

ENGAGING ACROSS TRADITIONS:
ROYCE & GADAMER ON INTERPRETATION

DAVID VESSEY

The canons of diverse traditions may share texts, figures, and questions, but that doesn't necessarily make communication across traditions any easier. The figures and texts, while shared, are often not shared in the same way. To know Karl Marx's *Capital* belongs to a thinker's tradition is not yet to know if that thinker is an economist or a social theorist. But to know the thinker works in the tradition of Marx and Theodor Adorno is to know the thinker most likely does not work in the tradition of Marx and Adam Smith, or Marx and Mao Tse-tung, for that matter. The Marx embraced by the economist is often not the same Marx embraced by the social theorist or the political revolutionary—for one the theory of capital is the central guiding principle of Marx's other views, for another it's the historical materialism, and for a third the theory of alienation. In this example, all lay claim to the "real" Marx; as a result the debates between them rarely constitute a genuine engagement but instead devolve into turf battles. Their first priority is claiming the figure or text as their own, not coming together to appreciate the complexity of the figure's views.

In the case of shared questions the situation is not as bad. A tradition's strength and staying power lies in its ability to pose relevant questions, to resolve those questions in compelling ways, and to show why other questions are not worth asking. When traditions intersect on a question the occasion arises for each tradition to take up the task of defending its answer. Engagement across traditions should follow. Of course, it may be that what looks like the same question being asked by two different traditions is actually two separate questions that appear united only when expressed in the most generic terms. Confucius and John Dewey both ask the question, "What is the relation between an individual and society?" but the simplicity of the formulation hides enormous differences. Also, it is not always clear whether the disagreements belong to the question or to the answer. When Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel

Kant present divergent answers to the question, “What is one’s duty to the state?” are they asking different questions—they share neither the same notion of duty nor the same of state—or is it that they are offering complicated answers to the same question, answers that require specifying what we mean by “duty” and “state”? To settle such questions is to settle the debate itself, and that can’t be done without genuine engagement across traditions.

All this is to point out that engagement across traditions on shared questions is quite different from engagement across traditions on shared texts and shared authors. When others disagree with us we need to see if they are asking the same question, and, if so, why they answer the question differently than we do. If they are asking a different question, we need to know how we would answer that question as well as why that question isn’t ours. Hans-Georg Gadamer, the main figure in the hermeneutic tradition, is right to say that to engage others requires seeing how they could be right, which is to say that to engage others requires seeing how they could be providing a plausible answer to a legitimate question.

In *Truth and Method* and elsewhere Gadamer has articulated the canonical history, figures, and texts of hermeneutics.¹ Needless to say American pragmatism is not included in the canonical history, and appropriately so. However, Josiah Royce—a canonical figure in the pragmatist tradition—in the second part of his 1913 book *The Problem of Christianity* takes up in detail the question, “What is interpretation?” and in doing so crosses paths with one of the central questions in the hermeneutic tradition. My task here will be to look carefully at how Royce formulates and answers the question in order to see what hermeneutics can learn from Royce. The hermeneutic tradition as articulated by Gadamer is my starting point and ending point, so the answer will not be to abandon hermeneutics for pragmatism, nor will it be that the answers Royce provides are so embedded in his tradition that engagement is impossible. As hermeneuts, we are committed to the denial of radical incommensurability and to the hope of a fusion of horizons.² We are also committed to revising our views in dialogue with others.

1 His account has been reproduced in a number of histories of hermeneutics: Palmer 1969, Grondin 1994, and Ferraris 1996 are three key examples.

2 Properly understood, that is. A fusion of horizons is not the same as agreement, rather it is an increased understanding of the preconceptions that lead one to accept one view over another and an understanding of how those

First, a few words as to why Royce takes up the question of the nature of interpretation in such an unusual place as a discussion of the nature of Christianity. Royce lays out what he saw as the three essential features of Christianity—the importance of belonging to a spiritual community, the inescapable moral burden of every individual, and the need for atonement; the question then was how these three features manifested themselves in actual Christian communities and this required reflection on the general organization of communities. Royce concludes that a community gets its identity from the shared interpretations of the members of the community.

