JOSIAH ROYCE'S "FLAT ABSOLUTISM"

REAL INDIVIDUALS THROUGH THE RELATIONS REGRESS[1]

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ABSTRACT: Josiah Royce is remembered mainly as an absolute idealist. Through his confrontation with "Bradley's regress", this paper will show that he was actually trying to combine a bold form of monism with a pluralism of real, discrete individuals. His commitment to the actual infinite is used both to turn Bradley's regress into the generative mechanism of individuality within the Absolute, and to abolish the ontological difference between the Absolute itself and the individuals it contains. The "flat absolutism" resulting from this operation will be compared to the contemporary "flat ontologies" of Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, whose pluralism and commitment to "external" relations are shown to be just some of the ways in which a robust sense of individuality can be defended.

KEYWORDS: Monism; Pluralism; Internal Relations; Josiah Royce; Bradley's regress; Flat ontology; Speculative realism; Pragmatism; Object-oriented ontology; Graham Harman; Manuel DeLanda

INTRODUCTION

In the pages that introduced contemporary continental philosophy to pragmatism, Gilles Deleuze defined it as

> first of all the affirmation of a world in *process*, an *archipelago*. Not even a puzzle,

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> whose pieces when fitted together would constitute a whole, but rather a wall of loose, uncemented stones, where every element has a value in itself but also in relation to others … Royce is particularly important, with his 'absolute pragmatism' and his 'great community of Interpretation' that unites individuals.[2]

The reference to Josiah Royce as the prophet of the horizontal "community of brothers" that, contrary to the vertical "society of fathers" of the European continent, is the paradigm for a pluralistic stance, should surprise anyone who has some acquaintance with his writings. Royce was a monist and absolute idealist remembered mainly for the "battle for the Absolute" he engaged with the pluralist William James; in his most Hegelian moment, he draws from his reconstruction of the history of California the "old and simple lesson" that "it is the State, the Social Order, that is divine. We are all but dust, save as this social order gives us life".[3]

This paper has a twofold aim. First, it could be read as an exercise in comparative ontology, that shall show how philosophers can arrive at very similar conclusions starting from very different premises, or else they can arrive at the most heterogeneous conclusions starting from a common ground. In brief: the very same philosophical intuitions can be defended in the most diverse ways; our "philosophical temperament" and our deepest intuitions never oblige us to a determined style of thought. Second, by defending the view of a "pluralist Royce" that would not be offended by Deleuze's reading, this paper will highlight the relevance that Royce can acquire for contemporary ontological debates.

This is why the ground for comparison will be double, ranging from Royce's own time to our days. On the one hand, Royce's philosophy will be framed within the debate between internal and external relations: basically, relations are internal if they define the identity of their terms in some essential way, and therefore tend to conceive them as partial moments within a whole; they are external if they are contingent and accidental, and if therefore terms have a non-

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[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Essays critical and clinical*, transl. Daniel W. Smith & Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 86, 193. Deleuze's acquaintance with Royce (and with pragmatism in general) was very superficial and mediated by Jean Wahl and Gérard Deledalle; his work was nonetheless fundamental to the recovery of pragmatism by new generations of French philosophers like David Lapoujade, Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Stéphane Madelrieux.

[3] Josiah Royce, *California from the conquest in 1846 to the second vigilance committee in San Francisco: a study of American character* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1892), 501.

relational essence, resulting in a pluralist metaphysics.[4] This is a popular issue today because of "speculative realism" and especially of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, that has made of the defense of external relations one of its tenets. The debate from which this distinction is taken raged in the early Twentieth century, in the same intellectual environment in which Royce elaborated his views; it is remarkable that, despite being interested in supporting monism and idealism (two views usually associated with internal relations), Royce never made use of the distinction: we may guess that he knowingly avoids that vocabulary because, even if he would have placed himself among the advocates of internal relations, his monism shares many traits with models of external relations. We will show this through his confrontation with the single most important argument produced by the debate, "Bradley's regress": while Royce accepts its monistic conclusion, he challenges, thanks to his philosophical use of Dedekind and Cantor's mathematics of the infinite, the way the regress is stated in order to achieve a pluralistic understanding of his own monism.

Thus (and this is the second ground of comparison) Royce is brought to share many insights with the contemporary (and pluralistic) "flat ontologies" defended by Manuel DeLanda, Bruno Latour and (once again) Graham Harman. Flat ontology is a view according to which a difference in scale is not an ontological difference: that means that, independently from size or mereological relations, we can speak of "individuals" at the most different levels of the cosmos, from atoms to persons to communities to the universe itself.[5] Here again, Royce's use of the infinite will be crucial, and will show how a real pluralism is possible even while defending a bold form of monism and the doctrine of internal relations, thus problematizing contemporary flat ontologists' hasty resort to merely external relations.

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[4] The history of the distinction between internal and external relations is very tortuous: for an overview, see Christian Frigerio, 'Reconceptualizing the debate over internal and external relations: across the continental-analytic divide', forthcoming in *Syzetesis*.

[5] We will stick to DeLanda's original exposition of "flat ontology", even if today this expression has acquired a variety of meanings, and "taxonomical flatness" – according to which research must start by putting every kind of entity (human, physical, social, fictional, divine) on the same ontological footing – has become the most popular use of the expression.

INFINITY IN THE MAKING: BRADLEY'S REGRESS OVERTURNED

The notorious "regress argument" appears in the first chapters of Francis Herbert Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (1893). Bradley's original statement was meant to show that relations were *as such* contradictory, and therefore not real: a relation is something that distinguishes the very same terms that it binds, and it was therefore inadmissible in Bradley's Parmenidean Absolute, that disposed of any trace of separation. However, as the subsequent debate over internal and external relations will show, the argument is effective only against *external relations*. This model of relationality will be defended mainly by Bertrand Russell: relations are external if they are numerically distinct from their terms and have no essential link with their natures; external relations are not *reducible* to their terms, nor are they *relevant* to their identity. A world held by external relations is therefore a heap of atomic, independent particulars in which relationality has only a contingent role.[6]

There are various ways of exposing the regress argument; we will present it as a device capable of undermining the model of external relations according to two "horns", starting both from the external relation and from the supposedly independent terms.

