"'A New World': Philosophical Idealism in America, 1700 to 1950"

Lecture VI

1. *Noah Porter on the dangers of reading Emerson*

Why not read the modern Emerson, because some say he teaches a subtle Pantheism, as freely as you read the ancient Plotinus, to whom he refers so often, and with a deference so profound; or as you read those Indian sages, from whom he quotes a striking line now and then?

It is safe to say that whoever the author may be, whether he be . . . Emerson or Plotinus, . . . if he shakes your well-established confidence in God, or leads you to disown the name that is above every name; or if he disturbs the serenity or fervor of your Christian devotion, then he is not an author whom you should read. (*Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*, 1883)

2. *What Henry C. Brockmeyer found among the selections from Hegel in Frederic Henry Hedge's* Prose Writers of Germany *(1847)*

Reason is the substance of all things, as well as the infinite power by which they are moved; is itself the illimitable material of all natural and spiritual life, as well as the source of the infinite variety of forms in which this material is livingly manifested. It is the substance of all things; . . . it is the infinite power, . . . it is the illimitable material of all essentially and truth; . . . it feeds upon itself, it creates its material, viz. the infinite variety of extant forms; for only in the shape which reason prescribes and justifies do phenomena come into being and begin to live.

[History is] the rational and necessary course of the spirit which moves the world,— spirit whose nature does indeed ever remain one and the same, but which, in the existence of the world, unfolds this its one nature.

The essence of spirit is freedom.

The history of the world is the exhibition of the process by which spirit comes to the consciousness of that which it really is.

The history of the world is the progress in the consciousness of freedom.

The Oriental world only knew that *one* is free; the Greek and Roman world knew that *some* are free; but we know that all men, in their true nature, are free—that man as man is free.

3. *Emerson thanks William Torrey Harris for presentation copies of the new* Journal of Speculative Philosophy (1867)

It is a brave undertaking & I shall think better than ever of my country-men if they shall sustain it. I mean [that is, intend] that you shall make me acquainted in it with the true value & performance of Hegel, who, at first sight is not engaging nor at second sight satisfying.

4. *William James on the "Fortnightly Club"*

I saw most of [Thomas Davidson] at a little philosophical Club that used to meet every fortnight in his rooms in Temple Street in Boston. [Davidson came to Boston in 1873.] Other members were W. T. Harris, G. H. Howison, J. E. Cabot, C. C. Everett, B. P. Bowne, and sometimes G. H. Palmer. The Club had existed before Davidson's advent. The previous year we had gone over a good part of Hegel's larger Logic under the self-constituted leadership of Messrs. Emery and McClure, two young business-men from Quincy, Illinois, who had become enthusiastic hegelians and, knowing almost no German, had actually possessed themselves of a manuscript translation of the entire three volumes of Logic, made by an extraordinary Pomeranian immigrant named Brockmeyer. ("Thomas Davidson, Individualist")

5. *Four points of agreement between Howison and Bowne:* (i) monistic idealism is at odds with human individuality and freedom; (ii) the spontaneously acting subject of experience constitutes the world in space and time, which is thereby rendered "phenomenal" or "ideal"; (iii) the real world beyond the ideal world can be known; (iv) it includes not only an infinite God, but finite selves who are independent of God.

6. *Howison and Bowne on (i)*

Monistic idealism is a "pantheism [that] necessarily represents what it calls God as the sole *real* cause in existence. Every other being exists but as a part or mode of the eternal One." (Howison, *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays Illustrating the Metaphysical Theory of Personal Idealism*, 1901)

The "Higher Pantheism" of recent idealism "signalise[s] a return to the elder views of the Orient." (*Limits*)

Howison quotes Benjamin Jowett: "The abasement of the individual before the Divine Being is really a sort of pantheism." (*Limits*)

He detects a connection with Calvinism: There is no escaping from the reasoning of an Augustine, a Calvin, an Edwards, except by removing its premise. That premise is the utter finitude of the "creature," resting upon the conception that the Divine functions of creation and regeneration, more especially creation, are operations by what is called "efficient" causation, that is, causation by direct productive energy, whose effects are of course as helpless before it as any motion is before the impact that starts it. Creation thus meant calling the creature into existence at a *date*, prior to which it had *no* existence. It was summoned into being by a simple *fiat*, out of fathomless nothing; and quite so, it was supposed, arose even the human soul, just as all other things arose.

It is time we all understood how finally at variance with the heart of Christian faith and hope is any doctrine of evolution that views the *whole* of human nature as the product of "continuous creation,"—as merely the last term in a process of transmissive causation. (*Limits*)

Howison's question for Royce: "Can the reality of human free-agency, of moral responsibility and universal moral aspiration, of unlimited spiritual hope for every soul,—can this be made out, can it even be held, consistently with the theory of an Immanent God?" (*The Conception of God*, 1895)

He extends his concern from Royce to Emerson (from Limits*):*

> The doctrine of a Cosmic Consciousness . . . reduces all created minds either to mere phenomena or, at best, to mere modes of the Sole Divine Life, and all their lives to mere *effects* of its solitary omnipresent causation:—

When me they fly, I am the wings.