A community as we have seen, depends for its very constitution upon the way each of its members interprets himself and his life. For the rest, nobody's self is either a mere datum or an abstract conception. A self is a life whose unity and connectedness depend upon some sort of interpretation of plans, of memories, of hopes, and of deeds. ...Were there, then, no interpretations in the world there would be neither selves nor communities (Royce 1968, 274).

Two things will immediately endear themselves to hermeneutics. First, we interpret things when we need to understand them. All understanding is interpretive. Moreover, in some cases (and I'll leave it open whether this is true in all cases) it's the interpretation that acts to bring about the object of the interpretation. Interpretation doesn't just reveal something already waiting, but constitutes it. In Royce's case, interpretation is the means by which the self is constituted as a unified self. It connects not just to how we understand ourselves, but also to what we are as selves. Second, interpretation has social implications. In the case of the self, the same activity that individuates us socializes us. As we interpret we locate ourselves within various communities of interpreters who share our interpretation. This sociality may not exhaust the social dimensions of interpretation, but it serves our purpose here of highlighting two themes in Royce amenable to hermeneutics. Royce goes on to say that "to inquire what the process of interpretation is, takes us at once to the very heart of philosophy [and] throws light both on the oldest and latest issues of metaphysical thought" (Royce 1968, 274); this is hermeneutic gospel. So even though he belongs to a different tradition, those of us in hermeneutics can see Royce as "one of us." But perhaps

preconceptions need to be revised to integrate together the legitimate insights from both views.

that is because we have yet to look at his views in any depth of detail. It's easy to generate agreement by leaving out the details.

Royce contrasts the process of interpreting with the processes of conceptualizing and perceiving. Generally the latter two are thought to be sufficient for an account for the mental life of a person. We get universals from our conceptions and particulars from our perceptions, and we may even develop sophisticated theories about how they are related through successful action (i.e., that the content of the concept is just that which would appear to perception were the concept given power to guide action). The classic debate of empiricism versus rationalism swings on which of the two ought to be understood as taking precedence in the production of knowledge.

But Royce thinks interpretation constitutes a third, entirely distinct cognitive process best exemplified through our awareness of other minds. We are aware of other minds, but how? It couldn't be that we have a conception of the other mind, for conceptions only provide universals and we are aware of particular other minds. Yet we never have sense perceptions of other minds either. We can speculate about the contents of another's mind, but we lack the perceptions to trigger or confirm our speculations; without the perceptions, the conceptions have no place to lead, no cash value, and must remain empty, speculative, and incapable of generating awareness. There must be another kind of awareness. Royce takes up the metaphor of perceptions being the cash value of conceptions (thought of as credit) and points out that converting currency as we cross a border is always a different kind of transaction than simply providing cash for credit. There is an interpretation—an exchange rate—and actions based on this interpretation. He writes,

Each of us, in every new effort to communicate with our fellow-men, stands, like the traveler crossing the boundary of a new country, in the presence of a largely strange world of perceptions and conceptions. Our neighbor's perceptions, in their immediate presence, we never quite certainly share. Our neighbors conceptions, ... are so largely communicable that they can often be regarded as identical, in certain aspects of their meaning, with our own. But the active syntheses, the practical processes of seeking and of construction, the volitions, the promises, whereby we pass from our own concepts to our own percepts, are often in a high degree individual.... Therefore, in our efforts to view the world as other men view it, our undertaking is very generally analogous to the traveler's financial transactions when he

crosses the boundary. We try to solve the problem of learning how to exchange the values of our own lives into the terms which can hope to pass current in the new or foreign spiritual realms whereto, when we take counsel together, we are constantly attempting to pass (Royce 1968, 283–84).

Perceptions are individual and similar, but not the same due to differences in perspective. Conceptions are universal, and communicable for that reason, but fail to tell us about the other's particularity. The key to differences across traditions (across boundaries) has to do with the different ways that universal conceptions get "cashed out" by particular perceptions. How conceptions are connected to perceptions has to do with the actions and instincts of the individual and these vary from individual to individual (and from tradition to tradition). So when it comes to understanding one another in communication, we are not simply looking for confirming connections between perceptions and concepts. We are looking for new ways of associating concepts and percepts; we are coming to understand differently. This process is the same one that occurs when we try to understand ourselves across periods of time (though in such a case the boundary is not cultural but temporal).³ Understanding ourselves and others, then, is never simply a matter of conceptions or perceptions alone, rather we need a third distinct cognitive process to explain how this is possible—interpretation.