(R1) Take a relation external to its terms. How can it link its terms if it remains external to them? That is: *what is the relation between the terms and the relation* that is supposed to be independent from them? In Bradley's words:

> Let us abstain from making the relation an attribute of the related, and let us make it more or less independent. 'There is a relation C, in which A and B stand; and it appears with both of them.' But here again we have made no progress. The relation C has been admitted different from A and B, and no longer is predicated of them. Something, however, seems to be said of this relation C, and said, again, of A and B. And this something is not to be the ascription of one to the other. If so, it would appear to be another relation, D, in which C, on one side, and, on the other side, A and B, stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process.[7]

In brief: if you admit relation as a third entity numerically distinct from its terms,

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[6] Bertrand Russell, *The philosophy of logical atomism* (London: Routledge, 2010), 31: "Particulars have this peculiarity … that each of them stands entirely alone and is completely selfsubsistent. … each particular … does not in any way logically depend upon any other particular. Each one might happen to be the whole universe; it is a merely empirical fact that this is not the case".

[7] Francis Herbert Bradley, *Appearance and reality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930), 17-8.

you will need another relation to relate it to each term; but then you will need another relation between the terms and these new relations, and so on in an infinite regress.

(R2) Start instead from the independent term and try to hook a relation. This way you are creating a curious splitting within the term, that is now divided into a part that is involved in the relation, and a part that remains untouched by it:

> For consider, the qualities A and B are to be different from each other; and, if so, that difference must fall somewhere. If it falls, in any degree or to any extent, outside A or B, we have relation at once. But, on the other hand, how can difference and otherness fall inside? If we have in A any such otherness, then inside A we must distinguish its own quality and its otherness. And, if so, then the unsolved problem breaks out inside each quality, and separates each into two qualities in relation … We, in brief, are led by a principle of fission which conducts us to no end. Every quality in relation has, in consequence, a diversity within its own nature, and this diversity cannot immediately be asserted of the quality. Hence the quality must exchange its unity for an internal relation. But, thus set free, the diverse aspects, because each something in relation, must each be something also beyond. This diversity is fatal to the internal unity of each; and it demands a new relation, and so on without limit.[8]

In sum, the problem is: what is the relation between the relational part of the term and the non-relational one? A new regress is engendered, this time a fission *within* the term, because to attach this relation you must split further the non-relational part in a relational part and in a non-relational part, and so on endlessly, eroding the autonomous part of the term until nothing of it is left.

Summing up, the point of the regress is this. First, *you can't get a whole out of complete isolation*, you can't build a totality out of once independent individuals: relating cannot be *brute*, and in order to relate, some fundamental form of relationality must be in place right from the start. Second, this fundamental relationality must be included in the definition of the identity of the terms themselves. Relations can be preserved, but they must be conceived as capable of penetrating the essence of the terms and of defining it: this is a theory that post-Bradleyan idealists such as Joachim, Bosanquet and Blanshard will defend as the doctrine of "internal relations" – a doctrine that entails at least a mild form of monism.

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[8] Bradley, *Appearance and reality*, 29-31.

Royce follows the same monistic trail. Therefore, it is not a surprise to find in his masterpiece, *The world and the individual* (1900-1901), a very precise statement of the regress argument used against realism in its pluralistic form, the first "historical conception of being" that he tackles:

> The realist's many beings, as defined, are defined as wholly disconnected; and they must remain so. You cannot first say of them, for instance, that they are logically independent, and then truly add that nevertheless they are really and causally linked. … *The mutual independence, if once real … cannot later be changed to any form of mutual dependence.*[9]

You need to be related to relate: even if it is not mentioned, it is easy to see that Bradley's regress is implicitly at work. An equally striking passage is the following, in which Royce explains that what we treat as a transition from isolation to relationality is actually only a transition from implicit, involved relations to apparent and more robust ones:

> In our ordinary world of experience, beings like meteors and planets, water and wood, men and other men, viz. *beings that on occasion may come into a very obvious connection, are already, even before their so-called actual linkage, truly related*, yes, linked to one another, by space, by time, by physical and moral ties. *What happens when we say that they pass from mutual independence to linkage, is really that we find them, in our experience, passing from relations whose importance is merely to us less obvious, into relations of more obvious human interest.* But now the relations of an object in ordinary experience make parts of the object itself. A change in these relations would result from the change of other objects. … Then you can never say that experience proves me to be independent of the existence of those as yet unobserved relations. What experience can show is only that a certain mutual dependence of objects may long remain unobserved by us men, until this or that meteor-flash in the heavens … shows us how important even the remotest and heretofore least obvious empirical relation may at any moment become.[10]

Royce's acceptance of the full import of Bradley's argument makes it all the more a surprise to see *The One, the Many, and the Infinite*, the *Supplementary Essay* to the first volume of *The world and the individual*, entirely devoted to challenging this same regress. As we are going to show, the reason behind this duplicity is Royce's wish to elaborate a model of the absolute that is far less uncompromising than

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[9] Josiah Royce, *The world and the individual, vol. 1* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), 129; italics added.
[10] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 126-7; italics added.

Bradley's. Bradley's inspiration remains a Parmenidean one: the only reality lies in the immutable, all-encompassing Absolute. On the contrary, Royce's Absolute admits individuals within it: "Individuality is the most characteristic feature of Being",[11] and this is not only the individuality of the only Substance, but an individuality working at the most different levels of scale.

