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Can a 21st century person be a philosopher? Or Is Philosophy Dead?

In his 1913 book, *The Problem of Christianity* Josiah Royce asked whether a modern person can be Christian. Ninety years later, Christianity remains a problem but so does philosophy and for that matter, so does modernity itself. I could have asked whether it is possible in the 21st century to be a modern person. I will begin with what I hope is provocative list of questions:

Can a 21st century person be a philosopher?

(Is philosophy dead?)

Can a modern person be a Christian? (Royce's question)

Must a modern person be a materialist?

Can a 21st century person be a modern thinker?

(Is modernity dead?)

Philosophy and Its Undertakers

A former WJU colleague from the theology department recently said in an interview that philosophy is dead. There was some gloating involved because he said that not long ago philosophers were saying theology is dead, but now theology is thriving and philosophy is in the ground.

As I thought about this I remembered the 60's when there were some widely believed rumors that Paul McCartney was dead. In a recent interview Paul McCartney said that he himself never believed those rumors. The rumors of philosophy's death are

not new and did not begin with post-modernism. Analytical philosopher Hilary Putnam quoted Etienne Gilson as saying “Philosophy always buries its undertakers” (p 19). This was written in 1936. At that time the death of philosophy was being announced by logical positivists. Gilson’s point was that the apparent death of philosophy, followed by its inevitable revival, is an integral part of philosophy. Philosophers work to replace the current state of thought in philosophy, and when they achieve their goal, it looks like a death, but it is philosophy itself that carries out this process. I think of a serpent that sheds its skin. Somebody finding the old skin might proclaim that the serpent is dead, but it has in fact moved on.

What is the philosophy that some people today are calling dead? The notion of philosophy as a body of ideas that can serve as a foundation for other disciplines has not been viable for some time, although we philosophers often act as if providing a foundation were our role. Nevertheless, philosophy in some way will continue as long as there are people who want to understand things. My friend who proclaimed the death of philosophy thinks it has been buried by post-modernism. As for the future of post-modernism, I can only tell you where the previous undertakers of philosophy are buried. They are buried in the footnotes of history of philosophy books. But enough about the undertakers, let’s take a look at the prospects for philosophy now.

Philosophy’ Present Life

My title question is whether a 21st century person can be philosopher? I am not referring only to professional philosophers, but to people who turn to philosophy for meaning. I think that this question is crucial for the good of us all for several reasons. First, whether we think philosophically or not, we live our lives, both individually and communally, based on assumptions, even if we don’t know what the assumptions are. Secondly, we need philosophy in order to do ethics. Ethics is the standard for evaluating all things including religion and science. Religion can be a force for the greatest good that humans can do; but it can also become demonic and lead to the worst crimes. So religion must pass the test of ethics and not the other way around. A similar thing can be said of science. Science is seldom neutral; it provides a great deal of good, but can also provide

bad things, and we need to interpret the work of science to make sure that it serves our ethical purpose and does not sabotage it.

Reconstruction of philosophy is one of the urgent tasks for men and women in the 21st century. John Dewey proposed this in his 1920 book, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. In previous times, e. g. Ancient Greece, Medieval Europe, and the early days of modern science, philosophy served as a unifying foundation for understanding the place of the human person in society and nature. It gave a basis for evaluating ethics, religion, politics, economics, and every aspect of life.

Today our understanding in each of these areas has surpassed the imagination of our predecessors. But there is no philosophical view to connect all of the fast moving aspects of human life. In the words of the poet W. B. Yeats, “Things fall apart; the centre can not hold.” Metaphysics appears to be dormant if not dead; academic philosophy is often just one more unrelated activity and is on the fringe of life and thought compared to other human concerns such as science, technology, and economics. Philosophy cannot return to its former role as foundation. That was a metaphor and one that does not fit the current role of philosophy. Philosophers today cannot build foundations and expect that other disciplines will build on them. We need a more dynamic metaphor. This should come naturally to anyone whose philosophy is a process, a flow, a teleological journey. From the time of Socrates real philosophers realized that they were not wise; they are on the way to wisdom, they are not there yet. Philosophers are the guides or navigators, but never too sure of themselves. We are in the same thicket or the same boat as our lost companions. But we have some ideas of how we might proceed.

