

George Holmes Howison's "The City of God and the True God as Its Head": The Royce-Howison Debate over the Idealist Conception of God

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At the turn of the last century, George Holmes Howison (1834–1916) was considered one of the most important thinkers in American philosophy. The *Cambridge History of American Literature* said he "proved one of the most successful and inspiring teachers of philosophy that America has yet produced."¹ Ralph Tyler Flewelling called him a "Prophet of Freedom."² Howison's major work, *The Limits of Evolution*, was admired by J. M. E. McTaggart, James Ward, and William Ernest Hocking. His students included Arthur Lovejoy, Sidney Mezes, Charles Bakewell, and others who went on to teach at the most important philosophy departments of the age. As recently as William Werkmeister's *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America*, Howison was still included in the company of Whitehead, Royce, James Peirce, Dewey.³ But shortly after this Howison's name all but vanished from philosophical discussion—partly because of the submergence of idealism in Anglo-American philosophy, partly because of the religious character of his thinking, and partly because his pluralist "City of God with the True God as its Head" is so radical to traditional religious thinkers.

1. Cited in John Wright Buckham and George Malcolm Stratton, eds., *George Holmes Howison, Philosopher and Teacher: A Selection from His Writings with a Biographical Sketch* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 1. Henceforth this anthology will be cited as "P&T."

2. Ralph Tyler Flewelling, "George Holmes Howison: Prophet of Freedom," *Personalist* 38, 1 (winter 1957): 5–19.

3. W. H. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), 122–32.

illusion" (P&T, 133). This idea is key not only in understanding Howison, but also for grasping fully the depth and importance of his critique of Royce.

The "Conception of God" debate forced Royce to confront the conflict between his absolute idealism and his voluntarism. This is a recurring theme throughout the philosophical activity in *The World and the Individual*, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, and *The Problem of Christianity*. Despite Howison's disagreements with Royce, Howison both liked and admired him. Both died in the same year but not before Howison would describe Royce as one of the greatest American philosophers, rivaled only by Jonathan Edwards.³⁰ For Howison, the debate and its aftermath brought him more fully to define his own metaphysical pluralism, a view that remains a unique, but unfortunately unexamined, piece of the history of American philosophical and religious thought. □

30. Howison, "Josiah Royce: The Significance of His Work in Philosophy," 243.

Starting in 1987 Howison studies have experienced a minor renaissance as a result of the centennial of the great philosophical event of Howison's life, the 1895 "Conception of God" debate with his friend and rival Josiah Royce. Recent articles by Robert Lauder in 1987 and John J. McDermott and Ignas Skrupskelis in 1994 have returned to examine the debate.⁴ Lauder's 1987 *Owl of Minerva* article is an excellent summary of Howison's position in the debate. Unfortunately the other articles do little to revive Howison at the end of the twentieth century. McDermott's article is primarily a historical discussion of the background of the debate, while Skrupskelis's article is a defense of Royce against Howison that is completely unsympathetic to the latter. For example, Skrupskelis begins his analysis of the debate with the following statement: "Somewhat to my surprise, given Howison's literary style, I found in the text not simply an attitude but an identifiable argument, although not a very good one, urged by Howison not only against Royce but against all monists." Skrupskelis continues:

I had furthermore thought that Royce and Howison disagreed on matters of general metaphysics. To my surprise once again, I found that the crucial premise in Howison is not at all a metaphysical one, but rather is an expression of a belief in the superiority of Western Civilization. Reduced to its barest minimum, Howison's argument amounts to this: since Western Civilization conceives the world pluralistically and Western Civilization provides the true account of what is ultimately real, pluralism is the true account of what is ultimately real. Howison is so confident of the truth implicit in

4. Robert E. Lauder, "Howison's Post-Hegelian Personalism and the 'Conception of God' Discussion," *Owl of Minerva* 18, 2 (spring 1987): 131-44; John J. McDermott, "The Confrontation Between Royce and Howison" and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, "The Royce-Howison Debate on the Conception of God," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 30, 4 (fall 1994): 779-802. See also James McLachlan, "George Holmes Howison: The Conception of God Debate and the Beginnings of Personal Idealism" in *Personalist Forum* 11, 1 (spring 1995): 1-16; and "The Idealist Critique of Idealism: Bowne's Theistic Personalism and Howison's City of God" in *Personalist Forum* 13, 1 (spring 1997): 89-106; and Rufus Burrow Jr. "Authorship: The Personalism of George Holmes Howison and Borden Parker Bowne," *Personalist Forum* 13, 2 (fall 1997): 287-303; and *Personalism: A Critical Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 53-66.

Western thought that he is prepared to maintain this truth regardless of the outcome of the philosophical dialectic.⁵

This lack of sympathy leads Skrupskelis to a complete misunderstanding of Howison's position that stems from his insistence on reducing Howison's pluralistic idealism to a defense of American democracy and cultural imperialism. While it is true that early in Howison's response to Royce in *The Conception of God* he equates his position with Christianity and Western civilization and Royce's with the mysticism of the East, Howison goes on to develop an argument that Royce took quite seriously.