Royce does not make it clear, but his idea seems to be that the only reason a monist such as Bradley should refute relational facts is the assumption that, first (and this would be the real reason behind Bradley's stance), relational facts as conceived by Bradley require discrete individuals between which relations stand, and are therefore incompatible with any serious monism; second (and this would only be Bradley's way of arguing against such a possibility), they require not only an infinite regress, but a *completed infinite*. Bradley was in fact a sworn enemy of the idea of the infinite; as he writes in *The principles of logic* against Venn's use of the locution of "the long run": "An 'infinite number' is an idea that attempts to solder elements which are absolutely discrepant … The formula of the 'long run' must be banished from logic".[12]

This is the reason why, rather than challenging the actual import of the regress, Royce tackles only its *literal statement*. His alternative lies in an appeal to the new mathematics of the infinite developed by Dedekind and Cantor, and to their revaluation of the *actual* infinite against a tradition that dated back to Aristotle and held that the infinite could be only potential. Royce's famous example is that of a map of England that is drawn somewhere on English territory: to be perfect, such a map should include a representation of the map itself that is being drawn; but this new map should in turn represent another England with another map on it, and so on endlessly. This idea reproduces Dedekind's definition of the infinite: "A system *S* is called 'infinite' when it is similar to a constituent (or proper) part of itself".[13] An infinite collection is a collection having a part that is precisely similar to itself – that means, a part that is precisely as infinite as the collection itself. This is a kind of system that Royce

[11] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 585.

[12] Francis Herbert Bradley, *The principles of logic, 2 vols.* (London: Oxford Univ., 1922), 228-9. To this same "long run" Royce will appeal many times, influenced by the use made of it by Peirce.

[13] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 510-1. Dedekind gives this definition in *Was sind und was sollen die Zahlen?*; for an English translation of this work, see William Bragg Ewald (ed.), *From Kant to Hilbert, vol. 2* (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2007), 806.

calls a "self-representative system",

> a system precisely represented by a proper fraction or portion of itself. … We may, with Dedekind, use the generalized conception of a self-representation of the type here in question as a means of positively defining what we mean by an infinite system or multitude of elements.[14]

Committing himself to an actualist conception of the infinite, Royce takes such a system as the model for his Absolute: "We have indeed found a sense in which the 'endless fission' of Mr. Bradley's analysis expresses not mere Appearance but Being".[15]

Before proceeding in the study of Royce's solution, it would be natural to wonder why an argument on the nature of relations should be so concerned with the reality of the infinite. In fact, the problem does not seem to lie in Bradley's refusal of the actual infinite; he seems to hold that the validity of the regress is independent from our assumptions on the nature of the infinite: as he writes in the posthumous paper *Relations*, "while we keep to our terms and relations as external, no introduction of a third factor could help us to anything better than an endless renewal of our failure".[16] The question of the infinite is only the discursive, dialectical form that Bradley gave to this insight, but there must be some reason why the actual infinite acts as the logical translation of a relational point of view.

The fact is that Bradley's regress is about the impossibility of transition from discreteness to that form of continuity that is required by relations: there may be a distance between two related elements of the universe; but this distance cannot be a complete *void*, a non-being that would make the two completely independent from one another. This distance must be itself a relation. Hence we come to continuity; and, because of the second horn of Bradley's regress, once relations are in place they refuse to stay out of the essence of their terms: they become always in some measure *internal* to their identity. Now, the infinite is the most intuitive transition from a logic of discreteness to one of continuity: when we think through images, we try to fill the gaps between particulars by adding more and more elements, and we imagine that, in an endless process, these gaps would be

[14] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 509.
[15] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 554.
[16] Francis Herbert Bradley, *Collected Essays, 2 vols.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), 643.

closed. In fact, a possible definition of a continuum – for instance, the one given by Cantor[17] – is that between any two points there is always one more: accordingly, an *infinite number of discrete elements* would be enough to have a continuum; one may thus claim that there is, "in the long run", a passage from discreteness to continuity. But this cannot serve to defuse Bradley's regress: this fallacy depends on the illusion that, by filling the gaps more and more densely, we visualize the elements as finally connected. But first, on the mathematical level, we are unduly visualizing unextended points as endowed with extension; second, on the metaphysical level, Bradley's regress shows that no matter how many elements we add between the two, the gap always remains and cannot be filled this way. If we accept the validity of his argument, then the kind of continuity required by relationality cannot be composed of discrete individuals.

What could really be useful to our attempt is the concept of the *infinitesimal*: if the gap between elements becomes infinitesimal, then the continuum reaches the plenitude required for relationality. The infinitesimal transition from one element to another is precisely what post-Bradleyan idealists called an *internal relation*. But this is possible only if we give up the logic of discreteness, and with it the hope that the actual infinite will be enough to account for relationality between absolutely discrete elements.[18] Bradley is baffled, and our concept of relation is

[17] See Joseph Warren Dauben, *Georg Cantor: his mathematics and philosophy of the infinite* (Princeton: Princeton Univ., 1990).

[18] The way continuity automatically resolves the regress problem can be appreciated through the solution that Charles S. Peirce gave to it. The doctrine that Peirce calls "synechism" holds that reality is everywhere continuous and that, when we think in terms of discrete elements, we are only abstracting from this fundamental continuum. Differently from Cantor's, Peirce's continuum is, in Fernando Zalamea's words (*Peirce's logic of continuity: a conceptual and mathematical approach*, Boston: Docent Press, 2012, 17-18), *inextensible* (it is not composed of points) and *reflexive* (all its parts are as continuous as the continuum itself); these properties allow to defuse the regress. As Peirce explains in a 1904 letter: "To say that 'A is in the relation R to B' is to say that A is in a certain relation to R. Let us separate this out thus: 'A is in the relation R1 (where R1 is the relation of a relate to the relation of which it is the relate), to R to B'. But A is here said to be in a certain relation to the relation R1. So that we ca express the same fact by saying 'A is in the relation R1 to the relation R1 to the relation R to B', and so on ad infinitum. A predicate [or relation] which can thus be analyzed into parts all homogeneous with the whole I call a continuous predicate [or relation]. It is very important in logical analysis, because a continuous predicate obviously cannot be a compound except of continuous predicates, and thus when we have carried analysis so far as to leave only a continuous predicate, we have carried it to its ultimate elements" (quoted by Irwin Lieb, *Charles S. Peirce's letters to Welby*, New Haven: Whitlock, 1953, 25). On the concept of continuous predicate, see Francesco Bellucci, 'Peirce's continuous predicates', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 49(2), 2013, 178-202.

saved, as soon as we give up the logic of discreteness.

