INDIVIDUALITY AND THE MORAL LIFE

In their discussion on love and friendship, Millie tells Harry that what we love about someone or something are the qualities that makes them special.(1) As Harry phrases it, other people's differences are just what we like about them. Two issues seem to be implied by these statements: first, what is special or unique about someone is an expression of individuality; second, those individual differences become precious to us as we enter into a significant relationship with another.

Millie and Harry similarly have come to appreciate each other's uniqueness as a result of sharing in the project of meaningful inquiry about matters of importance to them. Indeed, other classmates who share their interest have come to value each other as individuals with different points of view, each working toward the common goal of finding his or her place in the world. As Lisa has emphasized, "I want to find what's right for me," but she soon realizes that her conclusions are valid only in relation to the whole - to the community of significant others.

Few philosophies deal successfully with the problem of individuality. Some see the individual as a brute fact, no different from other facts in a physical universe; others see him as consisting of higher and lower natures, of spirit and matter; others lose the individual in the grandeur of the whole, a mere instance of a universal principle; and the final alternative touts the individual as the supreme reality, but leaves no room in the community.

The American idealist Josiah Royce tried to rescue the individual from the morass of traditional philosophy. Although he views the world against the backdrop of eternity, the concrete individual is the centerpiece of his cosmology. Somewhat of an anomaly in American philosophy, Royce was trained in the tradition of German idealism, but he was pressed to grapple with the same issues that confronted his contemporaries, James and Dewey - the role of experience, the relation of the practical to the theoretical, and the significance of the individual to some larger whole. Although Royce incorporated Hegel's Absolute and the dialectical method in his thinking, he was equally concerned to restore the individuality of life and experience, not as the expression of some impersonal Being or legalistic society, but as the uniquely personal and purposeful expression of the moral order. The bond which links one individual to another is the same that ties the individual to the universal system of meaning:

> *It is thus, for instance, that the lover says, There shall be none like my beloved. It is thus, too, that the mother says, There shall be no child like my child. It is thus that the loyal friend says, There shall be no friend like my friend. It is thus that the finite Self says, No life shall have precisely the meaning that my life has. It is thus also that the ethical consciousness says, My duty shall be that which nobody but myself can conceivably do.(2)*

The individual achieves his individuality or Selfhood to the extent that he consciously chooses a plan and performs deeds for the realization of some ideal. Only through such a life-plan or vocation do we define and create ourselves. In order to demonstrate this idea more adequately, we must briefly explain Royce's view of the relation between the subject and the object of consciousness. This sketch will be necessarily superficial, since it is drawn from his two-volume treatise on metaphysics, The World and the Individual.

Reality, according to Royce, consists not of facts, but of ideas. The idea is defined as "a state of mind that has a conscious meaning."(3) The idea of the individual, which Royce calls the "internal meaning", is only a partial and inadequate grasp of the intended object, in the way that humming a tune is a partial fulfillment of a song. The self's idea, in seeking for the fulfillment of its internal meaning, strives to become more and more determinate, until it is embodied in an individual reality; the idea wants to be fulfilled by an actual entity, which is the "external meaning" of the idea.

Royce describes, almost phenomenologically, the intentionality of consciousness, the striving for the ideal correlate of the idea. Cognition alone is insufficient to grasp the individual reality, because cognition as such deals with abstractions. What is needed is the volitional element of consciousness. Royce criticized his contemporary psychology and earlier rationalism for separating the will and intelligence. Along with the other pragmatists, Royce saw them as inextricably linked in the individual's successful adjustment to the environment. The intellect is influenced by our motives, and likewise, our interests guide our conceptions. Knowing is an activity embodying our will because all ideas are used for a purpose or plan. "Facts are never known except with reference to some value that they possess for our present or intended activities."(4) The volitional aspect, which Royce often refers to as attraction or love, leads us to the individual; it allows us to recognize the uniqueness of the individual for the sake of our purposes.

We know that interest, by definition, is selective. It chooses from among the possibilities of the situation those that fit its purpose. The world is, therefore, an individual fact by reason of "the definiteness of the selection of that object which shall be permitted to fulfill the final meaning."(5) The individual exists as the object and expression of an exclusive interest. Royce concludes that the individual is the only ultimate form of Being, and the expression of ideas is always unique and individual.

Royce's theory of human individuality rests on the same presuppositions as his metaphysics. He disavows any kind of soul-substance beneath the ephemeral stages of human growth. The self is a "meaning embodied in a conscious life. Its individuality, in the case of any human being, implies the essential uniqueness of this life."(6)

Royce looks at the self both genetically and teleologically: how did it arise? What is its purpose? How does it fulfill that purpose? The self is not antecedent to social experience, but rather is derived from it and always refers back to it. Sometimes we feel as though we have no real Self at all, that we are swayed by other's thoughts, beliefs, and images of us. Yet this phenomenon provides a clue to the self: We always develop in contrast to others. Our empirical self-consciousness relies "upon a series of contrast-effects, whose psychological origin lies in our literal social life."(7) Through interaction with others and reflection upon these contrasts, the individual forms a definition of himself. The distinction between the self and the not-self is similar to that between the internal and external meaning of ideas; both imply each other. Because we live in an intersubjective reality, there is no original chasm to be bridged between the self and others. We constantly refer back to the social matrix for the realization of our goals and purposes.

We are committed to cooperating with others in the pursuit of common goals. Our goals are fulfilled only by recognizing the life-plans of others as similar yet different from our own. An individual's life-plan is

an ideal whose expression needs indeed the cooperation of countless other selves, of a social order, of Nature, and of the whole Universe, but whose individual significance remains contrasted with all other individual significance.(8)

In short, we derive from others everything except what is unique about ourselves. Individuality cannot be reduced to causal factors. True, a person's heredity, education, and temperament can be causally interpreted, but the individual's "conscious intention to be," his "expression of a rational purpose to win a unique relation to the universe as contrasted with all other selves is inexplicable and irreducible."(9)

The meaning of a life is not to be found in a single part or stage of it, but in its entirety, in the total fulfillment or realization of its purpose. As the existentialists would say, there is no instant at which I can say, Here, now I finally "observe what I finally am."(10) We are always becoming, each life's moment a "glimpse of a task now assigned to you, the task of your life as friend, as worker, as loyal citizen, in general as man, i.e., as one of God's expressions in human form."(11)

Each person has a role to play, a set of tasks to be performed, and responsibilities to be met which can be accomplished only by that individual. Every portion of our experience is unique, because it represents an opportunity for choices, decisions, and actions that will help to realize our life-plan.

Millie, Harry, and Lisa have learned that they are morally free and independent, that their lives are unique paths to be consciously chosen. Each self is defined and created by its unique way of viewing its relation to the whole(12) and expressing its ideals regarding this relation.

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Footnotes

1. Matthew Lipman. Lisa. Montclair, New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1983, p. 90.
2. Josiah Royce. The World and the Individual, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1959, Vol. 1: 459.
3. Ibid, I: 24.
4. Ibid, I: 436.
5. Ibid, I: 459.
6. Ibid, II: 269.
7. Ibid, II: 260.
8. Ibid, II: 276.
9. Ibid, II: 326. 10. Ibid, II: 288. 11. Ibid, II: 275. 12. The whole here means "the community of inquiry" in the Peircean sense or to use Royce's words, "the community of interpretation." In The Problems of Christianity, the later Royce has moved away from the Hegelian notion of the Absolute (still present in The World and the Individual) to the notion of "the community of interpretation."