It is no doubt fine, and in some sense it is correct, to say that God is in all things; but when it comes to saying that God is all things and that all forms of thought and feeling and conduct are his, then reason simply commits suicide. (Bowne, *Metaphysics*, 1898)

The conception of the many as made out of the one, or as resulting from any fission or self-diremption of the one, or as being parts of the one,—its "internally cherished parts,"—is seen at once to be an attempt of the uncritical imagination to express an unpicturable problem of the reason in the picture forms of the spatial fancy. (*Personalism*, 1908)

This result has been perhorresced by many able thinkers in recent times as committing us to a destructive and pernicious pantheism, and they have taken refuge in an impossible pluralism. Some have gone so far as to hold that the many have always existed, as the only means of rescuing finite personality. But surely this is to throw out the child with the bath. (*Personalism*)

The dangers against which these thinkers protest are indeed real, and their pernicious character is clearly seen in the Vedanta philosophy of India. (*Personalism*)

7. *The argument for (ii)*

Howison: The "varying flood of serial experiences" has to be "connected," and only an "*act* of the soul" can manage it. (*Limits*)

Bowne: Every . . . successive thing, in itself, is made up of mutually external existences, and these attain to any abiding existence only through the activity of some non-successive being which is able to unite the successive existences into the thought of something fixed and permanent. Every such successive thing must be phenomenal, for, like the symphony, it exists and can exist only for and through intelligence. Or if we prefer to say the thing exists, then the claim is that it exists only through intelligence. (*Personalism*)

We find the problem solved only in the unity of conscious self, which is the only concrete unity that escapes the infinite dispersion of space and time. (*Personalism*)

Howison: [The lesson of Hume is not that the self is a bundle of perceptions, but that] "without an Abiding and Active in us the transitory and sensible is impossible." (*Limits*)

Bowne: We came to the phantasmagoric flux of Heraclitus, which is the destruction of both thought and thing. We also saw the impossibility of making any use of the world of rigid identity. . . . In the view before us [a common-sense impersonalism] all this is overlooked, and it is assumed as a matter of course that both change and identity can be united in the impersonal. But when this is seen to be impossible, we no longer have one cause or one being, or indeed any cause or being whatever, but simply a causing in which nothing causes and nothing is caused, and a movement in which nothing moves and nothing is moved. We have a kind of metaphysical vermiform peristalsis, or peristaltism, in which nothing worms itself along from nothing to nothing, and is mistaken for something along the way. A moving body without continuity and identity would not be a moving body, but only a succession of optical phenomena; and if there were no observer, not even this could exist. The impersonal changing cause is in this case. Its unity and identity are not in the flow itself, but in the observing mind; and when that is removed, there is nothing articulate left. (*Personalism*)

8. *Bowne's empiricist reply to the objection I raised earlier for Edwards*

His transcendental empiricism: "Concepts without immediate experience are only empty forms, and become real only as some actual experience furnishes them with real contents" (*Personalism)*. Bowne is a *transcendental* empiricist because these are categories or forms "which the mind gives to its experience"—forms without which there cannot be experience. Yet "the mind is not to be understood through them. Rather they are to be understood through the mind's living experience of itself" (*Personalism*).

Personality can never be construed as a product or compound; it can only be experienced as a fact. It must be possible because it is given as actual. When we attempt to go behind this fact we are trying to explain the explanation. We explain the objects before the mirror by the images which seem to exist behind it. *There is nothing behind the mirror*. When we have lived and described the personal life we have done all that is possible in sane and sober speculation. If we try to do more we only fall a prey to abstractions. This self-conscious existence is the truly ultimate fact. (*Personalism*)

His anti-abstractionism: Early in the last century, M. Comte, the founder of French positivism, set forth his famous doctrine of the three stages of human thought. Man begins, he said, in the theological stage, when all phenomena are referred to wills, either in things or beyond them. After a while, through the discovery of law, the element of caprice and arbitrariness, and thus of will, is ruled out, and men pass to the second, or metaphysical stage. Here they explain phenomena by abstract conceptions of being, substance, cause, and the like. But these metaphysical concepts are really only the ghosts of the earlier theological notions, and disappear upon criticism. When this is seen, thought passes into the third and last stage of development, the positive stage. Here men give up all inquiry into metaphysics as bootless, and content themselves with discovering and registering the uniformities of coexistence and sequence among phenomena. . . . The aim of these lectures is to show that critical reflection brings us back again to the personal metaphysics which Comte rejected. We agree with him that abstract and impersonal metaphysics is a mirage of formal ideas, and even largely of words, which begin, continue, and end in abstraction and confusion. Causal explanation must always be in terms of personality, or it must vanish altogether. Thus we return to the theological stage, but we do so with a difference. At last we have learned the lesson of law, and we now see that law and will must be united in our thought of the world. Thus man's earliest metaphysics reemerges in his latest; but enlarged, enriched, and purified by the ages of thought and experience. (*Personalism*)