What makes Royce's confrontation with the regress so peculiar is that he is not willing to give up such logic. Continuity, vagueness and generality remain for him defective features of being: discreteness is to him the only possible conception of true individuality, at the point that we cannot even think if not in terms of discrete individuality. While his use of the actual infinite commits him to infinite divisibility, Royce defends an ontology of discrete individuals, and the only definition of continuity he is prepared to accept is the Cantorian one according to which "*between any two objects of the world there is always another to be found*"[19]:

> *We have an absolute logical need to conceive of individual objects as the elements of our ideal order systems.* This postulate is the condition of defining clearly any theoretical conception whatever.[20]

> In the older discussions of continuity, this concept [continuity] was very generally confounded with that of infinite divisibility. The confusion is no longer made by mathematicians. Continuity implies infinite divisibility. The converse does not hold true.[21]

This tangle of jarring commitments justifies the complexity of Royce's confrontation with the regress. To make things clear, we could try to reduce Bradley's argument to its "logical form" as seen by Royce. *Step 1*: we have a world made of sparse, atomic individuals. *Step 2*: we must account for relationality. *Step 3*: in order to relate sparse individuals, we would need an infinite regress. *Step 4*: an infinite movement is inadmissible. *Conclusion*: the hypothesis is refuted; a world of sparse particulars could not have any form of relationality if some kind of whole is not admitted right from the start.

As we have seen, Royce shares the idea that relationality is possible only if it is given from the start in the form of a whole. But he supplements this idea with a further argument that turns Bradley's regress literally upside down. What in the regress argument appeared as the conclusion is here given as a premise – *Step 1*: there is some form of totality as a ground for relationality. Then the form of Bradley's regress is assumed as a model – *Step 2*: to account for relationality between discrete individuals (the only definition of individuality he is willing to

[19] Josiah Royce, *The world and the individual, vol. 2* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 88.

[20] Josiah Royce, *Royce's Logical Essays*, ed. by Jacub Loewenberg (London: Brown, 1951), 351.

[21] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 505.

accept), an infinite progression is required. Finally, Bradley's refusal of the actual infinite is contested *via* Dedekind and Cantor – *Step 3*: an infinite movement is possible. Thus, what in Bradley's argument appeared as the hypothesis to be refuted is here the *Conclusion*: the world can be composed of discrete individuals.

Once its possibility is admitted, the fact that the infinite fission "expresses not mere Appearance but Being" is taken by Royce as a truth because of the way in which it can adjust his monism with his discrete view of individuality. Thus, Royce puts the regress on its head. The *Supplementary Essay* is not meant to be a refutation of it – Royce knows well that there is no passage from discreteness to continuity, not even with an infinite adjunction of intermediaries –, but a way of saving the intuition contested by the regress once the validity of the argument has been accepted. Bradley's regress is not only an argument that shows the impossibility of obtaining the One from the absolutely many; it is also an argument that shows how, *once the One is in place*, the many can be *produced* from it. Royce finds in the view of the world contested by Bradley – a world of discrete particulars and external relations – the only satisfying picture for his intuitions about individuality; but, aware of the untenability of this same picture, he backs it with a monistic metaphysics that is his other fundamental intuition. This combination of discreteness and interconnectedness has a monadological flavor on which we will return, and it is probably the nearest a monist system has ever come to a doctrine of external relations and real individuals.[22]

To stress the pregnancy of Royce's confrontation with the regress, we cannot avoid a brief comparison with another thinker who saw in the worldview challenged by Bradley the promise of a new ontology: Russell's "logical atomism" and his defense of external relations and sparse, independent particulars start precisely from there. It is not a surprise that Russell will try various answers to the regress; the one that interests us is the Royce-inspired solution found in *The principles of mathematics* (1903). Here, Russell distinguishes

[22] This impression would be corroborated by Royce's development of Alfred Kempe's logical analysis of the relation of *betweenness*. Rather than a relation, betweenness is for Royce the general character of relations themselves: "We need a generalization of the relation expressed by the word between … Between any two objects of the world there is always another to be found" (Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 77, 88). This is remarkable because the equivalence of relationality and betweenness was one of the points through which Russell contested the traditional reduction of relations to monadic properties of substances, thus giving rise to the model of external relations.

> two kinds of regress, the one proceeding merely to perpetually new implied propositions, the other in the meaning of a proposition itself; of these two kinds, we agreed that the former, since the solution of the problem of infinity, has ceased to be objectionable, while the latter remains inadmissible. … It may be urged that it is part of the very meaning of a relational proposition that the relation involved should have to the terms the relation expressed in saying that it relates them. … It may be urged, however, against this view, that the assertion of a relation between the relation and the terms, though implied, is no part of the original proposition. … the endless regress, though undeniable, is logically quite harmless.[23]

An endless regress remains untenable when it is a logical condition for the meaning of a proposition; but, because of Dedekind and Cantor's discoveries, when a regress is merely *implied by* a proposition as a consequence of it, it is "logically quite harmless": the relations regress would fall within this second kind of infinite *pro*gress that we can accept.