At this point Royce introduces what might seem like a truism, but it will lead us to see what hermeneutics can learn from Royce. He argues that interpretation always relates three things: the interpreter, what is being interpreted, and that for whom the interpretation is taking place. Interpretations are always by someone of something for someone. For example Royce (by someone) interprets the "problems of Christianity" (of something) for a 1913 philosophical audience (to someone). This threefold structure applies to self-understanding too: we interpret ourselves for ourselves; "through the present self the past is so interpreted that its counsel is conveyed to the future self" (Royce 1968, 288). But this is a special case of the more general fact that interpretation always happens with an audience in mind. According to Royce, the person for

3 As in hermeneutics, for Royce self-understanding is not a special kind of understanding but operates in just the same way by which we come to understand others. Royce quotes Charles Sanders Peirce: "there is no royal road to self-knowledge" (Royce 1968, 285).

whom the interpretation exists is traditionally neglected from theories of interpretation.

Royce then connects the triadic structure of interpretation to the argument that interpretation is a unique kind of knowledge, typified by knowledge of other minds.

Psychologically speaking, the mental process which thus involves three members differs from the perception and the conception in three respects. First, interpretation is a conversation, and not a lonely enterprise. There is someone, in the realm of psychological happenings, who addresses someone. The one who addresses interprets some object to the one addressed. In the second place, the interpreted object is itself something which has the nature of a mental expression. Peirce uses the term “sign” to name this mental object which is interpreted. Thirdly, since the interpretation is a mental act, and is an act which is expressed, the interpretation itself is, in its turn, a sign. This new sign calls for further interpretation. For the interpretation is addressed to somebody. And so,—at least in the ideal,—the social process involved is endless (Royce 1968, 289–90).

Interpretation differs from perception and conception in virtue of always invoking an audience for the interpretation. In addition, perception and conception are solely directed at objects—perception at perceptual objects, conception at conceptual objects—and thus have a natural terminus in the object of perception or conception. Interpretation has no such terminus. Neither perception nor conception introduce the cycle of sign relations, as interpretation does. Gadamer too holds that all interpretation is modeled on conversation, and that interpretation can itself become an object of interpretation. He will disagree, however, that everything interpreted “has the nature of mental expression,” but it would take us too far afield to compare Royce’s idealism with phenomenology’s attempt to move beyond the debates between idealists and realists. Gadamer will also disagree, as we will see, with the view that perceptions and conceptions exclude interpretations.

Let’s look more closely why Royce thinks interpretation is an infinite process while the other two are finite. Royce points out that when we are interpreting something for someone, in order for that person to understand our interpretation he or she must *also* engage in an interpretation. Since interpretation is the activity of being aware of other minds, a conversation requires interpretations of interpretations. One person authors an interpretation for another, interpreted as the recipient of the

interpretation. That recipient interprets the author as the source of an interpretation and then interprets the interpretation presented by the author. It is not just that the conversation is a kind of interpretation, nor is it just that the conversation is an exchange of interpretations. Both of these are true. In addition, however, the conversation is a series of interpretations ending only in parting. In interpreting I interpret for someone, who then interprets my interpretation, again for someone (perhaps me), which then requires another interpretation and so on; “discoveries [of interpretation] are constantly renewed by the inexhaustible resources of our social relations, while its ideals essentially demand, at every point, an infinite series of mutual interpretations in order to express what even the very least conversational effort, the least attempt to find our way in life that we would interpret, involves” (Royce 1968, 290). All interpretations are like the number line: infinitely dense and infinitely extended.⁴