Philosophers of the time, including William Ernst Hocking and Thomas Davidson, thought Howison's objections were devastating to Royce's position.⁶ Years after the event, William Werkmeister saw the debate and Howi-

5. Skrupskelis, "The Royce-Howison Debate," 791.

6. Davidson wrote in a letter to Howison that he thought that Howison had devastated Royce's position:

Well, your reply to Royce is splendid, and you ought to be severely punished for not giving to the world more of the same sort. I am afraid that professional comfort is making you contented and lazy. Royce, from whom I received a copy of the pamphlet, seemed to feel that his position had been somewhat invalidated by your arguments; and Warren and I think it has been entirely demolished. Several other persons of philosophical ability, whom I know, think the same thing. (P&T, 81-82)

Later William Ernest Hocking, who was Royce's student and at one time a younger colleague of Howison's at Berkeley, and later a colleague of and successor to Royce at Harvard, agreed with Howison's critique of Royce:

In failing to penetrate through the blank otherness of Nature to the spirit that is its support, natural Realism falls short of the truth. Idealism corrects this error; and in correcting this error, falls as a rule into another—it refers the experience of nature to a spirit, which turns out to be only the solitary finite self. The logic even of "absolute idealism" usually fails here, as Professor Howison has well shown ["City of God," 104]. The corrective of both this natural realism and this solitary idealism must be found, not by changing the venue of the question to the moral consciousness, but by appeal from natural realism to a *realism of social experience*. (W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912], 289-90)

son's critique of Royce as critical in Royce's philosophical development.⁷ John McDermott sees the debate as so important for Royce that he returned again and again to Howison's objections throughout his philosophical career.⁸ A sympathetic analysis of the debate shows that not only is Howison still worth reading for his important criticism of Royce, but that from the debate grew Howison's own pluralistic system of personal idealism.

I. The "Conception of God" Debate

Howison began his philosophical career as a Hegelian, a member of the St. Louis Kant Club with William Torrey Harris and Henry Brockmeyer. He was initiated into Hegel during the reading of Brockmeyer's translation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. But Howison radically modified his Hegelianism between 1885 and 1892 because he thought Hegel ended in either absorbing the Absolute in the self or the self in the Absolute. Howison found neither alternative appealing. In a June 8, 1892, letter to his old friend, the

See Auxier in this issue of *PF* for full details on Hocking's critique of Royce and agreement with Howison.

7. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America*, 138–40.

8. McDermott noted that Howison's principal objection was that Royce was caught between pantheism and solipsism with no real reason to choose the one over the other.

Howison says of Royce, that he is caught between pantheism and solipsism. I think Howison was right. And Howison says that so far—even given the "rich and crowded arsenal of his thinking"—so far Royce has not sustained the presence of a real, flesh and blood, erotic, neurotic individual existence, that is a *me*, a *you*, within the boundaries of his Absolute. Here also I think Howison was right; not for all the king's horses, nor all the queen's men, nor the "Supplementary Essay" to *The Conception of God*, nor *The World and the Individual*, nor the never-ending supplementary essays to those massive volumes, nor System Sigma, could overcome Howison's critique and it echoes in Davidson, and Hodgson and Peirce and James. For a possible way out look to Royce from his book on loyalty forward, and look backward to the social, historical, religious and environmental essays. There, throughout, has to be sought material for a reply to Howison. ("The Confrontation Between Royce and Howison," 788)

See the essay by Jason Bell in this issue of *PF*, who followed McDermott's advice as to how Royce might make a genuine answer to Howison.

St. Louis Hegelian William Torrey Harris, Howison attacked Royce's version of absolute idealism as "hopeless pantheism." Howison claimed that Royce, whom he nevertheless regarded as the greatest American philosopher of the age, had no proper respect for human nature, that Royce's "infinite self" is always our dimly 'Transcendent Self,'" and one might as well say that "we have no true self at all."⁹ According to Howison, Royce's view of the person violated the sacred primacy of personhood: "And the most depressing sign about his thinking is, that he seems perfectly aware how this makes no provision either for immortality or for real freedom, and yet he appears to have no uneasiness under it, but to contemplate this ghastly destiny of ours with a complacency even savoring of self satisfaction."¹⁰

In 1882 Howison, who had spent his life seeking a permanent post in philosophy, lost a position at Harvard to Royce, a man more than twenty years his junior.¹¹ Howison went to Berkeley in 1884, where, at fifty, he finally found a permanent position. He thrived in California, creating not only an important philosophy department but also the Philosophical Union. The Union sponsored addresses and debates by the most important philosophical figures of the age.¹² The plan of the Union was simple: The members would read an important philosophical work during each year, and at the end of the year the author of that work would address the group. In 1895 Howison was ready for Royce, and the Union spent the year reading *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (Royce's only full-fledged book in philosophy at that time).

The debate, which included two other participants, was a kind of a family affair of American idealists. Joseph LeConte, of the University of California, at 72, was a father figure. He had taught both Sidney Mezes and

9. Quoted in Flewelling, "George Holmes Howison: Prophet of Freedom," 10-11.
10. *Ibid.*, 11.

11. When Howison contracted the disease called "philosophy," he was a mathematics professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Howison became involved with the Hegelians of the Kant Club in 1865. When the club broke up in the 1870s, Howison left his position at Washington University and drifted north to Boston where philosophy in America was centered. There he took a position in philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which cut its philosophy program during the depression of the 1870s. Howison stayed around Boston teaching philosophy part time, lecturing at the Concord School, and even hiring himself out as a private tutor in philosophy, finally studying in Germany in the early 1880s. See the "Biographical Sketch" in P&T, 1-122.

12. During Howison's tenure as its head, the Union received such visitors as James Ward, J. M. E. McTaggart, Hastings Rashdall, George Herbert Palmer, William James, John Dewey, and of course Royce.

Royce as undergraduates.¹³ Sidney Mezes, of the University of Texas, had been a student of both Howison and Royce. At the time the *New York Tribune* labeled the debate “the most noteworthy philosophical discussion that for many a day has taken place in this country.” The *New York Times* called it “the great debate” and “the battle of Giants” (P&T, 80). The discussion after the four presentations focused on the disagreement between Royce and Howison.