While Royce's and Russell's solutions may seem very similar, being both based on the revaluation of the actual infinite, the background metaphysics the authors endorse create the greatest difference between them. Russell's attempt is frustrated by his extreme pluralism: the argument that the actual infinite makes discrete individuality possible is futile if a ground for relationality is lacking.[24] The admission of the actual infinite is not by itself sufficient to defuse the regress argument. The point of the regress is that, independently from our assumptions on the nature of the infinite, relationality *cannot even start* if it is not already in place. The infinite regress is, in Russell's sense, "part of the meaning" of an external relation's "hooking" to its terms. As Sprigge suggests against a similar objection to the regress made by McTaggart, Bradley "could say that the connectedness of A, R and B *presupposes*, and does not merely *entail*, a relation which links them, and so on in an infinite regress"[25]; or, as Anna-Sofia Maurin answers to the same point made by Francesco Orilia, "the infinitist's external

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[23] Russell, *The principles of mathematics*, (London: Routledge, 2009) 99-100. A comparison between Royce's and Russell's answers can be found in Sébastien Gandon, '"To bring Dedekind's research into its proper relation to general metaphysical inquiry": Royce et Russell, critiques de Bradley', *Philosophiques* 36(1), 2009, 85-109; Sébastien Gandon, 'Infinity and the self: Royce on Dedekind', *Hopos* 11(2), 2021.

[24] There is a general consent in the literature that Russell could never effectively answer to the regress argument, due mostly to the problem of the "unity of the proposition": see Stewart Candlish, *The Russell/Bradley dispute and its significance for twentieth-century philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[25] Timothy Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, *American truth and British reality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 402.

relation regress can only guarantee the existence of unity in complexity if there is unity in complexity".[26] This is what Royce saw clearly, and this is why he backs the appeal to the infinite with a monistic metaphysics. The need for an infinite regress to relate discrete individuals (what we have called the *Step 3* to the regress argument) is actually only the logical translation of a deeper metaphysical truth: that *you always need some ground for relationality*, something that comes before it, *and this can only be a more fundamental form of relationality*.

To sum up, what Royce's confrontation with the regress amounts to is this: a real pluralism is possible, but it needs a fundamental and "internal" interconnectedness between things as its scaffold. In Royce's terms: real individuals with real relations are possible within the absolute; but they must be conceived as the products of the "self-expression"[27] of the Absolute itself. The next section shall show that this logical priority of the One is not a menace to the ontological dignity of individuals.

FLAT ABSOLUTISM: "THE REFLEXIVE ABYSS OF INFINITY"

It has always been a widespread idea that *a difference in scale is an ontological difference*: individuals at some scale have *more reality* than individuals at other scales, and there is usually one level that is privileged over the others.[28] For instance, in Aristotle, the parts of a substance are not substances themselves; in Leibniz monads are the only substances, while their aggregates are not; from a Hegelian point of view, the individuals composing the State are less real than the state itself. Monism is the view that the fundamental ontological difference is that between *the largest individual* – for instance, Spinoza's only substance – and all the other individuals – its "modes". Here, reality is almost directly proportional to scale: the larger an individual, the more reality it has.

"Flat ontology" is a term coined by Manuel DeLanda to define an ontology in which a difference in scale in not an ontological difference: a flat ontology is

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[26] Anna-Sofia Maurin, 'States of affairs and the relation regress', in G. Galluzzo, M. J. Loux & J. Lowe (eds.), *The problem of universals in contemporary philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ., 2010), 195-214, 213.

[27] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 308.

[28] The subtitle of this section, that expresses perfectly Royce's use of Dedekind and Cantor's mathematics, is taken from Alain Badiou, *Le séminaire: l'infini. Aristotle, Spinoza et Hegel* (Paris: Fayard, 2016), 40. Given his commitment to a mathematical ontology of the infinite, Badiou is arguably, among contemporary philosophers, the one whose confrontation with Royce would prove to be most fruitful.

"one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatiotemporal scale but not in ontological status".[29] Atoms, persons, societies, planets, the whole cosmos are individuals *in precisely the same way*. Putting it another way, *individuals may be contained within other individuals*, the definition of "individual" remaining perfectly univocal. "Individual" is a non-metric, scale-free concept.

This view can be defended in various ways. For instance, in DeLanda's "assemblage theory" macro-individuals "emerge" from lower ones as something really distinct from their parts, thus securing the individuality of the contained individuals, that remain quite autonomous from any "whole" in which they may enter.[30] Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) allows instead for the inclusion of individuals within other individuals, but grants to each "object" a "withdrawn" dimension that remains untouched by any relation.[31] Finally, Bruno Latour's *actor-network theory* considers scale a product of the clashes of forces that determine which individuals are the strongest (and therefore "larger") ones.[32]

Let us return to Royce. The first reason why he recurs to the mathematics of the infinite is to turn Bradley's regress into the generative mechanism for individuality. But there is another, equally fundamental reason: *the infinite allows to reconceptualize the relation between individual and collective*. As Badiou writes, "the infinite is fundamentally oblique in relation to the One/many opposition".[33] We can see this from Dedekind's definition of the infinite as a collection having at least one part that is just as infinite as the collection itself. This is Royce's example: "consider the whole numbers … the powers of 7, of 11, of 13, and so on, would form a system of collections of whole numbers. Now consider these resulting *partial collections of whole numbers*. Each collection is *precisely as infinite* as the entire series of whole numbers".[34] A series can be contained within another series, but both series remain infinite *in just the same way*. The ontological consequences are radical: as Royce writes, "To an infinite collection of objects … *the axiom that the*

[29] Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive science and virtual philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002), 47.
[30] Manuel DeLanda, *A new philosophy of society: assemblage theory and social complexity* (London: Continuum, 2006).
[31] Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology: a new theory of everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018).
[32] Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, transl. Alan Sheridan & John Law (Cambridge: Harvard Univ., 1993).
[33] Badiou, *Le séminaire: l'infini*, 108.
[34] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 450.

part cannot be equal to the whole does not apply".[35] This means that *a difference in scale is not an ontological difference*, that individuality is a scale-free concept, that containment is not the measure of being: "Our whole theory presupposes that *individuals may be included within other individuals*; that one life, despite its unique ethical significance, may form part of a larger life".[36] If the Absolute is conceived as an infinite collection, then it can have potentially infinite parts that are just as infinite as the Absolute itself. These are the "individuals" Royce wishes to account for. The only difference is that individuals are "partial": they lack the *completeness* with which the Absolute – to stick to our example – represents the whole series.[37] This completeness preserves to the Absolute the role of logical warranty for the possibility of relations between discrete individuals, and this is the reason of the Hegelian tone of many Roycean pages; but Royce takes this equally infinite character as an index of an equal ontological status, so that individuals can be defined as "equal to God":

