

# Some Parallels between Phenomenology and Pragmatism. Intentionality, Attention, and Precategorical Dimension in Husserl and Royce

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## Abstract

In this paper, I aim to show how Josiah Royce's philosophy contains many themes that will be at the core of Husserl's philosophical investigations. This paper is divided into two sections. The first one outlines the starting point of these two philosophers, contextualizing their background and showing how they share a common purpose: to put the experience at the center of their thought. For this reason, I want to analyze how they treat the concept of attention concerning intentionality to argue that their philosophies are strictly anchored to the givenness of the experience. In the second one, I deal with the rising of the precategorical dimension (prior to any objectivation) as a possibility of experience itself, paralleling the Husserlian concept of *Lebenswelt* and the Roycean of *the World of Appreciation*. Through this distinction, they criticize the scientific, naturalistic, and objectivistic *Weltanschauung*, showing how its method is founded in an intuitive and non-thematic relation with the world experience that comes ontologically before the scientific description.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, Pragmatism, Intentionality, Precategorical, Attention.



## Introduction

The relationship between Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Josiah Royce (1855-1916) has yet to be studied much, neither from a historical nor a theoretical point of view. Jaqueline Ann K. Kegley is the only one who focused her research on the relation between Royce and the phenomenological and existential tradition.[1] She has recognized how Royce's philosophy can fruitfully interact with a phenomenological approach to philosophical problems; according to Kegley, Royce, as Husserl does, gives importance to concepts of time of inner-consciousness, showing how a study of experience cannot do without an analysis of the first-person experience and that any theory needs a reference to lived experience. Royce is undoubtedly less well-known than Husserl, so I briefly outline his figure. Royce was a close friend and colleague of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and William James (1842-1910); when James took a year's leave of absence from his teaching duties, he got his position at Harvard in 1899.[2] During his life, Royce has studied, like no other pragmatist, German philosophy.[3], in particular, Kant and the post-Kantian idealism; for this reason, his name is often linked to those of the idealistic tradition. Since their first writings, he became interested in the concept of the Absolute, starting a massive debate with James and other pragmatists, which took the name "the battle of the Absolute." In the last part of his career, he approached Peirce's semiotics, re-thinking knowledge and experience in a hermeneutical way.

Before going further, it is worth contextualizing how Royce and Husserl got in touch; for this reason, I first want to draw attention to two students of Royce, William Ernest Hocking and Winthrop Bell. Hocking was the first student of Royce who decided to go, at the beginning of 1900, to study with Husserl. According to his testimony, when he was in Göttingen to do his Ph.D., Husserl told Royce that he "is an important thinker and may only be treated as such." Winthrop Bell is another student of Royce who went to Germany approximately one decade after Hocking to write his Ph.D. dissertation about Royce under Husserl's guide.[5] However, the Göttingen faculty voted to annul his doctorate due to the political situation (the beginning of the First World War). Bell received his degree in 1922, and he was the first teacher of phenomenology at Harvard from 1922 to 1927. His students were Dorion Cairns and Charles Hartshorne, who afterward became Husserl's more celebrated followers.

