The Concept of the Absolute; Its Historical Development

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Philosophy may be defined as a search for the ultimate principles of reality. It is the reflection of humanity upon its own existence, the effort and desire to fathom the meaning of the ever-changing activities of its environment and the attempt to find the substantial and unchanging principle or principles from which all things spring. Philosophy is an intellectual endeavor to make a rational system out of what is seemingly chaotic; it is purely a mental procedure which arises from the very nature and demand of the mind, to all appearances a necessity from which man cannot escape, and which he must work out in whatever environment he is cast. It was this demand which prompted Thales and the earliest Greek philosophers to declare the element as the ultimate; the Eleatics found an explanation in Being; and, later, their critics, influenced by an empathetic attention toward the changeableness of everything, saw the ultimate in becoming. Democritus with his atom of final division and Plato with his abstract ideas were polar opposites, but still expressing this same mental attitude of striving for the ultimate. The conflict of the nominalists and realists in the Middle Ages over questions which they thought vital to their theology were similar outcroppings. Whereas the first of the idealists, who sought to overthrow materialism, raised the new problem of knowledge, or rather raised that problem in a new way, but he sought an ultimate more worthy than the atom which ultimate he declared to be the mind of God. Infinity with his monads, the relation of which was not interrelation but pre-established harmony; Spinoza with his predominating intellectualism, in the idea of an infinite substance with its diversity of appearances in the equally infinite attributes, both have constructed systems because of this demand. Fichte, the most extreme subjectivist, and Hegel the rationalist, who makes reason bind all in a unity and types of the German spirit in philosophizing.
This then has been the hope of reflection, to grasp in thought the ultimate. Order in thought's minded characteristic and it has been considered that the more thorough the thought-system and the more complete the arrangement of concepts, the more nearly had the goal been reached. As the philosophies have passed into history they have been succeeded by others, which have sought a satisfactory interpretation, in connection with the older systems, of what has been brought together from other lines of thought and discovery, and in the light of these new facts to offer a complete solution. The attitude of philosophy has been changing and progressing with adaptations to overcoming some new obstacle, but always this tendency has been toward monism. But there has been another reason, than the satisfaction of thought for the desire for unity, of which philosophy is just the reflective side, and without which philosophy would have a minimum value. That is the religious conviction. Though it has not always been stated, in the majority of systems, the religious stands out and above like a dome capping the whole structure. The god of all religions has been credited with the most complete and most superlative attributes which were conceivable; hence, what philosophy has declared to be the final, has each time been accredited to the god.

It was Spinoza who went the whole limit and gave us pantheistic absolutism. Instead of being religious, as his contemporaries accused him of being, he was so thoroughly religious that he could not accept the common belief of God as one of a hierarchy, but must clothe him with all the extreme of conceptions; God is eternal, infinite, all-inclusive and whoever thinks him less is the more irreligious and irreverent; this it religion and philosophy in one, the God of religions identified with the Supreme Reality of philosophy. Absolutism is the final word.

Hunt and Spencer both admit that such ideas as the absolute, the infinite, the eternal, are terms which reason cannot but postulate, yet which it cannot know directly; nor at all comprehended they are both agnostic as regards the power of pure reason. Green and Bradley, to notice more recent advocates have been
preachers of this doctrine of the absolute in England; and still more recently there is Royce the American and Münsterberg who has championed the cause on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the many angles of vision, and the inclination of temperament, the demand for the absolute still shows itself. In truth, all philosophies have in some measure radiated the tendency to which, culminating in the later philosophies, the name "absolute" has been attached. All Germany has become literally steeped in this manner of thinking. England is a near second, for whom the absolute is almost the paramount article of the philosophic creed. Even the pluralist, whose supposition excluded him from classification with the idealist, says that it cannot be escaped, yet says it cannot be proved, and though not proved actual must be believed in somehow.