We should put out an example here on Royce’s behalf or we may get led along by mathematical metaphors and lose track of what exactly is being argued for. Consider a road sign, such as a sign for deer crossing. The sign itself is a sign, put up by an interpreter who both recognizes the meaning of deer tracks and knows the road sign vocabulary so as to be able to convey that meaning to travelers. The traveler then sees the sign as an interpretation, and interprets the interpretation by grasping the interpreter’s interpretation. The traveler understands what the sign-poster had in mind when placing the sign. In analogous fashion, we use language to interpret, creating an interpretation that is then shared with others. Others interpret our interpretation and in doing so grasp, though language, the interpretation we had in mind prior to our presentation in language. This mutual grasping of each other’s minds is what Royce has in mind when he distinguishes the object of interpretation from the object of conception and perception. He writes, “metaphysically considered, the world of interpretation is the world in which, if indeed we are able to interpret at all, we learn to acknowledge the being of the inner life of our fellow-man” (Royce 1968, 294). Since interpretation is connected to intersubjective relations, it is always a constituent of community—recall our very first point that Royce sees

4 Here the influence of Peirce on Royce shows itself again.

questions of the nature of interpretation central to understanding the nature of a Christian community.⁵

Although I've made comments along the way about how Royce's views compare with Gadamer's, we need to make a more careful comparison to appreciate how Gadamer's views should be modified in light of Royce's views. Fortunately, our work may already have been done for us. In a recent article Kenneth Stickers argues that "Royce calls into question at least three central features of Gadamer's hermeneutics" (Stickers 2001, 16). Stickers argues that there are severe limitations in Gadamer's account of interpretation and that putting Royce and Gadamer in dialogue brings these limitations to light. Stickers's central concern is that Gadamer takes too strongly the paradigm of interpreting a text as the model for all interpretation. As a result, Gadamer takes the pre-interpretive unity of the tradition and of the self for granted and misses how interpretation is intersubjectively constitutive of both of these. Gadamer prioritizes reading over community building. Royce, on the contrary, views interpretation as essentially tied to, indeed conceptually subordinate to, community formation. In his summation Stickers writes,

I have suggested, first, that traditions and communities are taken for granted by Gadamer, as part of the backdrop, the fore-structure, of interpretive understanding, while for Royce, they are constituted through interpretation. Second, while "self" appears within Gadamer's hermeneutics as already given and present in a more or less unified way, "self," too, in Royce is co-constituted in relationship to texts and a community of others. And third, while texts are central to Gadamerian hermeneutics, they are instrumental and subordinate to the constitution of communities and selves in Royce (Stickers 2001, 18).

Stickers gets Gadamer wrong on all counts, but the way he gets him wrong is insightful for what it means to read across traditions and what hermeneutics can learn from Royce.

Stickers's first objection is that Gadamer takes traditions for granted, while Royce sees them as "constituted through interpretation." What

5 Royce continues here by discussing the role of a third in adjudicating interpretations. For reasons of space I have not included that discussion here, but in a longer version I explore how Royce's argument has changed from his early essay "The Possibility of Error" and how Gadamer's account of interpretation needs to be clarified to both appreciate Royce's insight and avoid Royce's absolute idealism.

Stickers means by saying they are taken for granted is that they are taken as given, and indeed this is true, traditions are taken as given by Gadamer. In fact, the case could be made that all Gadamer ever means by tradition are those things that are always taken as given—those implicit and explicit beliefs and practices that provide the background conditions for the intelligibility of a text or an action. We can with fairly loose and broad strokes distinguish traditions by their differences of interpretive priority, but, in fact, Gadamer has nothing to say about the necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a tradition or about the identity conditions of a tradition. It's a placeholder in his theory for those things operating behind the scenes. Royce would not want to deny that there are beliefs and practices operating behind the scenes that make interpretation possible, so the real issue becomes Stickers's second point: that for Royce a tradition is "constituted through interpretation." The same, however, holds for Gadamer as well. Traditions only exist to the extent they are maintained, and they are only maintained only to the extent they remain operative in interpretations. So interpretations are necessary conditions for the existence of traditions, and the way that the interpretations unfold give the explicit character to the tradition. To consciously come to understand a tradition always requires interpreting the way the tradition is active in interpretation and actions. This interpretation itself functions to affect the role of the tradition in the interpretation and, as a result, constitutes the tradition.