## **Intentionality and Selective Attention**

### **Husserl**

In this first section, I want to link the concept of intentionality and selective attention, present in the attempt led by Royce in *The World and the Individual* and in *Outlines of Psychology*, to establish certain elements characterizing the structure of the experience. In the early 1900s, Husserl was studying almost the same things about perception and selective attention; here, I am referring in particular to the lessons that Husserl held between 1904 and 1905 and that merged into the posthumous collection called *Wahrnehmung und Aufmerksamkeit: Texte aus dem Nachlass (1893-1912)*[6], located precisely halfway between the theoretical framework of the *Logical Investigations* (1900) and the so-called transcendental turn of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913). It is worth framing the specific problem through which Husserl develops the theme of attention: the aim is to differentiate the intention from the apprehension about the perceptual scene. By the word intention, Husserl means a situation of dynamism, a tendency to (see paragraphs §35, §36, §37, and §84 in *Ideen I*); this term carries with it a constellation of different acts: remembering, perceiving, desiring are verbs which fall within the intentionality's compass. This intentional dynamicity can be expressed differently and outlines different object fields. Roughly speaking, intentionality shows the original correlation between consciousness and the world, and it is an essential aspect of subjective acts because consciousness is always consciousness of something. The theory of intentionality denies that consciousness is a sort of place, a closed space within which there would be images of things. Consciousness is positional and intentional and aims at something beyond itself, requiring a movement of transcendence and self-transcendence. In the *Logical Investigations* (particularly in the fifth research, §15, §16), intentionality, even if introduced in a germinal form, allows Husserl to distinguish intentional experiences and state of consciousness (Husserl 2001 pp. 106-113). Not all our experiences are intentional in the sense of presenting something to our attention. For example, sensations in themselves are not intentional, albeit they contribute to creating the matter of our intentional acts.[7] Perception has a positional nature, so it refers to intentional objects with specific features that the intentional acts attribute to them. This

does not mean that consciousness brings an object into being: it is a matter of constitution of objectivity not understood in the manner of Berkeleyan subjective idealism. This brief introduction to the concept of intentionality can be helpful to thematize the concept of attention since, when Husserl (2016: 116, 127) starts speaking about it, he describes it as a particular intention.[8] Husserl often uses the image of a ray of light that focuses on a particular object, leaving in the darkness other objects present in the perceptual scene; when something attracts our attention, our intention prioritizes something and sets aside something else. There are two possible ways to speak about intention: the first one is a kind of background-intention that does not pay attention to any particular elements, whereas the second one is a type of privileging-intention that highlights a particular element in the visual field: perceptual experiences occur around this continuous exchange between emergence and background. An object emerges from the perceptual background by intensity and contrast, but not all object has the same power to emerge. For this reason, according to Husserl, it is essential to look at the nuances of attention (Husserl, 2016, p. 126). The perceptual scene is triggered by a subjective factor unrelated to the objective emergence. Affections and feelings are closely linked to the features that prioritize a particular object. In this sense, contrast is a necessary but insufficient condition of the emergence. It is a multitude of factors related to objective and subjective poles that light up the objects. Again, perceptual dynamics need both the empirical features of the objects and the subjective, affective, and motivational circumstances. Husserl says that feelings appear as the authentic sources of interest (2016: 137). In Husserl's view, attention, having an emotional basis, keeps together the experience while it modifies direction by segregating some aspects of experience while privileging others. Within this field, attention acts and reacts, with characteristic freedom, to the intentional objects and the stimuli operated by affection and interest.

### **Royce**

Now, we have to look at Royce's understanding of the concept of intentionality; here, we will see how the emphasis is shifted to the voluntary-practical side rather than the cognitive one, as Husserl does. Indeed, according to Husserl, attention is a power that moves the observation or noticing, like in the case of something that attracts