> Perhaps a being, who in one sense appeared infinitely *less* than God, or who at all events was but one of an infinite number of parts *within* the divine whole, might nevertheless justly count it not robbery to be equal to God, if only this partial being, by virtue of an immortal life, or of a perfected process of self-attainment, received, in the universe, somewhere an infinite expression.[38]

I propose for Royce's model of the relation between the One and the many the label of *flat absolutism*. Discrete individuals can be admitted only by giving to the One a logical priority. But once the One is in place, these individuals can assume an ontological dignity that equals that of the Absolute itself. In fact, there is a quantity of levels of scale that, throughout his work, Royce defines as "individuals" in the same univocal sense. The extremes are the Absolute itself, at the upper end, while the lower end are the "modes of action", the logical primitives that constitute his "system Sigma".[39] The other fundamental levels are those of (personal) individuals, and of the communities they form.[40] As a personal

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[35] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 449, italics added.
[36] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 238, italics added.
[37] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 447.
[38] Josiah Royce, 'The concept of the infinite', *Hibbert Journal* 1, 1902, 21-45, 44.
[39] Josiah Royce, 'The principles of logic', *Royce's logical essays*, 310-378.
[40] The concept of the "community of Interpretation", of which Deleuze spoke in the passage quoted in the introduction, is developed in Josiah Royce, *The problem of Christianity, 2 vols*. (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

individual, I myself contain still other individuals. Each "plan in life" I may form throughout my existence determines an accomplished individual,[41] and "momentary selves" must be listed as well: for Royce, who shares Peirce's anti-Cartesian belief that the self is never given in intuition but can only be approximated through a semiotic process, the relation between yesterday's me, the current me and tomorrow's me is the same kind of relation that I as an individual have towards any other individual, so that these momentary selves count as individuals *tout court.*[42] Finally, above the single community we must include what Royce describes variously as "international community", "the invisible church" or simply "humanity",[43] uniting al communities in a single enterprise of approximation to the all-comprising individual that is the Absolute.

As Royce writes conclusively against Bradley, "the Absolute is no absorber and transmuter, but an explicit possessor and knower of an infinite wealth of organized individual facts".[44] This "infinite wealth" extends throughout the cosmos, at the most different levels of scale, among the most heterogeneous sorts of being.[45] In this way, Royce traces a new possible path for flat ontology. DeLanda and Harman are both defenders of external relations who define individuals through their independence and their non-relational nature.[46] Differently from DeLanda's assemblage theory, Royce's system cannot be

[41] Josiah Royce, *The conception of God: a philosophical discussion concerning the nature of the divine idea as a demonstrable reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1898), 89-93.

[42] Royce, *Royce's logical essays*, 154.

[43] Josiah Royce, *The sources of religious insight* (New York: Scribner, 1912); Josiah Royce, *The hope of the great community* (New York: Macmillan, 1914).

[44] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 587.

[45] *En passant*, we should mention that Royce shares also a form of "taxonomical flatness". Despite his idealism, human mind is not the exclusive model of the cosmos; on the contrary, he hypothesizes the existence of an infinite variety of modes of consciousness, of which we cannot become aware because of the excessive difference between their "rhythms" and ours: "we have no right whatever to speak of really unconscious Nature, but only of uncommunicative Nature, or of Nature whose mental processes go on at such different time-rates from ours that we cannot adjust ourselves to a live appreciation of their inward fluency, although our consciousness does make us aware of their presence … My hypothesis is that, in case of Nature in general, as in case of the particular portions of Nature known as our fellow-men, we are dealing with phenomenal signs of a vast conscious process, whose relation to Time varies vastly, but whose general characters are throughout the same" (Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 225-226).

[46] Manuel DeLanda & Graham Harman, *The rise of realism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). We will not consider Latour's case, since his flat ontology is very different from the mereological model of Royce: see however Christian Frigerio, 'Fuori scala: la flat ecology di Bruno Latour', *Etica & Politica* 23(3), 2021, 403-423.

described as an emergentist one, because Bradley's regress proves that when individuals are assumed, as Royce does, as discrete entities, the emergence of a whole from them is impossible. Rather, individuals are produced through an *immersion* or a *submergence* of the whole within itself: smaller individuals are immerged in larger ones, but this immersion is a structure-preserving operation that does not diminish their ontological status.

The difference from Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology is even greater. Harman is as radical as Russell when he has to describe individuals in non-relational terms. But this makes his objects system tremble: the complete "withdrawal" of objects is impossible in face of Bradley's regress – at least, if Harman wants his object to occasionally come out of their splendid isolation to interact with other objects. To account for the way in which objects interact, Harman postulates the mechanism he calls "vicarious causation": objects interact when they form larger objects comprising both of them.[47] A and B interact as parts of C – so that, rhetorically, Harman can say that there is actually no interaction but only the internal becoming of the object C. But if C is to interact with a further object D, they must form an even larger object, and so on in an endless process of enlargement that would eventually bring to a maximal object coinciding with the universe: this sounds almost as a further proof that a mild form of monism is in the end required to account for relationality. This is why some developers of OOO have tried to give to the manifest, relational dimension of objects a logical priority over their withdrawn face[48]; even so, and even if we cannot elaborate on the topic here, it is difficult to preserve the desideratum of a complete independence of objects.

Royce's model of flat-relational monism shows however how we may give up this desideratum without giving up individuality with it. Until now, we have spoken of Royce's concept of individuality only formally, as discrete and independent from scale. We must now add that individuality is for Royce "distinctly an *ethical* concept".[49] The following, threefold description is the most

[47] Graham Harman, 'On vicarious causation', *Collapse* 2, 2007, 171-205; Graham Harman, 'Time, space, essence, and eidos: a new theory of causation', *Cosmos and History* 6(1), 2010, 1-17.