Take as an example the intellectual tradition of liberalism. Those operating under the effects of that tradition are likely to respond positively to some texts and negatively to others. For example, they may find Rawls's political liberalism as a viable suggestion for how one might justly establish the basic political structure of a well-ordered society. They may not agree with it in its entirety, but they recognize it as sharing sympathies and concerns they have as liberals. However, say in the context of the ongoing debate about what constitutes liberalism—about how to understand the tradition of liberalism, its commitments, and its proper trajectory—they come to the conclusion that at the core of liberalism is the acceptance of a conception of the subject as a bearer of universal rights. This is explicitly marginalized in Rawls's account of justice as fairness, so they may come to have new-found suspicions about Rawls and about his position in, much less his contributions to, liberalism. In fact, such a decision about the nature of the tradition of liberalism may provoke a hostile reaction against Rawls as a dangerous

pretender to the title of “liberal.” We witness this in the strong pragmatist reactions against Richard Rorty out of concern that the tradition is being usurped or corrupted. So the tradition itself exists to the extent it persists in interpretive practice and takes on an explicit character only through interpretation. On this point, contrary to Stickers’s claim, Gadamer and Royce seem to be on par.

We could have come to this conclusion through other means: for Gadamer, the only way anything becomes present to consciousness is as interpreted. This is the shift that occurs from descriptive phenomenology to hermeneutic phenomenology. So to the extent a tradition is thematized, it is thematized through interpretation, though we still need to distinguish the tradition as thematized from the tradition operating to shape our interpretive thematizations, including that one. To the extent a tradition is consciously present, it is interpreted.

Given the general principle of interpretive awareness, we should expect Stickers is mistaken on his second objection too: that “the ‘self’ appears within Gadamer’s hermeneutics is already given and present in a more or less unified way.” It does not take long to find examples where Gadamer says things contrary to Stickers’s interpretation. For example, “the essence of the realization of life is still being at one with another, whether the otherness of things or other people. This is true of seeing and perceiving, thinking and knowing. In this self-realization of life, moreover, one’s own self is discerned and felt along with the other thing. ... Via another, a person becomes one with himself” (Gadamer 1999, 158). Gadamer also accepts Hegel’s account of the origin of self-consciousness as laid out in the master/slave section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: we only become self-conscious through the recognition of another. This should shed new light on the passage in *Truth and Method* on which Stickers bases his argument: “History does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through a process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live” (Gadamer 1991, 276). Stickers objects to the self-evidence claim, but that is because he takes this to be equivalent to being consciously self-aware with certainty. In fact, for Gadamer, following Heidegger, understanding as a mode of being is broader than understanding as a conscious state. So the understanding that manifests itself through our relations to our family, society, and state are likely to be understandings embodied in habits and practices. We are first and foremost our habits,

so our identity is mediated through our traditions; as our traditions are reflected in our family, society, and state, they are the means by which we come to understand ourselves. The self-evidence of ourselves in our social relations stems not from certainty, but from being constituted by those relations. Stikkers provides Royce's view that the "self", too, in Royce is co-constituted in relationship to texts and a community of others" as a contrast to Gadamer, but given Gadamer's emphasis on our embeddedness in tradition (a term Stikkers takes to be equivalent to community, but in important ways they are not equivalent), the self is not only co-constituted by its relation to tradition, it is almost fully constituted by its relation to tradition. As he says, and as Stikkers repeats, "history does not belong to us; we belong to it."

Stikkers's final argument is that "while texts are central to Gadamerian hermeneutics, they are instrumental and subordinate to the constitution of communities and selves in Royce." It's not entirely clear in what Stikkers means by subordination. His evidence for Royce's view comes from *The Problem of Christianity*—"inquiry concerning the nature and reality of the community is still our leading topic. To this topic, whatever we shall have to say about interpretation is everywhere subordinate" (Stikkers 2001, 16)—though that can't be the only support for his view. The fact that Royce, in a book about community, investigates interpretation as a means to better understand community is not evidence of an overall subordination of interpretation to community. Royce's statement, also quoted by Stikkers, that "were there, then, no interpretations in the world there would be neither selves nor communities" (Royce 1968, 274) seems to suggest an inverse priority, though I think we all expect the proper relation to go both ways: no interpretations without selves and communities; no selves nor communities without interpretations.