What have been the influences which have brought about the present status of the concepts of the absolute? We are able to turn to the history of philosophy and discover three elements, which are the three systems of Spinoza, Berkeley, and Kant. Spinoza gave the incentive to absoluteism by his all-inclusive "substance," which instead of favoring the materialist in his belief of an ultimate substantia, or the spiritualist in his belief that mind was the final, gave place to both theories and combined the two in order that he might abolish dualism. Berkeley showed how knowledge was subjective and there must be mental perception and thought ere there was existence, and the materialistic theory now being considered out of the way, Idealistic philosophy was one step nearer its goal. Kant emphasized the supreme authority of the moral law as against the limits of reason and gave to the dualist the opportunity for making his theory more secure against materialists. This is the development. Fichte produced, arriving at realistic subjectivism. His, Shelling's and Hegel's systems are constructed upon Kant's conclusions. So the man who said reason brings its own laws with it and prescribe them to the universe, they take the cue to find their theories to the extreme and end in absolutism, panlogic, pantheism, or whatever they may be termed, all in direct opposition to what Kant had desired to emphasize, namely, that reason is limited, and instead of being comprehensible, the sphere of the absolute is excluded from human thought.
Out of the possible number of systems adopting abolition as their end, there may be discovered three to one of which each of the remainder may be eventually reduced; they may be designated as Materialistic Abolition, Logical Abolition, and Mystical Abolition. In a discussion of these three theories, those theories in opposition will necessarily be involved. Not to extend the examination over too much territory, Kant and Spences may be taken as earlier, and the pragmatists as later critics.

The metaphysical theories of the materialistic type have lost their crudeness and become systems of no small acceptance, because they have taken on brighter hues. There is not that primitive way of making the ultimate a matter of infinite division into minute particles, which in their last analysis partakes of the same nature, universally "Matter" atoms and "soul" atoms in a dualistic relation with matter thought of as inert and soul as activity, is not the point of controversy any more. Even when there had not yet been science developed to give unity on the basis of force or law or some other hypothesis, Thales demanded the explanation of nature and was satisfied in declaring that the elements in the proportions accounted for the diversity of things.

Instead of reducing the universe to one element as a few elements chemistry has revealed the existence of between seventy and eighty such elements and this tract has led further than ever into the wilderness. But though the problem has been shifted by substituting for element the terms force, qualities, energy and others other principles of vital and courage the end is not yet. Vitalized matter, electrical power, and what not are given the responsibility of accounting for ultimate reality. But so little value can be given to the theory of knowledge by materialism, that any effort to patch up a system to satisfactorily include it tends to become a mere juggling of words. With the later thinkers, the materialists those approached the spiritualists and also, as a matter of fact, the spiritualists have approached the materialists. It is hard to see how it raises the value of what is any more for the
psychic to call all mind-stuff, then for the materialist of the less favored type to call all matter-stuff. In either case it is much as it is anyhow.

It was become, in some part at least, only a matter of emphasis, on the one side spiritualized matter, and on the other, materialized spirit, receiving the greater attention.

When materialism claims to be the philosophy based upon science, it should be prepared to go the whole distance and say that scientific observation can and will discover, through laws what the final ground of existence is. But materialism may become a hindrance to science, for science as science never considers ultimate problems. Materialism can be only a postulate or working hypothesis for science, and what science has used as symbols of operation, atoms, matter, energy, are matched at by the materialist as the underlying substratum of all reality. But science must not be carried out of its own beyond her sphere.

To account for mind and matter under the same system of laws is impossible; the essence of mind whatever it may be, is baffling and continually remains a mystery. If it is possible to account for mental phenomena by means of matter, there must be something not yet discovered in what is termed matter. In any case it is unscientific to fill out in imagination what does not seem possible to be known. It is only an imaginary knowledge, which for hastening satisfaction says that it is the nature of matter to so act in what we call psychic processes. On that ground the assumption is made that the activities of physical phenomena are better known than the psychical, which is simply begging the question about what the process of knowledge is. Thought as a mere "physiological function of the nervous system or as a photogenesis of the brain" tell nothing about the mental processes; the problem remains still the same. It should be remembered that both psychology and natural science are systems of thought. Instead of trying to determine some ultimate principle, after all these years of effort,
the strange thing is that the outcome of materialistic philosophy has not been despairingly rejected by its followers, as but a mystery, which, in the attempt to explain it, has accumulated greater proportions with the age. Without it there is no mind gained with science. There might as well be as much value in lumping the whole business into an absolute totality, or making continued divisions until you have an independent substantation. In the first case we have pantheism and the world real, in the second pantheism and the world appearances. To say that it is the "nature of matter or that energy is inherent in" matter is not adding anything to philosophy; science has postulated that, as well as discovered it, if it is true. Materialism is not scientific therefore, when it attempts to go beyond the results of science, that is, where it goes as a philosophy built simply upon the postulates of science.