In *The Conception of God*, Royce’s argument for the existence and character of God proceeds from the experience of human ignorance and error.¹⁴ Royce had introduced this argument in *The Religious Aspects of Philosophy*. The central chapter of that book dealt with “The Possibility of Error.” Basically the argument proceeds like this: Since error is possible, two questions arise. (1) What is the truth that makes error possible? (2) What is the nature of reality that this truth implies? Either there can be no error, or, as Royce thought, there is “an infinite unity of conscious thought to whom is present all possible truth.” Error is incomplete thought that, viewed from a higher ground, fails to describe adequately what it was intended to describe. Once we admit that error only exists relative to a higher and more comprehensive thought, there is no stopping place short of an infinite thought. Thus, “all reality must pretend to the Unity of the Infinite Thought.”¹⁵

Royce gives the most impressive form of this argument in the “Conception of God” debate.¹⁶ For Royce the question of God’s existence is reducible

13. Howison considered LeConte one of America’s most important philosophers. George Holmes Howison, “Josiah Royce: The Significance of His Work in Philosophy,” *Philosophical Review* 25 (May 1916): 243.

14. The argument from ignorance and error is significant historically in its opposition to agnosticism. The philosophers in the debate were all opposed to Comtean positivism and saw idealism as an antidote to the agnostic school of Spencer. Howison’s introduction to the essays discusses the inadequacies of Spencer’s position. Royce uses Spencer’s agnosticism to argue for an Absolute.

15. Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965) 384–435. Werkmeister pointed to a shift in meaning in this work in the term “infinite thought.” Royce uses it in the first sense signifying an all-inclusive system of thought, and in a second sense as a conscious agent who can be aware of something or to whom something may be “present.” See Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America*, 135.

16. Royce refers to *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* at the beginning of *The Conception of God* but insists that we need to go beyond the argument offered in that book. See *The Conception of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1897), 4–5. Henceforth

to the question of the existence of an omniscient being (CG, 10). Basic to the proof remains Royce's conviction that humans are essentially ignorant of reality "as it is in itself" (CG, 18-19). This reality could only be present in what is ideally defined as an Absolute Experience (CG, 30). The nature of experience reflects the nature of reality. Our deepest sense is that the experience of our fellows is as genuine as our own (CG, 33). Apart from social consciousness, we have no clear, objective conception of truth. The experience of another supplements my own in two senses: as actual and as possible experience. Consensus about our individual experiences presents to us an ideal (CG, 34). The appeal here is "from what the various men do experience to what they all ought to experience, or would experience if their experiences were in unity. . . . Such an ideally united experience, if it could but absolutely define its own contents, would know reality" (CG, 35).

The terms "reality" and "organized experience" are thus correlative terms, and upon this equivalence Royce's whole argument for the existence of God depends. Royce says if we assume "there is no universal experience as a concrete fact, but only the hope of it," then the absolute finiteness and erroneousness of the real experience will still be "a fact, a truth, a reality, and, as such, just the absolute truth" (CG, 40). But for whom would this supposed ultimate truth exist? Not for the finite experience because for finite experience there is nothing beyond fragmentariness. "If we know this, it would be *ipso facto* an absolute, i.e., a completely self-possessed, experience" (CG, 40). Thus, to assert that the whole world is a fragmentary and finite experience is a contradiction. The assertion of such fragmentariness is possible only from the point of view of an experience that transcends it, so experience must constitute "one self-determined and consequently absolute and organized whole" (CG, 41). Royce toys here with the "liar fallacy"—if one asserts that there is no truth, one must also assert that the one truth is that there is no truth.

Now Royce comes to the conclusion of his argument by asserting that "all concrete or genuine, and not barely possible truth is, as such, a truth somewhere experienced," for truth exists only "so far as it is known." Since our experience is only finite and fragmentary, and is known to be such, there must therefore exist some other experience "to which is present the constitution (i.e., the actual limitation and narrowness) of all finite experience, just as surely as there is such a constitution" (CG, 41). Finally, Royce restates his argument in summary form:

There is, for us as we are, experience. Our thought undertakes the interpretation of this experience. Every intelligent interpretation of this experience involves, however, the appeal from this experienced fragment to some more organized whole of experience, in whose unity this fragment is conceived as finding its organic place. To talk of any reality which this fragmentary experience indicates is to conceive this reality as the content of the more organized experience. To assert that there is any absolutely real fact indicated by our experience is to regard this reality as presented to an absolutely organized experience, in which every fragment finds its place. . . . The very effort to deny an absolute experience involves . . . the actual assertion of such an absolute experience. This Absolute Experience is related to our experience as an organic whole to its own fragments. (CG, 42–44)

We thus know that God exists through our finitude, our fallibility:

Our ignorance, our fallibility, our imperfection, and so, as forms of this ignorance and imperfection, our experience of longing, of strife, of pain, of error,—yes, of whatever, as finite, declares that its truth lies in its limitation, and so lies beyond itself. These things, wherein we taste the bitterness of our finitude, are what they are because they mean more than they contain, imply what is beyond them, refuse to exist by themselves, and, at the very moment of confessing their own fragmentary falsity, assure us of the reality of that fulfillment which is the life of God. (CG, 47–48)

In his response, Sidney Mezes brought up an important objection that would be seconded and deepened by Howison. Why should one equate the Absolute and God? Still, Mezes accepted most of Royce's argument. While both LeConte and Mezes only objected to minor parts of Royce's argument, Howison—while he admired the argument to the end of his life as a devastating attack on agnosticism—found Royce's characterization of God unacceptable. Howison argued for what he called a "complete reason." Reason had to be more than scientific natural experience; it had to include moral reason as well. He charged that Royce's formulas were ultimately pantheistic and we end up with the "I am God" of the mystics.¹⁷ But Howison acknowl-

17. This seems to be the point that Skrupskelis takes as Howison's ethnocentric

edged that these are perhaps just quibbles over labels and went on to his most important criticism, directed against the chief weakness of Royce's argument. Behind Howison's objection is an axiom that Royce first articulated in his *Primer on Logical Analysis*: that for something to be true, it must also be consistent.¹⁸ Royce insisted that the idea "the Absolute does not exist" contradicts itself. Since the denial of the Absolute contradicts itself, the opposite must be true: the Absolute must exist. Howison takes this as the key problem in both *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* and *The Conception of God*. Royce argues that we can pass from the subjective to the objective, that existence depends on something that is subsequent to itself. Royce thus argues in a circle proving idealism with the assumption of idealism. Royce assumes what Nietzsche had just denied, that the world *had* to make sense, so it *does* make sense.