A pregnant passage in Hume that Bowne would have appreciated: Ideas always represent the objects or impressions from which they are deriv'd, and can never without a fiction represent or be apply'd to any other. (*A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.2.3.11) *We cannot turn back and deny of ourselves properties we know of only because we find them in ourselves.*

9. *Howison's rationalist—and "communitarian"—reply to the same objection*

It is the essence of a person to stand in a relation with beings having an autonomy, in whom he recognises rights, towards whom he acknowledges duties. (*Limits*)

That a mind is conscious of itself as a *self*, means at the least that it discriminates itself *from* others, but therefore that it also refers its own defining conception *to* others,—is in relation *with* them, as unquestionably as it is in the relation of differing *from* them. It cannot even *think* itself, except in this relatedness to *them*; cannot at all *be*, except as a member of a reciprocal society.

Thus the logical roots of each mind's very being are exactly this recognition of itself through its recognition of others, and the recognition of others in its very act of recognizing itself. (*Limits*)

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. (*Limits*)

The new theory puts altruism into the very being of each spontaneous self, and lodges his necessary recognition of others into the very primal intelligent act whereby he defines himself and gives intelligible meaning to his saying *I*. ("Personal Idealism in its Ethical Bearings," 1903)

We are "primordially social." ("Personal Idealism in its Ethical Bearings")

Howison's rationalism: . . . the criterion of all truth, namely, the "inconceivability of the opposite." (*Limits*)

10. *Bowne on the method of empirical coherence*

. . . [To] set forth a general way of looking at things which, I trust, will be found consistent with itself and with the general facts of experience. (Bowne, *Theory of Thought and Knowledge*, 1897, and *Metaphysics*, 1898)

11. *Edgar Sheffield Brightman's loyalty to Bowne and his preoccupation with disagreement*

The attempt to define idealism may be brought to a close by a document which has some historical interest in this connection. It is a "Platform of Personalistic Idealism" on which Professor Mary Whiton Calkins and I agreed May 25, 1929. It defines positions which may be held by those who affirm all . . . types of idealism.

PLATFORM OF PERSONALISTIC IDEALISM

1. The universe is completely mental in nature.

2. Every mental existence is either a self, or else a part, aspect, phase, or process of a self. The term "person" is used for selves capable of reasoning and ideal valuations.

3. The physical universe may be regarded as the direct experience and willing of one cosmic person, or as a system of infra-human selves, or as a system of ideas in the minds of finite persons.

4. The total universe is a system of selves and persons, who may be regarded either as members of one all-inclusive person who individuates them by the diversity of his purposing or as a society of many selves related by common purposes. ("The Definition of Idealism," 1933)

Brightman's tolerance for uncertainty: The personalistic theory of substance . . . is not advanced as something absolutely certain or completely demonstrated. It is advanced as the most coherent and most adequate hypothesis available to present insight on the basis of the whole of empirical evidence and what it implies and involves. The basic justification for a theory of substance stands—with full recognition of human limitations and cosmic mystery. (*Person and Reality*, 1958)

12. *Martin Luther King on Brightman*

I studied philosophy and theology at Boston University under Edgar S. Brightman and L. Harold DeWolf. Both men greatly stimulated my thinking. It was mainly under these teachers that I studied personalistic philosophy—the theory that the clue to the meaning of ultimate reality is found in personality. This personal idealism remains today my basic philosophical position. Personalism's insistence that only personality—finite and infinite—is ultimately real strengthened me in two convictions: it gave me metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God, and it gave me a metaphysical basis for the dignity and worth of all human personality.

Just before Dr. Brightman's death [in 1953], I began studying the philosophy of Hegel with him . . . . There were points in Hegel's philosophy that I strongly disagreed with. For instance, his absolute idealism was rationally unsound to me because it tended to swallow up the many in the one. But there were other aspects of his thinking that I found stimulating. His contention that "truth is the whole" led me to a philosophical method of rational coherence. ("My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 1958)

13. *The concluding words of King's 1955 dissertation*

Wieman holds to an ultimate pluralism, both quantitative and qualitative. Tillich, on the other hand, holds to an ultimate monism, both qualitative and quantitative. Both of these views have been found to be inadequate. Wieman's ultimate pluralism fails to satisfy the rational demand for unity. Tillich's ultimate monism swallows up finite individuality in the unity of being. A more adequate view is to hold a quantitative pluralism and qualitative monism. In this way both oneness and manyness are preserved.