Still, we have two different ideas of subordination at work here. In one case we subsume our investigations of interpretation to our investigations of community. The relation is methodological given the goals of the project. In the other case, there is an ontological relation between interpretations and communities (and selves): interpretations depend on communities for their existence. There are other possibilities, all signaled by Stikkers. He says that "for Gadamer interpretation is foremost a matter of getting at, or laying out, the meaning of a text. ... For Royce, by contrast, interpretation is first and foremost the constitution of community, and hence community's traditions, for which texts being interpreted are instrumental" (Stikkers 2001, 16). The question of super

and sub-ordination seems to be what is the paradigm instance from which we are going to best understand interpretation. For Gadamer, it's the interpretation of a text; for Royce it's the interpretation of communal signs. If this is the kind of subordination Stickers is referring to in his objection, I agree with his interpretation of Gadamer, but how it constitutes an object is no longer so clear. At least in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer is concerned with rehabilitating the claim of truth in the humanities, so texts, and artworks, are the natural objects of inquiry since they are the focus of the humanities. But Gadamer goes on to extend the category of text to anything that can be interpreted, so it includes signs and actions, for example. It's not clear that there is a significant difference here.

Stickers also writes, "for Royce, what one desires from interpretation is not to be alone, communion with others ... 'Love' is thus the central motive for interpretation in Royce's hermeneutics" (Stickers 2001, 16). For Gadamer, in contrast, the point of an interpretation is achieving understanding.⁶ It's hard to see how this is a criticism of Gadamer as opposed to a concern about Royce's goal of interpretive accuracy. It might be taken as a matter of personality, but perhaps more accurately it should be taken as a matter of their divergent interpretations of human nature. Royce thinks we are by nature seekers of community, and this is a, if not the, fundamental motivating feature of action. Gadamer believes we are interpreting beings—he embraces Aristotle's characterization of humans as *zoon echon logon*, as long as *logos* is interpreted as "linguistically disclosive"—and this is the fundamental motive for action. Stickers's argument is that it follows from this difference that Royce sees textual interpretation as always being a kind of relation between two people. We interpret texts with others, or by ourselves because of our relations to others, as an explicit expression of that relation. (Recall that the other person for whom the text is interpreted can be future manifestations of our selves). We've seen something like this in Royce's suggestion that interpretation picks out a distinct form of cognition that is always at work in understanding other minds. Stickers invokes

6 Stickers claims that a discussion of love is "conspicuously absent from Gadamer's [hermeneutics]," but he would be well directed to Gadamer's writings on Plato (from his dissertation, *Das Wesen der Lust nach den Platonischen Dialogen*, to "Amicus Plato Magis Amica Veritas" and "'Logos' and 'Ergon' in Plato's *Lysis*") and his late writings on friendship, such as "Friendship and Solidarity" and "Friendship and Self-Knowledge."

the claim that interpretation always involves a three-fold relation: the interpreter, the interpreted, and that being for whom the interpretation is presented. He claims this is different from Gadamer in that Gadamer focuses primarily on “receptively listening to the ‘voice of the other’ as manifested in and through the text” (Stickers 2001, 17). Royce focuses on the recipient of the interpretation.