For Howison, the radical flaw in Royce's argument is that this method of argumentation does not bring us to a community of knowers. What Royce really proved, according to Howison, "was that the individual thinker, upon reflection, must unavoidably affirm his or her own all-conditioning reality in and over the field of possible experience" (CG, 103). Royce's argument did not get beyond subjective idealism. Royce shifts the meaning of the term "infinite thought," first using it to signify an all-inclusive system of thought, and then as a conscious agent who can be aware of something or to whom something may be "present." For Howison, given Royce's argument, there is no logical justification for favoring idealistic monism to solipsism. Royce's preference for the former has more to do with his moral common sense than with his argument. Royce is therefore arguing, albeit unintentionally, for the omniscience of the individual knower as much as he is for the existence of God. So there is no logically compelling reason not to accept solipsism, which Royce really rejects for moral reasons (CG, 106).¹⁹ As it stands, Royce's argument actually leads to one of two undesirable ends: either the individual knower is omniscient, or the individual knower is annulled and taken up into the omniscience of the Absolute Experience (CG, 103-6).²⁰

argument against Royce, but deeper than the attack on "the mysticism of the East" is an argument against monism.

18. Howison considered this one of Royce's best—but least appreciated—books. See Howison, "Josiah Royce: The Significance of his Work in Philosophy," 236.

19. Cf. W. E. Hocking, *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, 390.

20. In the letter cited above to W. T. Harris (June 8, 1892), apart from calling Royce's system a "hopeless pantheism" (recalling that Howison protests that Royce

In his effort to leap over the abyss between subjective fragmentary knowledge and the Absolute, Royce fails to see that one could just as easily choose the solipsism of the individual knower as the reality of God. If the only choice is between solipsism and agnosticism, on one side, and belief in God or the Absolute on the other side, then—to the believer at least—the logic of the choice is irrelevant because it is not made on logical but on moral and religious grounds. For Howison, the choice is ultimately a moral one not entailed by formal logic of the argument. Still, Howison thinks—and this is where his appreciation for Royce is apparent—that Royce has performed the important service of helping us to see that the naturalistic agnostic (Spencer and the positivists) will end in solipsism and despair. Howison almost sees choosing God as an existential choice, and it is our moral reason, our “complete reason,” that helps us to make it.

But even if we do choose God, Howison contends that Royce’s idea of the person makes the single self nothing but an identical part of the unifying divine will. This gives the created soul no freedom at all. Persons should not be reduced to the logical singular. This would be the end of personality. Thus Howison has made primacy of personality the basis of an ethically grounded truth. Howison threw down his challenge to Royce’s conception of God in the introduction of *The Conception of God*: “No God except with human Selves free and in some sense, in some degree or other; and so, likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, of Freedom and of Immortality” (CG, xiii). For Howison, the battle is between pluralism and monism—and only pluralism guarantees the freedom of the person. Howison calls his position “Pluralistic or Ethical Idealism,” or, as he would prefer, “Personal Idealism . . . since all other forms of Idealism are . . . in the last analysis non-personal—are unable to achieve the reality of any genuine Person” (CG, xv).

That Skrupskelis did not see the implications of Howison’s critique is forgivable, given that Royce also found Howison’s “multipersonalism” doctrine strange. Though this ethical/metaphysical pluralism is behind Howison’s critique of Royce, Howison does not elaborate his positive conception in *The Conception of God* or in his ongoing correspondence with Royce leading up to the publication of *The Conception of God*. Though the debate took place in 1895, and the four actual addresses were published as

might as well say “we have no true self at all”), we can see that Royce’s view of the person was not just an alternate view for Howison; it violated his religious and ethical sensibilities, his deep regard for the sacred primacy of personhood.

a pamphlet shortly thereafter,²¹ *The Conception of God* was not published as a book until 1897. During that interval, Royce and Howison exchanged letters and arguments. Royce responded to Howison in a lengthy piece of more than two hundred pages entitled "The Absolute and the Individual: A Supplementary Discussion, with Replies to Criticisms." This response constitutes the bulk of the volume that was finally published in 1897. The four essays that made up the original debate comprise only 132 pages of the 392-page volume. Royce thought that the new essay *might* reconcile his and Howison's positions. In this essay, Royce attempted to outline the antinomy that he thought described the disagreement between himself and Howison:

Thesis

The entire world of truth, natural and ethical, must be present in the unity of a single absolute consciousness.

The world of truth, for the reasons developed in Part First of this paper, must constitute an Organic Whole of Fact, realizing ideas. Otherwise, there would be relations of ideas and facts which were real relations and which yet transcended all consciousness. Such real relations, as transcendent "things in themselves," prove to be meaningless. Hence the Thesis is established.

Antithesis

The constitution of the moral world demands a real Variety of Individuals,—such a variety as cannot be present in the unity of any single consciousness.