[48] See Arjen Kleinherenbrink, *Against continuity: Deleuze's speculative realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ., 2019), 230; Ekin Erkan, 'Against the virtual: Kleinherenbrink's externality thesis and Deleuze's machine ontology', *Cosmos and History* 16(1), 2020, 492-559.

[49] Royce, *The conception of God*, 258.

precise definition of individuality (or of an "individual whole") that can be found throughout his writings:

> First, *an individual whole must conform to an ideal definition,* which is precise, and free from ambiguity, so that if you know this individual type, you know in advance precisely what kind of fact belongs to the defined whole, and in what way. Secondly, *the individual whole must embody this type in the form of immediate experience.* And thirdly, *the individual whole must so embody the type that no other embodiment would meet precisely the purpose*, the Will, fulfilled by this embodiment.[50]

Because of Royce's voluntarism, the third criterion is the decisive one: "the Principle of Individuation, in us as in reality, is identical with the principle that has sometimes been called Will".[51] We will leave this aside for the moment, in order to focus on two criteria implied by Royce's definition of individuality that seem to overturn the classical accusation that internal relations efface the role of individuals.

The first is *irreplaceability*. If the world is composed of atomic particulars independent from any relation, then two of them may differ only numerically and may be substituted to one another without consequences; on the other hand, if each individual is defined by its relations to the rest of the universe, then we have to accept some form of identity of the indiscernibles: "The essence of the Real is to be Individual, or to permit no other of its own kind".[52] This gives a new sense to individuality, not as independence from relations, but as the possession of a singular place in the world: "Taken apart from its relation to the whole, the finite fragment appears as something more or less incomprehensible, and therefore as something more or less vaguely general, a mere case of a type".[53] Each individual can happen only once, because all the conditions of its appearance, both spatial and temporal, concur to the determination of its identity. This criterion is incorporated in Royce's voluntarism as the "irreplaceability of purpose".

The second criterion is *agency*: if the world is composed of a single net of relations, then we can say that *a difference anywhere causes a difference everywhere*. Consequently, the slightest act of the pettiest individual can cause a change throughout the universe, so that the "moral significance of the individual", as

[50] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 585.
[51] Royce, *The conception of God*, 259.
[52] Royce, *The world and the individual 1*, 348.
[53] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 292.

Royce calls it, expands to the opposite end of the cosmos:

> My visible sphere of action cannot then be so narrow that I am wholly without influence upon the whole realm of Being. … the significance of my moral existence, however petty my apparent range of influence, and however limited in one sense my powers may be, extends, in another sense, without limit, through the whole range of the future temporal order. It is with your moral efficacy as with your physical efficacy when viewed in accordance with the ideal theory of gravitation. According to that theory, when you move, you move, however little, the whole earth and the sun and the stars.[54]

The negative meaning of individuality as independence from relations is substituted by a positive individuality measured in terms of irreplaceability and agency. Once again, monism does not imply the effacement of individuality, and it can find positive ways of defending it.[55] Royce's tortuous confrontation with Bradley's regress is used to combine the typically pluralistic idea of individuality as a discreteness in being with monism and the interconnectedness of all things. We could almost say that there is a sort of Leibnizian inspiration to this attempt: Royce combines the real separation of individuals with their relational nature, just like Leibniz combined the complete isolation of monads with their capacity of reflecting the whole universe. Royce's metaphysics could be thought of as a completely different way of defending a similar insight, almost a "mereological Leibnizianism" that verts on the inclusion of individuals within larger individuals

[54] Royce, *The world and the individual 2*, 393.

[55] Royce feels nonetheless the need to temper his appeal to internal relations by granting that individuals are never completely defined by them: there are in fact "ambiguous relations" because of which systems may be completed by a variety of elements in a way that could not be determined in advance. Most of "moral relationships", the ones holding between "ethical selves", are of this kind. Therefore, "in choosing A, the Absolute would not, logically speaking, have yet chosen B, but only one of several individuals, any one of whom might have satisfied equally well the ideal relationship between A and B. But, now, what holds of the relationship between A and B would hold also of the relationship of either, or of both, to all definable other individual Selves in the universe. … their relations are such that whatever any one of them, A, is, neither the fact of his existence nor his character as an embodiment of the Absolute Will predetermines unambiguously the nature or contents of any other individual life. … the one act of absolute choice which is embodied in this world that contains the individuals A, B, C, etc., *does as fact actually include many mutually contingent, that is, mutually undetermined, acts of choice, each of which is identical with that mode of will which gets expressed in the life of an individual, and which as a fact includes his own personal self-conscious will*" (Royce, *The conception of God*, 312-314).

rather than on "established harmony".[56]

CONCLUSION (TWO CRITICAL NOTES)

This paper was meant as an exercise in comparative ontology. Starting from a completely different ground, Royce comes to conclusions that are very similar to those of contemporary thinkers such as DeLanda and Harman. Both Royce and contemporary flat ontologists could benefit from this exercise: the first by seeing recognized his possible relevance to modern debates; the others through the demonstration that there is never a single way of defending an intuition to which we are not willing to renounce. Flat ontology is usually described as a pluralist stance and as an ally of external relations; Royce shows that this alliance can be warped in a number of ways, even at the opposite side of the metaphysical spectrum, towards a "flat absolutism", a monism of internal relations in which lower individuals preserve an ontological dignity that equals that of the Absolute itself.

As a conclusion, we will address two critical issues in Royce's view that we have defended so far. The first is a *correction* of a mistake in Royce's own exposition of his system, that has caused some problems among his interpreters; the second points to a possible development of Royce's metaphysics in a direction that could preserve monism and internal relations while renouncing to his extreme "absolutist" stance.