A Pauline Christian in 1913

In addressing the question of the viability and role of philosophy, I used a paraphrase of Josiah Royce’s question. His question was whether a modern man consistently can be a believing Christian. Of course there are people in our time who are Christians, but Royce’s concern was whether they are modern, and, if so, whether there is any inconsistency between their Christianity and their modernity. By “modern man” Royce meant a person “whose views are supposed to be not only the historical result, but a significant summary, of what the ages have taught mankind.” The definition is a

summary of the hypothesis “that the human race has been subject to some more or less coherent process of education.” Royce does not limit the notion of modernity to the period from the 17th to the 20th century as we might do. Rather he argues that by his definition, St. Paul was a modern man of his time since he conceived of history as a process of education. Royce points out that Paul’s teaching includes the doctrine that the human race, taken as a whole has some genuine and significant unity, so that its life is no mere flow and strife of opinion, but includes a growth in genuine insight.”

The difference between St. Paul’s world and that of our modern age is vast, a vastness that we know but perhaps do not often think of. Royce invites us to think of it by a thought experiment in which a member of a Pauline community goes into deep coma and is preserved and resuscitated in the 20th century. Royce stipulates that the person of his thought experiment is a well-educated philosopher who had been converted by Paul. This person then would learn our language and be educated in the whole history of civilization up to the present. The person would find many things that no one of his Pauline community could have expected. Nineteen hundred years had gone by, Christ had not returned, and the world had not ended. There were people living today who still claimed to be Christian, but the history of the church did not always go the way Jesus and St. Paul might have hoped. The earth had been mapped and traveled; there were whole continents and peoples that he had not suspected existed. Our Pauline Christian would learn of transoceanic ships, transcontinental railroads, huge cities, electricity, and an effusion of factory-made goods. The earth is not the center of the universe but a satellite of a star which is one of several hundred billion in a galaxy of which there are billions. The world would be more alien to our Pauline Christian than any imaginative science fiction world would be to us. Could he absorb this modern world, give it his intellectual and ethical consent, and still be a Christian? Royce argues that such is the problem that every Christian faces in the modern world.

We can take a page from Royce and devise our own fiction. If a group of educated people fell asleep in 1913 and awoke in our time, they would face a situation similar to Royce’s Pauline Christian, but not nearly as severe. A person leaping over ninety years into our present time would certainly be overwhelmed by television, jet travel, space travel, computers and the internet, cell phones etc. Perceptive observers in

1913 might have predicted that the future would not be the sweetness and light predicted at the beginning of the modern era. But when they learned of the events just in the thirty-one years from 1914 to 1945, the horror would be overwhelming. They would then learn that in the following forty five years we lived under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust, and today live in chronic uncertainty of the future. The visitors might not be asking whether a modern man can be a Christian, but whether any person living today could be a modern person. They might think that the only people with a trace of sanity are those who call themselves post-modernists. According to Royce, a modern person was supposed to be one “whose views were not only the result of but a significant summary of what the ages have taught mankind.” But to our awakened persons, the human race seems to have turned all of its learning into a nightmare. Philosophy is dead, religion in its best sense is impotent but dangerous forms of fundamentalism are powerful. They might think of Yeats’s words, “The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity.” Our visitors might look at science as more of a danger than benefit. In considering technology they might remember the warning of William James who compared technological society to a child who got into a bathtub and accidentally turned the water on but did not know how to turn it off. If our group trying to grasp these ninety years walked into a philosophy classroom, they might ask “How in the hell can you guys be doing philosophy?” In a way, we are each a part of that group and we have to answer that question. Can a 21st century person be a philosopher?