Moral relations are relations of individuals, who are free as to their will, and independent both of one another and of any whole of

21. Howison, ed. *The Conception of God: An Address before the Philosophical Union by Josiah Royce, together with Comments thereon by Sidney Edward Mezes, Joseph LeConte and George Holmes Howison* (Berkeley: Executive Council of the Union, 1895), 84 pp. This was number 15 of the *Bulletin of the Philosophical Union of the University of California*. The 1897 edition reproduces in full the texts of the speeches by the four participants, with some minor editorial changes, but does not contain the description of the event nor Howison's introduction of the speaker. From the description we learn that the debate was attended by over fifteen hundred people. Many more had to be turned away at the door since the Harmon Gymnasium was already beyond its capacity. The introduction of Royce is also of significant historical interest and provides the reader with a full sense of the occasion.

reality to which they belong. Such independence implies mutual separateness, and forbids the free individuals to be the mere fulfillment, in a world of facts, of ideas of any one being. Hence the individuals cannot be contained in any single unity of consciousness; and the antithesis is proved. (CG, 329)

Royce claimed Howison's critique could be reduced to the Kantian antinomy between theoretical and practical reason. Thus Howison's main objection to Royce's argument only counted insofar as it concerned ethics. Howison, however, did not think the essay reconciled their positions. He disagreed with Royce's characterization of his argument, and in September 1898 published an essay outlining his much more fundamental disagreement with Royce. In that article, "The Real Issue in 'The Conception of God,'" Howison says that his point is not to set moral consciousness simply as a "categorical imperative" against theoretical reason, and simply "have the heart breathe defiance to the intellect."²² Howison says his aim in his critique of Royce's "Conception of God" was to show that there must be a theoretical justification of ethics—the fact that our moral sense objects to theoretical monism is not sufficient; we need a metaphysical theory to support it. Howison says that his real disagreement with Royce can be summarized in two main premises:

"(1) That no conception of God can have any philosophical value unless it can be proved real, or, in other words, unless it is the conception that of itself proves God to exist; and (2) that the conception [offered by Professor Royce and other monists] is the only conception that can thus prove its reality." It is precisely in denying the validity of this second premise that the vital point of my dissent consists.²³

Howison agrees with Royce on the first premise. Howison believes that there is a conception of God that can be proven real. But he denies the second

22. George Holmes Howison, "The Real Issue in 'The Conception of God,'" *Philosophical Review* 7, 3 (September 1898): 518–22, reprinted in *Responses to Royce*, ed. Randall Auxier. 3 vols. (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes Press, 2000), 2:24–28; this passage is from page 25 of the latter printing, and here Howison quotes himself from the introduction to CG, xxxv.

23. Howison, "The Real Issue," 26. Howison is in part quoting himself from CG, 120.

premise for moral reasons. He thinks that Royce's God annihilates the freedom of the creature and, with it, the reality of the creature. Thus he reformulates Royce's antinomy:

Thesis

The world of Truth, including truths of fact and law as well as truths of value and conduct, springs, as a whole and in every part, from the world of self-active intelligences; presupposes, and in its wholeness *is*, a Plurality of such strictly free minds, and cannot be contained in the unity of any Single Consciousness.

Antithesis

The world of Truth, including truths of value and conduct as well as truths of fact and law, cannot spring, either as a whole or in any part, from a world of many self-active intelligences, but prohibits a Plurality of such strictly free minds, and can only be contained in the unity of a single Absolute Consciousness.²⁴

In 1895, after the debate, Royce wrote to Howison that he should "put his multipersonalitarianism once and for all into its final argumentative rights by a complete and technical statement. That would be one of the most fascinating books of the century, for us who love dialectics, as well as truth."²⁵ But by 1897, Royce's tone had changed to exasperation for what he regarded as the incomprehensibility of Howison's objections. Royce even accused Howison of advocating a type of pantheism or polytheism where anyone was God.²⁶ It is ironic that Royce's objection to Howison's

24. Howison, "The Real Issue," 27.

25. John Clendenning, ed., *The Letters of Josiah Royce* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 339.

26. Royce writes:

I may frankly add that what I least can yet make out about the "City of God," as you so far reveal its mysteries, is what God (viewed as in any sense an unique or Absolute Being), has to do with it. So far as I can see, your view appears to be a polytheism, where anybody is as much God as he is even Christian. Or else God is merely the collective name for your crowd of polytheistic monads. I know of course that you can't really mean either of these things but I indicate the helplessness of my mind by suggesting the question; and my helplessness may help to show you what some other readers must most desire to have added, by way of explanation,

pluralism, where anyone is God, is so similar to Howison's objection to Royce's pantheism, wherein the thinker is as much God as God.

Royce had issued to Howison a challenge to attempt systematically to set forth his pluralistic, personal idealism. Howison finally did this in his only major work, a group of essays published in 1901 under the title *The Limits of Evolution, and Other Essays Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism*.²⁷ In it he offers description of the pluralist "City of God," and, in response to Royce's argument from ignorance, his own argument for the existence of God based on his ideal of "complete reason."

II. Howison's "City of God" and the Personal Idealist Argument for the Existence of God

In the preface to *The Limits of Evolution*, Howison set forth a ten-point outline of the Personal Idealism that Royce had dubbed "multipersonalism." First, all existence is either the existence of minds or the experience of minds. All material objects are certain types of these experiences. Second, time and space owe their existence to the correlation and coexistence of minds. This coexistence is not to be thought of as spatial or temporal but must be regarded as an internal relation; each is a logical implication of the other. The recognition of each other as alike, and each as self-determining, makes their coexistence a moral order. The world becomes a stage for the moral life. Third, these many minds form the eternal "unconditionally real" world. They constitute what Howison called the "City of God." Each has the common aim of fulfilling one rational ideal. God is the fulfilled type of every mind, the "living Bond of their union, [and] reigns in it, not by the exercise of power, but solely by light; not by authority, but by reason; not by efficient, but by final causation" (LE, xiii-xiv). Fourth, the members of this "eternal republic" have no origin other than the purely logical one they have in reference to each other. This includes their relation to God. This means they are, like God, eternal. In his fifth point, Howison indicates that the members of the eternal republic are not independent of each other, but they exist only through the mutual correlation. They are the ground of all temporal and spatial existences. They are thus, in his sixth point, free in reference to the natural world and to God. Seventh, this pluralism is held in

to the account that you have so far given. But at all events, I await, with keen curiosity, your outcome. (*Letters of Josiah Royce*, 360-61)