Idealism, however, takes the opposite side of the question, and accords everything to mind. While the earlier idealists did not expressly state the question as, their theories were generally absolutistic. There was no thought of separating the kind of religion from the absolute. It seemed to be a natural conclusion that the two conceptions must be identified. And, it is true, that is still the idea expressed by all absolutists, although to meet their present critics, they are compelled to emphatically affirm it in so many words. This conclusion is what ever remained a puzzle to Spencer. He asks how infinite mercy and infinite justice can be characteristics of the same being. He says our conceptions, being largely symbiotic, are capable of development into complete ones, and moving as steps to conclusions which are proved valid by their correspondence to observation, we acquire a habit of dealing with them as these conceptions or actualities. Learning by long experience that they can if need be be verified, we are led logically to accept them without verification. "Thus," he says, we open the door to some which pretend to stand for known things, which really stand for things that cannot be known
in any way. With Spencer as a critic of the absolute (and
infinity) it is all a matter of conceivability. We conclude that
knowledge is altogether relative -- that consciousness is
only conceivable as a relation and the absolute is incapable
of a necessary relation. Spencer gives the definitions of science
as knowledge of what is near and conceivable, religion as
belief in what is far away and inconceivable. We see here
his admission that there must be an absolute, identical
with God, but because it is logically inconceivable it is
therefore not comprehensible. That we use such words as
infinite, and immaterial and un-knowable shows the
negative character of any power of ours for expressing such ideas
and our futile efforts to give positive value to such concepts.

Now what Spencer calls a religious principle, Kant calls a
regulative principle of pure reason. Both are agnostics,
when it comes to considering such concepts as "infinity" or
"absolute" as having any objective counterpart, as far as
human reason is concerned. They acknowledge the
probability of the absolute, but not the possibility for human
conception, because human knowledge is confined to
experience. According to Kant, we may conclude that our
concept of the absolute has a degree of positive meaning, but
only as a regulative principle of pure reason, which spurs
us on to further accomplishing activity. The bad light in
which the agnosticism of Kant and Spencer has been taken
is due largely to the medium through which the opposition
has looked. It is again the question of the identity of God
with the absolute, that has caused the trouble. Spencer
himself evidently held this view, so of course the
conclusions of his First Principles are not acceptable to
the religious mind. We who would teach the existence of
God and then declare him to be Unknowable is often to
criticize on his very first assumption. But Kant
distinguishes between pure reason and practical reason
and finds a more consistent foundation in his
conclusion that the principle which pure reason discovers
is a regulator for practical reason, which alone can
give a basis for theology.
The absolutism of Hegel, while professing to explain it, virtually leaves no concreteness to reality. The importance
of his system is that it shows the universe to be as
"through-and-through" kind," as James says, systematic and
"rational," capable of rationality in system, and of system
in rationality. But in "burying the real subject and the
real object in the abstraction of thought," the system fails
to provide any real foundation for that dynamic principle
which for both science and philosophy is an "indestructible
token of reality." What is immediate as data for finite
experience is mute, because such data are not their
own others." They are negated by what is external to them.
The absolute is true because it and it only has no external
environment and is consequently its own other. As power
remarks about Hegel's process of alignment, "this sounds
well but is incomprehensible to most of us." To the
uninitiated, there is much in Hegg which remains
"words mere words," a wealth of words with a poverty of
meaning.