How can we do Philosophy in the 21st Century

In answering this question I will argue that a modern person in the 21st century can be a philosopher in the sense in which Josiah Royce was, i. e. we can develop metaphysics, ideas that are more universal than those of physical science. The term modern person , as used here, refers to the larger sense in which Royce used it, as one who believes and exemplifies the belief that the human race is subject to a unified process of education. I will take materialism as an exemplar of modern thought. Materialism may be immune to the disillusionment that has pervaded modernism since the beginning of World War I. If the world is just a conglomeration of molecules, it does not promise anything and if things go badly, that should be no surprise. Of the infinite number of universes one of them had to evolve life like this and we are it. So let’s make

the most of it; that's all we can do. The good news is that if we are materialist, we can be modern men and women. Unlike the post-modernists, the materialists who call themselves naturalists believe in science and that some ideas are true while others are false. As materialist philosopher Daniel Dennett says:

If you want to find anxiety, despair, and anomie among intellectuals today, look at the recently fashionable tribe of post-modernists, who like to claim that modern science is just another in along line of myths.... But it should be obvious that the innovations of science, not just its microscopes, telescopes, and computers, but its commitment to reason and evidence are the new sense organs of our species, enabling us to answer questions, solve mysteries, and anticipate the future in ways no earlier human institutions can approach. (p. 5)

Dennett fits Royce's vision of the modern man who believes that the human race has been subject to some coherent process of education. Anyone who thinks scientifically can be called a modern person in this sense. Materialistic naturalists try to proceed free of dogma, but they are subject to at least one dogma. The materialist dogma is that it is incoherent to speak of reasons or consciousness independent of biology. This view traditionally does not allow for any notion of God, a soul, real community, or free will. The case of free will must be reconsidered because Daniel Dennett has recently written a fascinating book called *Freedom Evolves* in which he argues that freedom is compatible with materialistic determinism. This view contradicts the conventional wisdom. The assumption has been that if our will is free, then we must be made up of something more than a conglomeration of molecules. The reason is that if our thought and our choices are nothing but the action of the molecules, then decisions are made by molecules over which we have no control. In fact there is no "we" to have control.

Dennett takes a different stand which if it is true, enables him to correctly believe in both free will and determinism. If Dennett is right, then materialists can claim some good things such as free will and community that up to now they had to sacrifice in order to keep their materialism safe from spooky notions such as soul.

I will try to briefly summarize Dennett's argument and hope that brevity does not prevent me from doing the argument justice. Dennett states unequivocally, "There are no genetic determinists. I have never encountered anybody who claims that will, education, and culture cannot change many, if not all, of our genetically altered traits" (p. 156). Further in the book he adds, "Human freedom is not an illusion; it is an objective phenomenon, distinct from all other biological conditions and found in only one biological species, us" (p 305). It is not difficult to understand how a determinist would say that education and culture could change genetic trait. The determinists can argue that behavioral traits that enable the next generation to survive and flourish are a product of natural selection. But he adds will, and will historically has been a problem for determinists.

Dennett's explanation of will is based on non-biological survival structures in terms of *memes*. The memes are described as "cultural replicators" parallel to genes which are the biological replicators. He compares a meme to a virus that latches on to a human brain and may be spread to others. Examples of memes would be anything that is part of what we call our culture from the way we prepare food to the way we enjoy music. The memes are products of natural selection so that, for instance, an innovation in food or music may or may not be replicated depending on whether or not it is to the liking of the biological host. Memes are made of information that is carried by some physical medium. They can go from medium to medium, but they must always depend on a physical medium. As Dennett says, they are not magic.

Just as our genes have a natural tendency to replicate themselves, so do our cultural memes. Richard Dawkins author of "The Selfish Gene" and coiner of the term "meme" writes,

We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and if necessary the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism—something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines but we have the power to

turn against our creators. We alone on earth can rebel against the power of the selfish replicators (p. 200-201).

Who are “we?” We are sharers of information. With the sharing of memes we have the beginning of a community rather than just an aggregate of individuals. The problem is, how do we rebel against the replicators as Dawkins affirms that we in fact do? Dennett’s answer is that the memes open up a world of imagination. We have a variety of options to choose from and we are not limited to only the option that best enhances our own individual survival, nor the survival of our genes. One person may forgo a family and children to live a life of service; another may do so to live a life of hedonistic delights. In both cases the genes desire for perpetuation is not met. This is, of course, only a metaphorical way of speaking because Dennett does not believe the gene has conscious desires.