attention from the field of what is more or less noticed. However, when Husserl speaks about attention and interest, he usually refers to "theoretical interest," which is attention at work in reaching evidence in object perception (Husserl, 2016, p. 141). In Royce's view, the perceptual gaze is already decision-oriented, and the attention to the contents of experience becomes relevant to guide and direct the action plan (Royce 1899-1901: 810). According to him, an idea is an act of will and fulfills a purpose, so it is impossible to separate the content of a concept from its decision-making aspect. *Meinung* is the German word that underlies the term intentionality; in his masterpiece, *The World and the Individual*, Royce introduces the concept of *internal meaning*, which shares an etymological root with the German word. Next to the *internal meaning*, there is the *external meaning* that is the objective side of the intentional relation; we could say that the *internal meaning* is headed towards the *external meaning* – that is the noematic aspect of the mind-world relation. Perception is always orientated by a purpose, by a *telos* that establishes the salience's degrees of intentional objects. In the perceptual scene, some elements remain outside the cognitive framework because they are taken into account voluntarily; they do not become objects of selective attention. Now, the point is to wonder why certain elements are cut off, whereas other elements emerge and become salient in the same perceptual scene. As we saw earlier, according to Husserl, affection plays a decisive role in directing attention; in Royce's view, the subjective and voluntary aspect is related to an ethical ground.[9] The subject directs his attention because he has always wanted to accomplish something. No purely theoretical attitude contemplates the intentional relation as an abstract relation between the noetic and noematic aspects; the attention is always directed toward a practical purpose and is always interested in what to choose.[10] Royce ethically understands the concept of attention, which is closely linked to that of will. According to Royce, selective attention is the basic form of the will: it is oriented by concrete material situations that make available some possibilities that cut out aspects and integrate others. Whether an idea has an object depends on the choice that the idea makes, that is, on attention as a selective process. It is certain, however, that paying attention is not a purely subjective fact; to say that attention and, consequently, will are not merely subjective facts means looking at the particular and determined situation in which they have always been inserted: there is always a starting condition on which doing is

triggered. Royce, therefore, argues that attention cannot be directed to anything regardless of the context in which it is located; the will cannot be on an absolute freeway. The situation in which the subject finds himself operating is already pre-structured and materially determined: there are particular possibilities and not others; there are certain expectations, specific possible courses, and not others. Attention should be understood as an act through which a particular universal idea finds its exemplification and unrepeatably individual fulfillment; it is, therefore, not only a process that implies a psychological preference but also a preference understood as an exemplary and exemplifying choice. What reveals objects and opens the field to the manifestation of phenomena is the practical doing as the realization of possible actions, praxis as constantly determined by the situation in which it operates. The interest in something acquires a greater degree of clarity and intensity than another, and an object is seen as more consistent with realizing a purpose. Therefore, the life of our consciousness is a life of surveillance, evaluation, forecasting our acts, and interpreting our whole world in terms of actions. We do not observe any external fact without observing more or less clearly at the same time our attitude towards that fact, our evaluation of its value, our reaction to its presence, and our intentions concerning our future relations with it. The action plan, the idea's internal meaning, sets in motion an already pre-determined object field, which orients the perceptual field and chooses where to go and where to pay attention. Husserl and Royce claim that thought does not have absolute power, so they deeply analyze the concept of selective attention and prioritize the *datum* of the experience to the givenness of the experience.

### **The Precategorical Dimension: *Lebenswelt* and World of Appreciation**

Husserl discusses in detail what *Lebenswelt* is in the investigations conducted in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (1936). Husserl's *Crisis* is not a work in the philosophy of science as we now understand the term; however, it is deeply concerned with science, its practices and methods, its development, its relation to everyday experience, and its internal structure. In the first section, he argues that all modern scientific inquiry (started with Galileo) rests on a mistake. Modern science mathematized nature, believing scientific

language was the authentic way to understand nature objectively. Husserl tries to show that science is just a way, a particular practice, to see the world and contextualizes the scientific perspective in a more comprehensive relation with the world. That is why he starts speaking about *Lebenswelt*, and he describes it as a pre-scientific and pre-theoretical common ground, a non-thematic starting point already given in its naturalness; the world-of-life is a world of original evidence, a place of obviousness and shared practices that structure the world in his wholeness. As Husserl says, the world-of-life has always existed before any science, whatever its mode of being in the age of science. Husserl is trying to thematize what the natural sciences build on and what they start their own specific theoretical practice on: the validities that science discovers are always based on other unspoken validities that inhabit the world-of-life. These ideas of givenness and intersubjectivity are exhibited by Husserl in *Crisis* when he discusses the life-world in § 37, where he says:

«The life-world, for us who wakenly live in it, is always there, existing in advance for us, the “ground” of all praxis, whether theoretical or extra-theoretical. The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live in certainty of the world». (Husserl 1970, p.142)