It is this point of subjective- objective relation in mental
and external meanings, as Prof. Royce designates it, which
has remained as dense and hidden, through all the
history of absolutism. What Royce has done and what
his work has meant to idealistic theories is well
expressed by Prof. Wilson in the following, "The elaboration
of the subject by Prof. Royce has had the effect of clearing
away much of the philosophic dust, which has been
wont to linger over the field of idealism and of laying
bare the roots of the matter for our inspection.
The argument is based upon a truth which modern
scientists have been too much disposed to overlook,
-a fact which, when stated has the appearance of
a truism, that all knowledge of whatever sort must
be in the subjective form of consciousness.
Upon the formal certainty of this point
the whole system of absolute idealism is built up.
If the universal to me is confined to mental content
then this mental content itself is declared to be
the ultimate and absolute reality. Thus, what Royce has set before us is a fuller development and elaboration of the suggestions of Berkeley and Hume about the subject. But his absolutism has not that ambiguity, for the meaning of idea, which is confusing in the work of the prince of Berkeley. For whom the term is used to express both perception and thought experiences. Though no opposite in their conclusions about the meaning of the absolute, how closely Royce approaches Kant may be shown by the following quotation from "The World and the Individual."

"in considering experience we are simply seeking and in the undertaking to give our ideas a certain positive determination, to this content and no other, but never in our human processes of experience does we reach that determination. It is for us the object of love, and of hope, of desire and of will, of faith and of works, but never of present finding. This individual determination itself remains as far the principal character of the Real; and is, as an ideal, the limit toward which we endlessly aim." This sounds as depressing as if one were to stop with Kant in his conclusions of the Critique of Pure Reason. But Royce continues, "yet if we could reach that limit of determination which is all the while our goal, if our universal judgments were confirmed by an adequate experience then we should stand in the immediate presence of the Real." Which is very hopeful but is a dogmatic affirmation of what is not known. We may call Royce a logical Idealist in this respect, that he demands a logical connection extending through our experience.

The other type of Absolute Idealist is the Mystical. The contradictions which we discover, the logical idealist says are due to our finitude and hence our ignorance, but the mystical idealist does not so face the question. Does reason present any contradictions? It may be asked, and he may answer yes and no both as possible, but with either answer there must be given an
explanation why it does or does not. Logic may be applied to all experiences but in some there are contradictions. The contradictions are due to the misuse of logic. Because there is an overlapping of the good, the true, and the beautiful and the use of logic, aesthetics, or ethics in the realm of another results in error and discrepancy. Münsterberg places the claim to 'values of absolutes' in 'conviction'. About such a system always the wonder, on first consideration, whether there has been any improvement made over the Hindu philosophy. Any 'absolute' doctrine is pantheistic and when it has the mythical trend such as Münsterberg and Bradley who despair of the living value of logic - gives to his system, it is little different in the end from the philosophy of Shripan, even though there is an appeal for the preconditions of the individual and we may ask how this is so materially different from the conviction of Descartes about the existence of God. In the mystic idealist the emphasis is that we have chosen, we have set our problem. We have not found them in natural systems nor even in logic. It is the meaning which we make of what is given to us, of what comes to us in various manners, that is valuable. It is the things of life, the values of life which we set, and to which we apply our logic, that have meaning for us. Logic is only without something to work upon and there are known before logic is applied. Logic is just a rule, a habit of a process under given conditions. Some things also are just appreciated and not realized in any conceptual logical effort, indeed they cannot be. Logic continually reiterates the view that the formal activity of thought could not give the content of reality and that the categories of logic could neither do justice to the processes of nature nor to the movements of history. In setting the claims of the value-judgment in a new and fuller light be made clear the right of the spiritual conscience to have a voice in the final interpretation of reality. Our convictions which we cannot escape and by which we live, come from our very nature, and we hold to these convictions through all time regardless of logic etc. We cannot fall into the preliminaries.
way of thinking that we and the world are neither one and more than mere appearances without real meaning. We hold to the conviction of the Absolute and our religious views attending, and bend all our lives toward our convictions for an active life and not toward our logic. We do not use the tools of our existence for their sake nor for the mere fun of using them, but for the value in progress toward our convictions, that we may obtain by these.