The question still remains, how can we be free in a deterministic world? Dennett argues that the opposite of freedom is inevitability. So freedom means in his words, “evitability.” If there is a future that we can avoid and want to avoid, that future is evitable. Because our memes reveal several different futures, the undesirable one can be avoided. So as a determinist, he argues that given a present state of affair, only one state of affairs can follow. But because we can imagine several options, and our desires and plans are part of the state of affairs, then we choose freely. A conglomeration of molecules makes the decisions. But then are the decisions made by *you*? Yes, because *you* are nothing but the conglomeration of molecules. Decisions are not made in a Cartesian spaceless point. They are made over time and involve our brain and even our whole organism. They are partly conscious and partly not conscious. When the whole organism acts with no sense of coercion or prohibition, we are acting freely.

A personal aside, I understand this idea intellectually, but at the level of what William James calls the pinch of our personal destiny, I ask myself whether I can somehow nudge the molecules in my brain to do other than they are doing. Can I, whatever I might be, take control of the movement of the molecules that make me up? This question is reminiscent of the arguments of some theologians who argued that God predestined everything, yet our will is free. There is no problem for those who make this

argument because, they argue that God predestines us to act freely. Looking at these arguments, I always wondered, “What am I missing?” I ask the same question when I study a materialist’s explanation of how our molecules determine us to act freely.

I will close this section of the paper on materialism by describing the role that Dennett attributes to the philosopher. He says,

My fundamental perspective is *naturalism*. The idea that philosophical investigations are not superior to, or prior to, investigations in the natural sciences but in partnership with these truth-seeking enterprises, and that the proper job for philosophy here is to clarify and unify the often warring perspectives into a single vision of the universe.

Dennett’s goal fits Royce’s view as expressing the essence of the modern person, namely that history is not a mere ebb and flow but rather a process of education that gains real insight and moves toward unification.

Must We Be Materialists?

A key question for philosophy is whether it is likely that nothing exists except what human beings can understand at this stage of our evolution? Can there be a consciousness that is not based on the evolution of the human brain? Can there be a higher consciousness that we are evolving toward, a consciousness whose guidance is responsible for the progress that we are making; is such an idea coherent?

To probe this I will use the philosopher I started the paper with, Josiah Royce. Why Royce? Because there are a lot of neglected insights in Royce that may serve the needs of our time. To paraphrase what Chesterton said about Christianity, Royce was not tried and found wanting, he was found difficult and never tried. I am concentrating on the mature Royce who wrote *The Problem of Christianity*.

Royce learned from C.S. Peirce that *interpretation* is the faculty that gets us most in touch with reality. Most philosophers, including James, had identified two basic mental processes, perception and conception. But with the guidance of Peirce, Royce

gained the insight that interpretation goes beyond percepts and concepts. Interpretation is the only way that we know such things as that other minds exist. A brief description of what he meant by interpretation will help to clarify this point. Interpretation means reading signs. It involves three aspects; the sign, the person reading the sign, and the one to whom the sign is read. A model of interpretation is the language translator. The language is the sign; the translator interprets it for another person. Interpretation involves the mind that interprets, the mind that is interpreted, and the mind to whom the interpretation is made. Sometimes the three minds involve only two persons as when one person is explaining her thoughts to another. The speaker may be the sign and the interpreter. Sometimes there is only one person perhaps writing a journal and trying to interpret his thoughts to himself.

Royce argues that we are brought to the very center of metaphysics by the question of a Community of Interpretation. Distinct individuals are unified by certain ideas, events, and goals that are acknowledged by each member. Such a community is a temporal process that involves a common history and common hopes. We can think of communities from clubs to universities to nations. There is the common history and the common hope that we try to interpret to each other. Every philosopher and every scientist believes in a community of interpretation as a pre-supposition for the discipline itself. These communities are not discovered by perception or by conceptual thought, but their reality cannot be seriously doubted.

Royce's key metaphysical question is, Why we believe in a real world at all? The question is not *whether* we believe in a real world; of course we do. The question is *why* we believe it. Royce's answer is that we believe in a real world because in the conflict of our present situation we look for an interpretation and understand the true interpretation to be the real world. Without a situation of conflict, we would not think the world is unreal, but the issue of reality would not come up.