He also insists on intersubjectivity in § 47:

«Thus, in general the world exists not only for isolated men but for the community of men; and this is due to the fact that even what is straightforwardly perceptual is communal». (Husserl 1970, p.161)

Hence, Husserl is obvious and explicit in highlighting the intersubjective and predatory aspect of the *Lebenswelt*: in short, scientific statements get their meaning by being embedded in the life-world. It is a universe of certainties made up of intuitive evidence, a pre-categorical layer with which the subjects entertain a daily and non-thematic trade and which is independent of any scientific, sociological, or psychological consideration. Our first impression of the world is a merely subjective-relative intuition of pre-scientific life in the world. With "subjective-relative" intuition, Husserl is not here alluding to a sort of skeptical relativism whereby the world is exhausted by the diversity of images that each subject makes; he is

indicating a ground that has always been shared and practiced that makes it possible to do specific theoretical and extra-theoretical activities. There is, therefore, a world shared by everyone, which is the world-of-life and a world, the objective world of the sciences, crossed by theoretical and scientific particularizations based on it.

In the same way, Royce distinguishes the world of appreciation from the world of description; he does so in many writings.[11], following an interpretative line that will lead him to question the status of the empirical sciences and their practices concerning the world. The world of description is configured as a world of established, verified facts, verified and ascertained by whom? Certainly not by any single individual. Each Individual is born and operates in an objective and concrete situation, which he cannot ignore: there are previous and ascertained knowledge and habits that define him. According to science, a fact needs to be irreducible, extraneous, and external to the will of the conscience, out of its power; Royce wants to show how everything that pertains to the world of description and that, therefore, can be verified and described is such because it belongs primarily to a pre-categorical level, the world of appreciation.

«The world of appreciation is, then, one of a sort of reflective “publicity” and interconnectedness; and such an interconnection and publicity is, as we have seen, the very presuppositions of the existence of any genuine truth in the world of description... Without the multitude of genuinely interrelated experiences, no true similarities, no describable universality of experience; without the facts of appreciation, no laws of description... Destroy the organic and appreciable unity of the world of appreciative beings, and the describable objects all vanish; atoms, brains, “suns and milky ways” are naught. The world of science, then, presuppose the world of spiritual oneness». (Josiah R., 1892, p.410)

The world of nature is constituted by description; objects described by sciences are reproducible and understandable within quantitative categories. Therefore, reproducibility and regularity are the fundamental characteristics of the description world. There are structures, orders, and universal laws that constrain the experience and prevent it from momentary improvisations. Only what is describable is universally communicable; only what belongs to this descriptive



domain is objective. However, if this world of description is communicable, this happens because there is a world that lies further down, which comes before this layer. The world of description (a world of abstraction) is deep-rooted in the social, non-thematic, and communicative dimensions of the experience. The point is that a particular fact is recognized only in connection with a particular action plan; it is, therefore, necessary to destroy the vision according to which there is, first of all, an objective world because such a world exists insofar as it is recognized as existing. It is recognized as existing because a pragmatic will considers it a valuable way to describe the world.

We believe in scientific discoveries that, day by day, find their place in scientific knowledge but are not passive acceptance because they always contain the intention to act; there is always a practical will behind every content of meaning that fulfills a specific conscious purpose. Royce is not totally critical of the scientific inquiry. However, a specific implicit physicalist monism that we could summarize as follows: the world consists of a single material substance, which is considered decomposable into scientifically identifiable elements. Through the distinction between the world of description and the world of appreciation, Royce claims that matter is what produces effects. This new materialistic non-reductionist ontology rejects to be considered in quantitative terms but emphasizes qualitative aspects. The notion of efficient cause - determined events produce other determined events according to definite laws - is a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain the role of the mental in the world; moreover, the notion of efficient cause is a form of anthropic causality and is pragmatically helpful for some purposes. It is, therefore, necessary to consider the notion of formal cause, understood as selective attention. In this sense, it is no longer helpful to obtain a narrow space for mental properties since the action of the will already manifests its presence on a material level: the selective attention, following a particular interest, chooses to describe the world in an "objective and mathematical" way to pursue a specific purpose. For example, exact measurement procedures require a typically objective attitude of attention, full of self-denial: scientists make a sort of sacrifice that derives from a selected attitude, cutting out any subjective element from their investigations because they chose to deny their subjective point of view in the name of the objectivity of