27. George Holmes Howison, *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays* (1901; rev. 2d ed. New York: Macmillan, 1904), hereafter cited as "LE."

union by reason. The World of Spirits is the genuine unmoved that moves all things. It is the final cause of all activity. Eighth, this movement of changeable things toward the goal of the common ideal is what is called the process of evolution. And the world of spirits, as the ground of the project, can therefore not be a product of evolution itself, nor subject in any way to evolution except that

minds other than God, who have their differentiation from him in a side of their being which is in one aspect contradictory of their Ideal, this sense-world of theirs is by its very nature, in its conjunction with their total nature, under the law of return toward the essential Ideal. In this world of sense, this essentially incomplete and tentative world of experience, evolution must therefore reign universally. . . . Every mind has an eternal reality that did not arise of change and that cannot by change pass away. (LE, xv-xvi)

Ninth, all these conceptions are founded on the idea of a world of spirits as the circuit of moral relationship, and they carry within them a profound change from the traditional idea of God. Creation is no longer an event; it is not an occurrence that happened at some instant in the life of God. Rather, creation is ongoing. God, who is a person, also represents the realized final cause, the ideal toward which the activity of the world of spirits is aimed. Without this goal, "they would be but void names and bare possibilities" (LE, xvii). Tenth, the Final Cause is here not merely the guiding principle but the grounding and fundamental principle of all other causes. The reference to every other mind brings us into relation with the divine mind. In this way, mutual recognition is essential to all minds. It is essential to the very existence of the individual. God is the type of all intelligence. God is the final Goal—the ideal by which all are influenced—that is the only causation in the moral world.²⁸

This is an idealistic pluralism. Universality is retained by the common goal of all persons. Ideally, every actual mind "is absolutely public and universal; and even in the mind's *temporal* aspect, the aspect of its struggle toward knowledge over the rugged road of experience, such a public and universal view must in every mind be potential" (P&T, 127-28). A person is a member of a manifold system of persons; all of them are self-active

28. Howison, LE, xvii-xviii. For further details, see my earlier article "George Holmes Howison: The Conception of God Debate and the Beginnings of Personal Idealism."

centers of origination as far as efficient causation is concerned. God is the final cause to which persons are led by the attraction of the ideal vision, the vision of the City of God. The City of God is not God but the community of finite persons who are freely independent of their creator. In fact their freedom comes from their being ontologically ultimate, as ultimate as God. The community is eternal, coeternal with God.

Howison's arguments for this multipersonal City of God are primarily moral. In the chapter of the Buckham and Stratton collection entitled "Personal Idealism and Moral Aims," Howison surveys other metaphysical positions and gives his reasons for rejecting them. Howison claims that "God is not the creator, in the sense of literal producer, or First (efficient) Cause, of any mind as such, nor even of that aspect in the conscious life of other minds which we know as their merely natural being, whether of psychic states or of physical processes" (P&T, 139). Since all persons are eternal, God is not their creator in the traditional sense as having brought them into being. God, however, is their creator in the sense of being their final cause as the goal of the evolving universe. It seems to be more accurate to say that God calls all others into being. Howison thus makes two essential claims about God.

1. God is the final cause, and as final cause, God is at once the logical Ground apart from which as Defining Standard, no consciousness can define itself as *I*, nor, consequently, can exist at all

...

2. God is the Ideal Goal toward which each consciousness in its eternal freedom moves its merely natural and shifting being, in its effort after complete accord between the two phases of its nature, the eternal and the temporal, the rational and the sensuous. (P&T, 139-40)

Howison contends that between God and all other minds, there can be no kind of causation but final causation because otherwise this would make God a threat to the moral independence of personal agents. The realm of the efficient cause is the realm of nature that exists because of the interaction of personal agents. Nature exists "between" persons. In this way God is not responsible for evil but only for the good that gradually arises in the world. "The evil in the world is the product of the non-divine minds themselves; the natural evil, of their very nature; the moral, the only real evil, of their failure to answer their reason with their will" (P&T, 140).

Howison holds that there is a moral need for the system of pluralist idealism. All systems of thought that subscribe everything to a first efficient cause are morally inadequate and thus, for the system of complete reason, metaphysically inadequate. These systems include traditional theism, which took Zoroastrian eternal dualism and modified it through the recognition of the Supreme Being of the "older orientalisms" and taught a dualism of the "monarcho-theistic sort." Eventually a creation was summoned into existence by sheer fiat. Philosophically the systems Howison rejects include Augustine, Aquinas, and Scotus. But the moderns have continued this philosophical enterprise. Among these are Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, the Deists, and even Kant. (P&T, 140). Howison rejects traditional theism because the dualism of traditional theism only seems to offer the *possibility* of freedom and therefore morality, but this possibility is then annulled because of the foreknowledge and absolute causal efficacy of God. We see ourselves as free, but in actuality we are really slaves to the will of God. Everything is predetermined by the direction given to it by the one, omniscient, omnipotent, eternal Being. In traditional theism, the responsibility for evil falls upon God, and the problem is the same whether we talk about predestination or God's simply allowing evil. "How dare we say that such things are wrought even by the consent of divine justice and love? Still less, surely dare we say that they are wrought by a God's predestinating edict" (P&T, 141).