Royce rather anticipates the criticisms of the Pragmatists in his discussion of what he calls the Third Conception of Being as one of four historical conceptions. Kant is the one who fathered this movement, which, Royce says, is not yet definitely named, since the designation he gives it. This is a modified Realism which, according to this conception, to be real means to be valid or true, or to be an object of possible experience, it is essentially a conception of the age—a scientific one, typical of the thought of the century, of the scientific age. Its argument is for empirical reality—a separation of actual and external meanings. "Being," this conception asserts, is what gives true ideas "their truth." To be real is to be the object of an idea. It confuses itself by forming internal meanings and testing them by external experience. It tries to rest content with abstract universals more or less determined by particular observations. In vain," Royce objects, "does one stand apart from the internal meaning, from the conscious inner purpose, embodied in a given idea, and still attempt to estimate whether or no that idea corresponds with its object. There is no purely external criterion of truth. He denies that individuals rest solely upon external experience as such for their guarantee. Experience be experience for something and is wholly internal, nor do our internal meanings ever present to us, neither do our external experiences ever produce before us for our inspection, an object whose
individuality we ever really know as such. Our ideas are vague and incomplete and we seek what other there is to make them complete in a final truth. Now this "other" always lies beyond and is an ideal "limit" toward which we aim. Each idea seeks its own other. "The completed content of the ideas' own purpose is the only object of which the idea can ever take note. This alone is the other that is sought." The other of all others is finally determined to be the absolute. This is the core of Royce's argument at building up his idealism. His reputation of the Third Conception is, that it was the result of the admission of experience as subjectively vital, for it would then resolve itself into idealism and lose its objective reality. This is on the assumption that this new type of realism must on that admission, draw the same conclusions, which Royce seems to think inevitable, namely the unity of an absolute which he identifies with God. But such a realist as Kant must not be overlooked at this point, for, although, he has his phenomena and noumena, he could very easily identify the latter with the "other" of Royce and the result would not be fatal to his system, under an explanation of meaning like Royce gives. Kant wants to emphasize the fact that it is only in attempting to establish the reality of the noumena that failure and fallacy ensue — and that is just what he wants to do. He emphasizes the assertion that "Experience never supplies any necessity of thought, much less the concept of absolute unity." But this is no detriment to either thought or experience. Experience may be real — is real to us — and reason is confined to experience for its validity. Who then must concede the point? If Kant were to do so he would admit that his marvelous system had lost its authority by affirming a real evidence of what could not be known in actual experience, as a
result of reason. If Absolutism were to adopt that it would be no more absolutism in the Latin sense which Royce gives it, for it must then confess the illegality of the claim of reason to the reality of what is not experienced and must agree with Kant that there is only a "regulative principle".

What is the mooted "point which causes these contentions?" we may ask. And when we have asked that, we are trying to fulfill that demand that is ever with us, the demand for a consistent unity in our world, vital and rational. There is one main point of contention, which if it were admitted by all contenders would clear up many difficulties. The trouble of course is to secure the admission for men will think as they please that point is, that the God of religion is not identical with the "absolute". And this has been already championed by Pragmatism under the leadership of Prof. James, who has recently delivered such a stinging criticism against the attempts to make the concept of the absolute, as fathered by Idealism either understandable or comprehensible, that the followers of that belief have been compelled to assume the defensive. James states the position thus: "Absolutism thinks that the said substance becomes fully divine only in the form of totality and is not itself in any form but the all-form, the pluralistic view which I wish to adopt is willing to believe that there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made and that a distributive form of reality the each-form is logically as acceptable and empirically as probable as the all-form commonly achieved in as an obviously the self-evident thing."
He then goes on to show for what reasons he rejects the idealistic theory. Under such a theory the world cannot be a collection of individuals but is one great all-inclusive fact, outside of which is nothing—nothing is its only alternative. We are parts of the absolute and the absolute is then but a grand total thinking through us, or rather the absolute thinking in produces our individuality—differences of self. We are not each, but a part of the All. We revolt against such an argument which has just as little reason in it as that the world is pluralistic, and no argument that makes individual finite, finally swallowed up in a whole can bring satisfaction.

