragmatic one in this sense. Our efforts to present the white philosophers of the past as neutral or progressive on race rather obscure the entire context in which Black philosophers lived and wrote. Simply put, we will never understand Black philosophers from the nineteenth century if we begin from the premise that there was a racially neutral white canon.

Tunstall provides the most critical assessment (“The Good Royce and the Bad Royce, Or, Is Saving Royce from Himself Worth It?”) of Curry’s approach. He had conceded the historical argument already in 2009, so he makes no attempt to deny that Josiah Royce developed his philosophy of loyalty largely in response to debates about colonial administration. What he disputes is rather the relationship between historical context and philosophical meaning. He accuses Curry of a certain reductionist tendency in this regard, and he argues that although Royce’s social program was racist, the meaning of expressions such as “loyalty to loyalty” should not be limited to Royce’s own circumstances. At some level, Tunstall has it, the philosophy may be divorced from its context of origin.

Daniel Brunson follows with a series of reflections (“Personal Reflections on Studying Royce after Curry”) about how he came to the study of Royce in the aftermath of Curry’s initial debate with Kegley. His own interest in Royce concerns insurance—the topic of one of Royce’s last books—and environmentalism. Brunson recounts how he navigated the pitfalls of being a white scholar at a Black institution, studying a racist white figure while applying that figure’s theory to environmental racism. He does not purport to offer any solutions to his dilemma. He presents, rather, an example of how white historians of philosophy might display humility and attentiveness in our approaches to racially nuanced contexts such as his.

My own contribution (“White Imagination in Search of a Canon”) places Curry’s methodological arguments in the context of broader debates in intellectual history. I examine Curry’s position next to arguments by Charles Mills, Quentin Skinner, and others in order to arrive at a more general theory in the historiography of racism. Like Tunstall, I allow that theories are sometimes

separable from their circumstances of utterance. But I emphasize the pragmatic, as opposed to semantic, implications of Curry's theses. I agree with Curry that his work on Royce should lead us to a thoroughgoing rejection of the extant American canon. My focus, however, rests on the cognitive architecture of reading, which we need to understand better before we can specify the racialized elements involved in it.

Myron Jackson presents ("Is Royce's Philosophy of Loyalty Another white Man's Burden?") a more forward-looking response to *Another white Man's Burden*. He takes the lesson of Curry's work to rest in revealing an essentialist strain in Royce's theory of collective identity. With that in mind, Jackson outlines what he calls a theory of cultural adoption. Adoption is Jackson's replacement for Roycean assimilation. The polemical target of the theory of cultural adoption, however, is not only Royce but also some broader trends in contemporary culture regarding identity politics. Much of our current discourse on this topic, Jackson argues, follows Royce in conceiving of identities as too static. Once we reject the assimilationist paradigm, or the idea that there is something stable in our culture to which we might assimilate, then we are free to become "open selves," adopting liberally from the pluralistic "adoption agency" of American culture.

In Curry's main contribution to this symposium ("Hayti Was the Measure: Anti-Black Racism and the Echoes of Empire in Josiah Royce's Philosophy of Loyalty"), the author reframes his arguments about Royce by examining how Black philosophers in the nineteenth century regarded the Haytien revolution. The events in Hayti at the turn of the nineteenth century proved that Black people in the Americas could overcome racist regimes through self-determination and agency. Important figures such as Douglass, Delany, and others recognized this, and for that reason, they did not imagine Black liberation to be rooted in the democratic and supposedly egalitarian ideals of the American polity. If we recognize the role of Hayti, Curry argues, we should no longer seek to assimilate Black thought to the ideals of Anglophone liberalism. We should rather approach the whole field of Black philosophy as an intellectualized attempt at self-assertion modeled on revolution rather than on reform or integration.

Finally, our symposium closes with a review of *Another white Man's Burden* by Kara Barnette. Readers who seek a faithful review of Curry's book should begin here, as Barnette provides a concise account of its contents. She orients the entire set of debates undertaken by Curry, and the other respondents, by focusing on Royce's relatively marginal status in the wider field of philosophy. Why would the fairly small collection of scholars working on

Royce undermine our own field of study by highlighting his racism? Barnett argues that our newfound recognition of Royce's deep racism does not undermine the field of Royce scholarship. What Royce scholars present is rather a model of how philosophical communities might grapple with racial history while not abandoning all attempts to discover useful ideas in the past. She concludes that "with care and humility," it should be possible for future scholars to adopt notions like "loyalty to loyalty" and "beloved community," but that they will not be able to do so without due recognition of the colonial sources of these ideas.

Barnette's review also returns us to my initial question: How have scholars in the history of philosophy altered our orientation to the racial contexts of the past? Royce is not the only white philosopher whose views have come under attack in recent decades. Already in the 1990s, Emmanuel Eze (see "Color of Reason"; *Achieving Our Humanity*), one of Curry's mentors, argued that the entire field of modern European philosophy rests on deeply racist assumptions. Following Eze, Mills (*Racial Contract*) argued that the social contract theories of modernity concealed the real underpinnings of the modern world, namely, the racial contract by which white Europeans colonized the entire globe. In the subsequent decade, scholars began examining such issues as the relationship between Kant's racial anthropology and his egalitarian moral theory, and the racial aspects of much of the canon came belatedly into view. The scholarship on Kant, which has slowly begun to investigate the implications of Mills's then-controversial argument in "Kant's *Untermenschen*," mirrors to some extent these developments in Royce scholarship (see Allais; Sandford).

The big lesson that Eze and Mills wished to teach us was that European philosophy cannot be entirely parsed from European colonialism. Scholars of that field should thus investigate the material connections between the grand theories of European Enlightenment, such as Kant's moral philosophy, and the incipient racial sciences of the eighteenth century (not to mention the colonial aggressions of the entire era). What is true of Europe is doubly so, Americanists should allow, of America. The time has thus come to discover the relationship between American racism and American philosophy. For this reason, we might regard *Another white Man's Burden* as a book that is only superficially about Royce. The real topic is American racism, and American racism is part and parcel of American philosophy for at least two reasons: first, the classical American theories such as pragmatism and feminism are embedded in, and inflected with, complex racial dynamics; and second, the tendency of those scholars who have defined an American philosophy has been to underestimate the role of race in our own pursuits.

A related set of considerations about the current discourse on race also sheds light on our collective response to Curry's argument. The past decade has seen the rise of Black Lives Matter, an explosion of popular books about race and uprisings of all sorts. These events occurred long after philosophers and other scholars accepted that race is socially constructed rather than biological. The rejection of biological concepts of race is no longer understood to entail anti-racism. The facile opposition between segregation and integration also has been eclipsed even in these popular books on race, with assimilation finding its rightful place next to segregation as one form of racialized social structure. While Royce's philosophy of loyalty thus appears as less controversially racist, it should also be understood as more historically illustrative. What Royce offers is a theoretical idealization of certain assimilationist social practices from the early twentieth century, and we now better understand how such practices co-existed with segregation in the long history of American racism. One purpose of Royce studies, and classical American philosophy more generally, should be to investigate the historical shapes that racial assimilation took in the relevant period.

In all these matters concerning race and canonicity in scholarly endeavors, the discipline of philosophy has walked slowly and out of step with our sibling disciplines such as literary studies and history. *Another white Man's Burden* begs us to accelerate the pace, and the symposium before you presents our humble attempt to do so.

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