14. *From King's final exam in a course with DeWolf*

To my mind one of the most important problems confronted by present personalists is that of the relationship between Personalism and theology. This problem grows up mainly because of the emphasis, by many personalists, on the method of coherence. The problem boils down to this: Can one hold to an empirical method of coherence and at the same time make absolute decisions? Certainly religion demands such absolute decisions . . . . Theoretically we can never make a claim to absolute certainty. This is certainly the emphasis of a method of coherence and that I accept. But while we cannot be theoretically certain about any issue, we are compelled to act. And certainly we have a right to act and accept any belief until one better is found if it does not contradict experience. So that along with a "theoretical relativism" we have the perfect right to adopt a "practical absolutism."

15. *King on Thoreau*

When I went to Atlanta's Morehouse College as a freshman in 1944 my concern for racial and economic justice was already substantial. During my student days at Morehouse I read Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience* for the first time. Fascinated by the idea of refusing to cooperate with an evil system, I was so deeply moved that I reread the work several times. This was my first intellectual contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance. ("My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence")

16. *From Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience"*

There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.

17. *Royce on transcendentalism, from "An Episode in Early California Life: The Squatter Riot of 1850 in Sacramento," first published in 1885 and reprinted in* Studies of Good and Evil *in 1898—another effort (like* The Religious Aspect of Philosophy *of 1885) at surpassing Emerson*

The cultivated Radicals of the anti-slavery generation, and especially of Massachusetts, were a type in which an impartial posterity will take a huge delight; for they combined so characteristically shrewdness, insight, devoutness, vanity, idealism, and self-worship, To speak of them, of course, in the rough, and as a mass, not distinguishing the greater names, they were usually believers in quite abstract ideas; men who knew how to meet God "in the bush" whenever they wanted, and so avoided him in the mart and the crowded street [the quoted words are from Emerson's poem "Good-Bye," to which Royce also alludes in other places]; men who had "dwelt check by jowl, since the day" they were "born, with the Infinite Soul," and whose relations with him were like those of any man with his own private property [the quoted words are from James Russell Lowell's *A Fable for Critics* (1848), a satire of contemporary writers that begins with Emerson; the words are attributed not to Emerson but to "Miranda," Lowell's stand-in for Margaret Fuller, Emerson's close friend; note that Royce had to go to some effort to make "men" the subject of the two quoted pieces]. This Infinite that they worshipped was, however, in his relations to the rest of the world, too often rather abstract . . . . From him they got a so-called Higher Law. As it was ideal, and, like its author, very abstract, it was far above the erring laws of men, and it therefore relieved its obedient servants from all entangling earthly allegiances. If the constitution upon which our only hope of better things also depended, was contradicted by this Higher Law, then the constitution was a "league with hell," and anybody could set up for himself, and he and the Infinite might carry on a government of their own [the quoted words are generally identified with the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison].

These Radicals were, indeed, of the greatest value to our country. To a wicked and corrupt generation they preached the gospel of a pure idealism fervently and effectively. If our generation does not produce just such men, it is because the best men of our time have learned from them, and have absorbed their fervent and lofty idealism into a less abstract yet purer doctrine. The true notion, as we all, of course, have heard, is, that there is an ideal of personal and social perfection far above our natural sinful ways, and indeed revealed to us by the agencies of spiritual life, and not by baser worldy means, but not on that account to be found or served by separating ourselves, or our lives, or our private judgments, from the social order. . . . He is the best idealist who casts away as both unreal and unideal the vain private imaginings of his own weak brain, whenever he catches a glimpse of any higher and wider truth; all this lesson we, like other peoples and generations, have to study and learn. The Transcendentalists, by their very extravagances, have helped us towards this goal; but we must be pardoned if we learn from them with some little amusement. For when we are amused at them, we are amused at ourselves, since only by these very extravagances in our own experience do we ever learn to be genuine and sensible idealists.

18. *Royce's final thoughts on the Absolute*

This essentially social universe, this community which we have now declared to be real, and to be, in fact, the sole and supreme reality,—the Absolute,—what does it call upon a reasonable being to do? (*The Problem of Christianity*, 1913)

19. *Howison's version of very much the same conception*

Ethics for [me], as for Professor Royce, can have no valid presuppositions except such as find their place in a totally coherent, totally embracing theoretical view. ("The Real Issue in 'The Conception of God,'" 1898)

[The] Divine republic of autonomous Persons . . . is itself the only sufficient condition of knowledge. ("The Real Issue")

The equivalent word 'true,' can have no valid meaning except as marking the *a priori* collective consensus of an absolutely total society of minds, independent and yet disinterested and harmonizing. ("The Real Issue")