This difference we will have to explore in detail for it is here that the relationship between Royce’s hermeneutics and Gadamer’s becomes most nuanced and we have the most to gain from close comparison. Let me first present briefly why Stickers is mistaken in his Gadamer interpretation here as well. Stickers misses three crucial features of Gadamer’s account of interpretation. First, for Gadamer all interpretations involve three parties: the two interlocutors, and the subject matter of the interpretation. This is not quite the same as Royce’s trinity, and I will unpack the differences below, but nonetheless interpretation for Gadamer is never simply a relation between a receptive reader and a text. Second, for Gadamer reading is not a passive activity of receiving the meaning of the text. We understand when we are able to interpret the text, which means to restate the meaning of the text, in effect to translate the text. We learn from being forced to become articulate anew in the presence of the interlocutor, not by simply listening to difference. Gadamer makes this point most clearly in his discussion in *Truth and Method* where he compares the interpretation of a text with the I-Thou encounter (Gadamer 1991, 358–62). He points out there that we only properly encounter texts when we take seriously what they reveal to us and that requires putting the views expressed there in ways that allows them to engage us. This is not a passive listening, but an often difficult reconstruction. Third, the alterity of the voice of the other is the alterity of the *view* of our interlocutor about the subject matter. Just because it is someone else making a claim doesn’t mean the claim embodies some form of alterity. It is the relation to the subject matter that establishes alterity, not the mere presence of another person. So listening to the alterity of the other is, for Gadamer, actively trying to understand what the other person has to teach us about the subject matter, no more and no less. It is a social act seeking to understand a shared meaning.

Like Royce, then, Gadamer sees all interpretation as including three elements, the two interpreters and the object (or subject matter) of the interpretation. A is always engaging B about X. This is why all interpretation, whether of a text of another person’s views, is a dialogue.

Whether we are reading Emerson on how to best live one's life, or talking to a friend about how to best live one's life, in either case there is an exchange of views about a subject matter in such a way that new insights arise. We are guided in our understanding of the other person by our preliminary understanding of the subject matter—the principle of charity requires us to see how the other person is providing an answer to a legitimate question about the subject matter—and we revise our understanding of the subject matter through engaging the other's opinion. How this engagement plays out can vary, but it always includes an attempt on our part to rearticulate our understanding in such a way to take into consideration the concerns ideas or questions raised by our interlocutor about the subject matter. For Gadamer, then, it is not that every interpretation is *for* someone, but rather that every interpretation is *with* someone. How does this compare to Royce's trinity?

According to Royce there is the interpreter, the interpreted, and that for whom the interpretation is made. But interpreting for someone and interpreting with someone are very different activities. In the first case the audience is kept in mind, but the interpretive process is a singular activity, not a shared activity. Interpreting with someone, in dialogue with someone, is irreducible to explanation in terms of alternating interpretations for one another and for that reason is a genuinely shared activity. Thus Royce's account of interpretation is less intersubjective than Gadamer's; for Royce, interpretation is not an actual dialogue between two persons, it is an act of one person attempting to establish a relation with another person. Since it is a singular act (for another), we can see how the (absent) other plays such an important role in the motivation of the interpretation. For Gadamer, interpretations aren't for the sake of establishing community, as community is a condition for an interpretation to take place to begin with.

We can understand a little better why Gadamer has to argue that incommensurability is impossible and why he connects interpretation, dialogue, and friendship so closely. If Royce is presenting interpretation as an attempt to regain community it is because he sees interpretation as a distinctive type of intellectual activity that occurs in the wake of a crisis. Consider his example of exchanging money. We need to exchange money because we are no longer able to use our currency; the conditions of normal social interaction have broken down and we need to go through the process in order to reestablish them. Royce introduces the "for whom" as part of the interpretive process and he sees interpretation as

an attempt to (re)establish community because he has a good pragmatist appreciation for the conditions of interpretation. Throughout most of his career Royce embraced the pragmatist principle that all judgments are constructive responses to a situation.⁷ Since interpretation is the key intellectual process whereby we are aware of our minds or other minds, the situation requiring a constructive response is a situation of intersubjective breakdown. We need to interpret because the meanings are unclear. This is not to say we are interpreting as isolated individuals; we are always interpreting given our intersubjectively established intellectual resources, our awareness of socially shared signs, and our metaphysically established desire for community.