Absolutism also has the problem of error to contend with. Royce has probably met this the most efficiently, but still, on the face of it, it is not enough to accredit our evil and our immorality to our ignorance. Even if we grant that much, we are only putting in an intermediate link to connecting evil of whatever kind with the activity of the absolute. What the idealist has gained in system, he has lost in its comprehensiveness. What he has made by unity he has lost to individuality. His pantheism leaves no freedom of individual human beings, and his theory of knowledge is necessarily intellectualistic. The absolute is belittled if he sees only through human avenues. He is loaded down with the responsibility of all the imperfect, the futile and even the silly thoughts which mankind has, for it is as rational to say that such thoughts are the absolute's thoughts as those which are progressive and noble and perfect, since the absolute is an all-form. Absolutism has no ethical basis if such is the case, no matter what the argument leading to the conclusion, because whatever the absolute does must be alright and we need not trouble ourselves about the morality of our deeds and
thoughts, it will be all very well in the long run anyway. No, to give ourselves a moral responsibility and an individual freedom we must beware of this doctrine, which to be consistent must favor of the workshop.

We have seen how through all the history of philosophy the has been the demand for competencies and unity, and always a tendency toward absolutism, and now that a theory which expressly states itself in absolutistic terms is perfected, to hear these powerful indictments against it is almost disheartening. The contention as has been said, is on the identity of God with the Absolute. But need we lose either to conceive them as apart from each other? May not the "Absolute" be a regulator of reason and its own objectification the total of the universe but yet a plurality of individuals with God as one of them? "The Absolute" as one writer says, "even if not proved actual must be believed in somehow." True, but isn't the tendency to believe in a plurality of individuals just as mandatory? Must we not just as thoroughly believe the contrary to have moral freedom for ourselves? If that is also allowable then God may have his independence and we ours, then he may be no longer responsible for our deeds of evil or other acts of any kind and we have more laid at our own doors.

Philosophers seem to have taken it for granted that the absolute unity must be the Supreme Being himself, because, as Spinoza thought, such a conception would be insulting the power and all efficiency of God. But the contrary cannot be as great an insult as crediting him with all the sorrow and weakness, ignorance and murder, shallowness and lewdness, that is manifest to us in our finite existence.
In this assemblage of theories pro and con, there has been criticised each of the theories in some point. Materialism has been laid low by the theory of knowledge of Berkeley, Fichte and Royce, and by the exaltation of reason by Kant, but materialism in materialism for fear of losing the reality of the world and the establishment of a succession of appearances in its stead. Yet everything may be only as it appears to some mind. Spencer has given us an intricate tangle of many colored threads which we hope to disentangle, but which, let us for plain – is not solvable. But, carrying the analogy still further it could be said according to Royce, that we are making progress with this tangle and each bit gained opens up the way toward making a further procedure. What the mystics say is comprehensible without logic, Royce says we shall be immediately aware of when a complete concept is obtained. While the pragmatists like all empiricists, hold it against the idealists that they are idealists, we are all idealists, who set the absolute as something to be worked toward and try to find the logical connection between our point of view and that of an absolutely perfect one. The logical absolutist has his ground for claiming rational logical coherence – it must be so else we would not have coherence in the realm of reason. But the absolute, if comprehensible at all, would not be so because of any syllogistic attempt to reach it. Kant has a right to his agnosticism, because, as we shall have to admit, we at least do not know the absolute whether we can or cannot. But the discrepancy of agnosticism is minimized if we do not identify God and the absolute. The agnosticism, which can be held against them – if Kant and Spencer is their almost tacit agreement that there is in all probability an unknowable – which is God.
The pragmatist, who claims to have given us a philosophy with a provision for moral seriousness, has, it may be said, tried of the attempt to attain the ultimate and is following the line of least resistance. But there is a vitality and an every-dayness about pragmatism which gives it a superior reception by the common man and by others who cannot endure the stretch of religious imagination to understand a pantheistic god. What the outcome of it will be remains to be seen. But whatever it will be the wholeness and freshness of pragmatism give it more life than logic and fewer profits than prospects.

Yet the absolute then be simply the unlimited prospect which the mind has set before itself, and let the mind not become discouraged but take its joy in the progress of accomplishment. We may speak of knowledge of our present world either as of appearances or reality; we consider it known what is still unknown may be discoverable and our work in pursuit has individual value. What we take as known certainly responds very beautifully to our life and whether appearances or realities things lend themselves to a life which we tenacious in holding to as real.