The next group Howison addresses, the Monists, substitute for the ex nihilo creation of the first group the older but rationally more continuous view of immanence of the creation in a monistic Creator or Eternal source. This view, says Howison, carries us back into the pantheistic emanationists like Plotinus, Shankara, Erigena, and Cusa and the modern pantheists, Malebranche, Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel and the later offshoots like Spencer, Fiske, T. H. Green, the Cairds, Bradley, and Royce. In these systems, however, the individual is canceled. Again Howison returns to the problem of freedom and of evil if the One is the end of existence. He objects that persons are not ends for these various monists, but only a transient means to an end. We are only stage properties of the eternal. "We are made mere tools of a counsel in which we do not share; our personality is trod upon and put to shame, in behalf of the invisible and inapproachable Lord or lords of our life, in whose sight we are as nothing" (P&T, 151). The only remedy to this is not to say that there is one or even many minds behind the scenes but to say that the many minds are our minds.

Finally there are two groups that are antimetaphysical, either by the reductionist effect of their doctrine, or by outright profession. The first of

these groups include those thinkers who abandon any type of consciousness as the first principle and drop a first cause from the list of causes. These are the materialists like Democritus, Dühring, and Vogt. The latter group includes those who repudiate the search for causes and argue that philosophy must drop metaphysics as well as theology like Hume, Comte, and Positivists of all stripes. Howison rejects these because they fail to provide a basis for morality. He argues that they distinguish between ethics and morality, and if they can escape fatalism of the harshest sort they cannot escape hedonism, which is finally, in the logical end, an egoistical, transient, and trivial hedonism (P&T, 143–44). The materialists and positivists are also not equal to the challenge of evil. “They indeed have alike no conscious World-Author to blame for evil, but they alike reduce all evil to natural evil, since their necessitarian systems provide no room for blamable wrong in men” (P&T, 145). We cannot say that “whatever is, is right” because as moral beings we know that much that is, is wrong and cannot be tolerated by a good being. Our whole business is to rid the world of suffering, injustice, and evil (P&T, 147).

Thus, Howison eliminates pluralist materialism, both idealistic and materialist monism, and monarcho-theism. What we are left with is an eternal pluralism of causal minds, each self-active, each recognizing all others, each possessed of moral autonomy and each directed toward a final cause. Howison thinks this is the only explanation that will “adjust itself to the primary conditions of moral life” (P&T, 148). The conditions of moral life include six essential ingredients: (1) the reality of moral freedom, (2) the objective nature of the self-active consciousness, (3) the immortality of the individual, (4) the hope of real and lasting moral improvement in this present world, (5) the solvability of the enigma of evil, and (6) the validity of belief in God (P&T, 147–51).

Moral freedom is the ability to adhere, or not, to the moral order of the world. This moral order itself is tied to the objective nature of the self-active consciousness—objective by virtue of its intrinsically social character. “Without this the moral ideal would be nothing but an empty egoism, incapable of transcending solipsism. . . . By this [primordial sociality], the system reveals the fact that Kant’s ‘categorical imperative,’ in its final and fully significant form . . . is in reality the very first principle of *knowledge*” (P&T, 149). The immortality of the individual is tied to the possibility that the goal of freedom, the City of God, could be fulfilled. Tied to this point is the hope for a real and lasting improvement of this present world by our individual moral endeavor. There must be some kind of eternal seal of our efforts to create a moral universe. And it must be possible thus to solve the

enigma of evil. Evil is curable, for Howison, because God is not its cause. Were God omnipotent and perfect (in the classical sense that the activity of persons adds nothing to God's perfection), then God's creation of the world would be an unparalleled act of sadism. God would have created a world that God did not need, and then subjugated its inhabitants to cruel suffering and misery. God's omnipotence makes personal freedom problematic as well. Traditional theism cannot help us in explaining freedom because we are continually led to an all-powerful, predestining God, or back to monism as first cause in a causal chain. In fact, Howison argued that he preferred atheism to the slavery of traditional theism: "[B]etter the atheism of a lost First Cause, and a lost Sovereign Lord, than the atheism of deified Injustice, with its election and reprobation by sheer sovereign prerogative" (P&T, 279). A personal, omnipotent, omniscient, predestinating deity is a tyrant, and all other persons mere serfs, or worse, puppets. If persons are free, they must be free even in relation to God; and to be free in relation to God, Howison thought, they must be, in some sense, coeternal with God, meaning that their free action has something of the same character as God's creative action.²⁹ Howison's God as final cause eliminates this problem through eliminating divine omnipotence. Evil arises through the moral conflict that exists because of the freedom of the world of persons. But Howison thinks that personal idealism guarantees the validity of belief in God. God is transcendent of every other being and immanent in none except in the sense that they carry his ideal image within them. God is the final judge but also the Eternal Inspirer:

The absence of objective reality from such an ideal Being, its reduction to a subjective ideal simply, as some modern philosophers caught in an agnostic's snare have proposed, would strip moral life of the main support for its struggle against wrong. Amid the manifold disappointments and discouragements of the long battle with defect and wrong, the merely subjective ideal would tend to fade out, to decline both in vividness and in character, and so cease to attract and adequately guide effort. The only adequate support—and it is adequate—is the reality of God, the heavenly Judge,

29. In his response to McTaggart's criticisms of *The Limits of Evolution*, Howison added several appendices to the book. In one he argues that we do not have to see each individual as preexisting co-eternally with God but only that the possibility of each individual and the necessity of the community is demanded by the character of God as a relative being. See *The Limits of Evolution*, 2d ed., appendix E, 420–30.

the unfailing Beholder and Sympathizer. To him, the one Absolute Conscience, in every moral disaster our conscience turns for assured refuge and certain renewal of moral courage and strength. That is the real act and infallible function of Prayer. (P&T, 151)

God is thus necessary to Howison's moral world.