What Royce calls the problem of reality is to compare two essential ideas, our present situation and the ideal that we are working toward. This is obvious in time of trouble. There is the bad situation, whether it is a financial crisis, an illness, or family problems, and the situation the way that you want it to be. Even when things are going

well, there is the contrast between where we are now and where we hope to be. Members of a happy family or leaders of a successful business are thinking about tomorrow. Business executives think about things such as their current products, market share, and profit, compared to what they will be five years from now. We who are scholars are contrasting our present knowledge of our discipline with what we hope to understand in the coming days and years. In any area of life, if we think of a possible solution and then become convinced that it won't work, we are making a judgment about what the real world is like. After all, we could make it work in our imagination. The interpretation that we think is the true one is our belief about what is real. We may be wrong, and to acknowledge that is also an affirmation of reality. So why do we believe in the reality of the world? Because we spend most of our mental energy trying to make true interpretations of our conflicting situation.

Interpretation is an act of mediation, and it is the act by which we get in touch with reality. The idea that expresses reality is the idea that compares two opposing ideas and shows the meaning of the contrast between them. The key word is the *meaning* of the contrast. Interpreting that meaning is the essence of human creativity which occurs when two apparently unrelated ideas are brought together. For example, in this paper I am comparing the materialist view of Daniel Dennett with the pragmatic idealism of Josiah Royce and interpreting the meaning of the contrast.

Royce's philosophy is a kind of voluntarism. We do not know reality by disinterested looking. We know reality by an act of willfully dealing with conflicts. Royce argues that every metaphysical theory is an attitude of the will and asserts, "...there is one and but one general and decisive attitude of the will which is the right attitude, when we stand in the presence of the universe and when we choose how we propose to bear ourselves towards the world" (p. 349).

Interpretation involves an act of the will. Contrasting Schopenhauer's will to live and will to resign, Royce postulates a third will, the will to loyalty—loyalty to the beloved community. Here lies Royce's answer to the question of whether modern men and women can be believing Christians. The answer is yes if they do not confuse the essential truth of Christianity with its many historical expressions. The truth that Royce

affirms is that the community is a reality and not just a collection of individuals, and the spirit of interpretation that ties the community together is real. According to the teachings of St. Paul, the community is the community of believers, and the spirit is the Holy Spirit. But Royce argues that any community of people tied together by a shared history and a hope in bringing the human race together as beloved community is an expression of the truth that St. Paul taught. This would apply, for example to a community of scientists who are loyal to the pursuit of truth, even if the scientists are atheist. Royce calls such communities, the "Invisible Church." The task of the Visible Church, the Church in the ordinary sense of the word, is to serve as an exemplar of the beloved community. When the Church fails to do this, as it often fails, it is not performing its task.

My conclusion is that we in the 21st century may be modern men and women and we do not need to accept the nihilism of post-modernism. I will repeat that I am using the term modern in Royce's sense and not affirming that we can hold to the mechanistic atomism that we have usually called modernism. I think we need another word, and "post-modern" has already been taken by the nihilists. Perhaps we can refer to ourselves as "hopeful" without adopting the optimism that characterized the older modernists. So a person in the 20th century can be hopeful about the human race, can be a philosopher, and can be a Christian.

In my conclusion I need to reconnect with the thought of the materialists and express my own interpretation. Darwinism can explain a lot, and it is right to push to see how much it can explain. But we should not be so dogmatic that we think that there are no other forces at work. The job of the philosopher is to keep alert to other, perhaps better, theories. We can be naturalists without holding to such a narrow and pinched view of nature that is held by our contemporary materialists. A fuller understanding of nature might not only fulfill our spiritual needs but provide a strong basis for an environmental philosophy, ethical theory, political and economic philosophy, and many other insights. Creativity means bringing things together; we do not need to assume that we are the only or the most important creative forces. We philosophers need to look at the world with the mind of scientists but also the mind of an artists, poets, and to the extent that we are able, the mind of the saints.

To see the world as real philosophers, we cannot be mere Thomists, or Marxists, or Darwinists. We have to avoid all literal interpretation whether they are religious, scientific, or philosophical. Such interpretations can only lead to dead ends. Philosophy must experience its own continuous death and resurrection. Our job is to consistently find new interpretations that expand our world, enrich it, and build the human community.

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