First point. Royce often mistakes two uses of the infinite: the infinite as the quantitative equivalence of Dedekind's definition, the *equally infinite character* of individuals at all scales that he takes as an index of their equal ontological status; and the *self-reproducing* activity of the Absolute, conceived as a mere tautological copying of itself at different levels. From the examples he uses – the example of the map in *The world and the individual* and that, in the 1902 paper *The concept of the infinite*, of a package with a label on it representing another package with another label *ad infinitum*[57] –, we can see that Royce even inclines towards this second meaning. The problem with it is that it reduces the nature of the lower individuals

[56] It could be remarked that there was a fundamental Leibnizian influence in Cantor's original theorization of the actual infinite as well: see José Ferreiros, 'The motives behind Cantor's set theory – physical, biological, and philosophical questions', *Science in Context* 17(1), 2004, 49-83.

[57] Royce, 'The concept of the infinite', 26-27.

to copies of the larger ones; in the end, each individual is just a dull copy of the Absolute itself. This conflicts with the dignity that Royce wishes to preserve to them; in fact, he will later renounce to it in favor of a communitarian and semiotic process of interpretation inspired by Peirce.[58] However, in his deepest intentions, and despite his unfortunate taste in examples, the infinite self-representation of the Absolute had never been tautological; the only fundamental use of the infinite was always the one affirming the *quantitative* (ontological) equivalence of individuals, whereas their *qualitative* equivalence was only superimposed on it by Royce's carelessness. The impression of a modification within Royce's system – while actually he only tried to clarify, to himself and to others, what his true intentions were – has caused among his readers a lot of confusion,[59] that could have been avoided if he had recurred to wiser examples, like a *mise en abyme* preserving both the *quantitative equivalence* – the equal ontological dignity – and the *qualitative heterogeneity* of individuals. We may think for instance of the cover of Pink Floyd's *Ummagumma* (1969), in which the mirrored image is always different from the previous ones, or of Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010), where the contained dreams are always different from the containing ones. In the same way, the individuals within Royce's system preserve an original and irreducible character even with respect to the Absolute to which they owe their being.

[58] See Royce, *The problem of Christianity*.

[59] The standard view is expressed by John E. Smith, *Royce's social infinite* (New York: Liberal Arts, 1950), 14: "Royce's conception of the Absolute consists in the shift from the idea that the Infinite thought is an all embracing consciousness apprehending *at a glance* all truth and harmonizing at once all conflicts between the multiplicity of finite wills in existence, to the idea that the Infinite is actual as a well-ordered system (or ultimately, a community) having a general triadic form and involving a type of cognition called interpretation". The idea of a break between the position expressed in *The world and the individual* and the later theory of the community of interpretation comes from the confusion between the two uses of the infinite: the transformation that signs undergo in the semiotic process of Royce's later writings is thought to repair the merely tautological character of the self-representative system. But the operation with which the Absolute represents itself was always meant to be transformative and interpretative; Jacub Loewenberg ('Interpretation as a self-representative process', *The Philosophical Review* 25(3), 1916, 420-430, 422-423) had already seen this: "Let x = any sign; y = interpreter; z = interpreted. Then R(x, y, z) = any interpretation, i. e., the triadic relation which unites the sign, the interpreter, and the interpreted into a complex. But the triad, R(x, y, z), is in turn a sign, requiring interpretation. The new complex will be R[R(x, y, z)], y', z'. This again requires a new interpretation … Each term is a triad one of whose terms is the term preceding the triad in question in the series; thus the series is self-representative. The self-representative character of interpretation shows at once that Professor Royce's new epistemology is no radical departure from his previous theory". There is surely a shift in focus from the Absolute to the Community as the bearer of the "One"; but Royce's theory never really changes.

Second point. Because of Royce's voluntarism, the existence of the Absolute as the "individual of all individuals" depends on the possibility of a maximal unitary will. We may problematize such a possibility through the words of one of the greatest philosophers of the infinite – Jorge Luis Borges, who saw in Royce's example of the map the theoretical equivalent of his obsession with literary *mise en abyme*:

> Why does it disturb us that the map be included in the map and the thousand and one nights in the book of the *Thousand and One Nights*? Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the *Quixote* and Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious.[60]

Passing to a philosophical register, Borges' comment means that the supposed Absolute itself would have no way of knowing that he is not part of a larger individual (that it is not "fictitious"). This objection is analogous to the notorious "class of all classes" paradox discovered by Russell: the existence of the Absolute as "the individual of all individuals" would be a case of this paradox.[61] The little reinterpretation of Royce's concept of "self-representation" as a semiotic and qualitatively heterogeneous movement we have just attempted could temper this objection by introducing a kind of qualitative "theory of types" within his system; but some problems remain. As a sketch of solution, we may see how Cantor himself, in order to differentiate his views from Spinozian "pantheism", distinguished the *absolute* infinite, pertaining exclusively to a transcendent God, from the worldly *transfinite*: while the absolute cannot be increased and is mathematically indeterminable, the transfinite is a true infinite that can however be increased. Against the post-Kantian (and Roycean) idea that the absolute is the ideal limit of the finite, this limit is actually transfinite.[62] Following this "*detotalization of number*", as Quentin Meillassoux has called Cantor's revolution,[63]

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[60] Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: selected stories and other writings* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 196.

[61] Elisa Buzzi, *Individuo e comunità nella filosofia di Josiah Royce* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 1992), 205-207, is an instance of how the paradox can be used to problematize Royce's view. Royce's (somehow unconclusive) confrontation with Russell's paradox is found in Robert Burch & Josiah Royce, 'An unpublished logic paper by Josiah Royce', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 23(2), 1987, 173-204.

[62] Anne Newstead, 'Cantor on infinity in nature, number, and the divine mind', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 83(4), 2009, 533-554.

[63] Quentin Meillassoux, *After finitude: an essay on the necessity of contingency*, transl. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 103.

the upper end of the cosmos may be opened to a virtually infinite number of further containers, thus making the concept of the Absolute as a "final reader" almost unusable, while preserving the appeal to a form of monism and of internal connectedness of all things.

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