He next attempts to offer a "proof" of the existence of God in the chapter "The Harmony of Determinism and Freedom." Howison's ideal of human freedom was incompatible with material or idealist determinism and predestination, nor could he accept any notion of freedom as mere caprice. Defined as mere chance, freedom has no power to act, so Howison thought freedom cannot be without plan or purpose. Freedom and determinism are reconciled only if determinism is seen as *definiteness* (but not constraining foreordination). Freedom means (instead of unpredictable whim) "*action spontaneously flowing from the definite guiding intelligence of the agent himself*. In short, the desired harmony will fail unless the determinism and the freedom are both alike defined in terms of *the one and identical definiteness of the rational nature*" (P&T, 263). The indeterminate could never confer definiteness on anything. Definiteness connotes purpose.

If persons are free, they are logically prior to nature. Natural laws are not discovered but issue from the interaction of persons. Also if persons are free, they are coeternal with God; God has to be in part dependent for His/Her existence on the relation with others. Howison admitted that he was divinizing the human and recognized that one of the great problems of his "celestial democracy" was that it could lead to the leveling and relativizing of persons and values, but God provides the ideal moral goal and the stability of the system.

Howison's argument for the existence of God rests on two points. *First*, the world of minds first must embrace the "Supreme Instance" in which each self-definer defines himself separately from every other. God then, is the eternal ideal, the perfect self-fulfillment in eternity of all ideal possibilities. God's very perfection lies in His recognition of all other finite beings, otherwise God's own self-fulfillment is unthinkable. And *second*,

the world of minds must embrace this complementary world, and every member of this complement, though indeed defining himself against each of his fellows, must define himself primarily against the Supreme Instance and so in terms of God. Thus each of them, in the act of defining his own reality defines and posits God as real—as the one Unchangeable Ideal who is the indispensable standard upon

which the reality of each is measured. The price at which alone his reality is self-defining can be had is the self-defining reality of God. If *he* is real, then God is real; if God is not real, then neither can *he* be real. (P&T, 288–89)

Thus we have another version of the ontological argument. Here God is defined as the highest by every other self-defining being and is thus a “universally implicated ideal,” the rational ground of all other self-definition, the Final Cause. This is, once again, God proven from the idea of God. Howison alludes to Descartes’s cogito, that I can never seriously doubt my own existence. But unfortunately, Howison thinks, Descartes does not carry through and connect the self to God; rather, he connects the ideal of classical perfection with *existence*. For Howison, Descartes’s argument turns into the vapid truism that if the perfect or God exists then He exists. But the existence of God is the very point to be proven.

The conclusion of Howison’s alternative version of the argument runs like this: “The idea of every self and the idea of God are inseparably connected, so that if *any* self exists, then God also must exist; but any and every self demonstrably exists, for (as *apud Cartesium*) the very doubt of its existence implies its existence; and therefore God really exists” (P&T, 291). The truth of the argument, claims Howison, rests in the self’s implication of the Other. In Hegelian fashion, the self only exists in its relation to other beings. God is the universal ideal of the community of coeternal beings.

Our self-thought being is intrinsically a *social* being; the existence of each is reciprocal with the existence of the rest, and is not thinkable in any other way. We all put the fact so, each in the freedom of his own self-defining consciousness. The circle of self-thinking spirits indeed has God for its central Light, the Cynosure of all their eyes: *he* is if *they* are, *they* are if *he* is; but the relation is freely mutual, and he only exists as *primus inter pares*, in a circle eternal and indissoluble. (P&T, 291–92)

Howison is arguing that just as we are formed by others around us—so that we cannot seriously doubt their existence—we are also formed by God. This is at the heart of his use of the ontological argument. But the demand for metaphysical pluralism in this version of the argument is obvious. We know the others and ourselves because of the final causality of God that requires the ideal social character of the relation with others.

"He is if they are, they are if he is" (P&T, 292). Howison's argument resembles both the ideal of perfection that is innately in the mind in Descartes's Third Meditation, and also the infinite striving toward the moral ideal in Fichte's *The Vocation of Man*. If humans were ever to attain the ideal, according to Fichte, we would cease to be human and become God. But the ideal, and our separation from the ideal, taken together, are what make us human. Likewise, for Howison, we reach the existence of God through his "very nature as central member of the world of freedom" (P&T, 292). God loves and is the free goal of all activity. God is unchangeably adorable because God subsists through His/Her free association of His/Her complementary world of free associates. Where Howison diverges from Descartes and Fichte is in saying that God, who must be both infinite and finite in all aspects, is in a moral and loving relation with the rest of the members of the eternal community. In fact, for Howison, it seems to be only the structure of God that is founded both on moral obligation and relation that is eternal. The only being that can love is that being for whom the objects of that love are free beings who can themselves recognize and return that love freely. God cannot be an "Omnipresent Meddler" but is rather the source of a "love that 'casteth out fear,' even the solemnizing fear which awe is, and that thrills only to the beauty and the joy of God's perfection of love" (P&T, 292-93).

Finally, Howison argues that this system of freedom is the only genuine monotheism because all the members of the world freely posit themselves as "not God," and in positing Her/Himself God likewise posits them as "not God." Our access to God through this argument is only possible if we accept what Howison called "a more complete reason" that includes, if not exalts, moral reason. What Howison never fully admits, though he comes close to it in his argument with Royce, is that what we are led to by his City of God seems to be a wager, an existential choice that runs something like this: "I choose to see the world as moral and I choose to believe in God. This is an alternative to the absurdity of existence. I choose it for moral reasons." God, for Howison, is the epitome of the related person, so God is the ideal toward which we all should strive.

III. Conclusion

Howison said of his thought that "it seeks to raise our ethical intuition into the region of intelligence instead of feeling, and to do this by showing that the ethical first-principle is not only itself an act of knowledge but is the principle of *all* knowledge, and of all real experience as distinguished from