Understanding Royce's emphases on the breakdown of social conditions that calls for interpretation helps us to see Stikkers's points in a better light. Although Stikkers consistently misinterprets Gadamer, we can appreciate some general concerns grounded in his Roycean spirit. Stikkers emphasizes that Gadamer takes our traditions and our self as if they are firmly in place unconstituted by the interpretations. In fact, Gadamer doesn't see them as unconstituted by our interpretations, but he does see them as in place, certainly in the sense that he doesn't discuss any crises that would lead us to engage in interpretation to begin with. Since interpretations, for Royce, deal with relations to others and self-understanding, the crises would be crises of community or crises of self, and thus the role the interpretation plays in reconstituting community and self is all the more apparent. Gadamer's examples of interpretation in contrast are particularly academic; he is concerned above all with the proper interpretation of the Greeks. We can see how Stikkers would be tempted to argue that for Gadamer interpretation is a purely intellectual activity, a relation between reader and text, rather than a communal activity. While Gadamer talks about an interpretation as answering a question, he doesn't consider the activity of interpreting itself as necessarily arising out of a lived dissatisfaction, a question generating crisis.

Is Gadamer so oblivious to the contexts that call for interpretation? Since Gadamer considers all intellectual activity, perception and conception included, as interpretation, he doesn't focus on the specific case of social crisis. Since what counts as an interpretation is broader, the motivation for interpretation must likewise be much broader than

7 For example he says just this in a 1903 version of his argument for error, "Error and Truth" in Royce 2001.

social crisis. Nonetheless, in one sense Gadamer does preserve the insight that all calls for intentional interpretation arise out of a question (on this point he is sometimes compared to John Dewey). He argues that all interpretations involve application, which is the same as saying all interpretations respond to questions in such a way as to allow us to move forward differently afterward. Application is his term for the practical consequences of the completion of inquiry. Since all intellectual activity is interpretation, application is not merely a social moving forward, a reestablishment of community and self, it includes all comportment. According to Gadamer the virtue associated with application is *phronesis*—a moral and intellectual virtue guiding action. Stikkers's point that "the absence of the other to whom one's interpretation is addressed is especially conspicuous in Gadamer's explication of interpretation as application" only makes sense in the context of Royce's restricted understanding of interpretation where interpretation is clearly distinguished from perception and conception.

So the difference between Royce and Gadamer has become focused on their disagreement about the scope of interpretation. Royce holds that interpretation is a special kind of knowledge distinct from perception and conception. Gadamer disagrees with Royce in holding that all perception and conception are also interpretations; all understanding is interpretive. Yet, when Gadamer claims interpretation is a dialogue with someone he is clearly only talking about explicit, intentional interpretations of a subject matter with a text or another person, not perceptions or conceptions. Royce therefore has a point. Even if we were to grant that Gadamer is correct in following Heidegger and arguing that we are fundamentally interpretive beings and that not only all our intellectual activity, but all our actions, are only properly understood as interpretations, this should not preclude us from distinguishing those interpretations that belong to our everyday, unreflective activities from those that are conscious and explicit. When a person walks into a room and sits in a chair, that person is expressing an interpretation of his or her surroundings and his or her place in those surroundings. But that activity is different from the one that occurs when a person walks into a foreign space and has to think about where to sit, and both are different from the activity of interpreting a confusing text (or interpreting what someone else means) when the meaning isn't apparent. Interpretation as a conscious, deliberate activity is what occurs when meanings come up short, and these meanings are always social meanings. So explicit,

intentional interpretation is a social activity geared toward the rehabilitation of a disrupted sense of community or self. Gadamer should be completely amenable to this differentiation, as it would square with what he has to say about friendship and community. Moreover Gadamer can explain, perhaps better than Royce, how it is that the community is re-established since his account of interpretation is explicitly dialogical. It needs to be pointed out, however, in contrast to Royce, that just because intentional interpretation is irreducibly social that doesn't mean that everyday interpretation is not. Our actions, perceptions, and conceptions are themselves intersubjective in the sense that they are conditioned by and express the traditions out of which we live. In the end, Royce is right to isolate interpretation as a class of intellectual activity with a uniquely social nature; hermeneutics should embrace this distinction and work to show its consequences.

Traditions are always intersubjective. Conflicts between traditions are thus social conflicts; they are the kinds of crises that Royce would put forward as inspiring the need for interpretation. To do that, however, requires careful reading and articulating of both traditions in such a way that they can be seen at some juncture as addressing similar questions. How they answer the questions differently then becomes the key for seeing how their other differences play out and what we have to learn from them.

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