the science. This attitude responds to a particular determination of the will that goes beyond any moral judgment; I am not claiming here that this practice of not considering the subjective point of view is terrible. I am just saying that only thanks to this voluntary ἐποχή we can accept valid and objective scientific discoveries.[12] For this reason, Royce argues, as Husserl does[13], that the world of description cannot be the proper and fundamental way to know the world. In fact, with the notion of a world of appreciation, Royce claims that objectivity cannot be experienced in itself; it is not autonomous, and it is not even immediately perceptible data: the objective is what results from an agreement made possible by the intersubjectivity of subjective judgments. In *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce argues that scientific discoveries become such only within a common horizon and a community willing to accept scientific judgments.[14] In this sense, Royce says that

«we report facts; we let the facts speak; but we, as we investigate, in the popular phrase, “talk back” to the facts. We interpret as well as report. Man is not merely made for science, but science is made for man. It expresses his deepest intellectual needs... as well as his careful observations... The theories of science are human, as well as objective, internally rational as well as (when that is possible) subject to external tests». (Robinson, 1951, pp.179-280)

Husserl and Royce, even if in different terms, argue that nature and its description is something social and interpersonal and that science can be respectful of the world only if it is aware that it is just a specific way to understand and describe the world:

«Whenever the scientist speaks as a scientist, he is in the scientific attitude, thinking within the horizon of his theoretical end, thinking into it, so to speak, and at the same time having it as horizon in a privileged universal validity as the immediate horizon of his vocational interest. The rest of the world, the world-totality which *eo ipso* takes all human purposeful structures up into itself as world-totality, lies outside his interest. The full universal being of the life-world - especially in its function of making possible his theoretical world and what is pregiven as belonging to it in particular - is completely unconsidered». (Robinson, 1951, p.383)

## End Notes

1. See Kegley J. A. (1978, 1988, 2008).
2. This year, Royce started to write his masterpiece *The World and the Individual* (1899-1901).
3. *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892) and *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (1919).
4. Royce J., (1913). *The Problem of Christianity*.
5. See Bell, J. (2011). In this article, Jason Bell parallels Royce and Husserl through the experience of Winthrop Bell, a Canadian student in Göttingen under Husserl's supervision.
6. Some of these lessons were translated into Italian and collected by Paolo Spinicci and Andrea Scanziani with the title *Percezione e Attenzione* (2016).
7. Husserl E., (2001). *Logical Investigations*, p. 109: «They themselves are not acts, but acts are constituted through them, wherever, that is, intentional characters like a perceptual interpretation lay hold of them, and as it were animate them. »
8. In this sense, "attention is not intention [Intention]" as regards an act of taking a position, or even a new act on its own, where a doxic position is explicitly taken in respect of the object. Starting from 1905 on, attention is a modification of an act, which superimposes on the unity of intention; it fuses with it.
9. Royce J., (1899-1901). *The World and the Individual*, Preface, XV: «That all our beliefs about the truth of any grade and that all theories have a practical meaning, I do indeed explicitly teach. That, as my reader will see, is my whole philosophy».
10. Royce, J. (1899-1901), pp. 38–39: «Now the finite process, whereby our consciousness passes from an indeterminate state of purpose, intention, search for contents, to a relatively determined one, is known to us in its psychological manifestations as a process of selective attention, which always becomes more defined, the more it proceeds. »
11. The distinction between the world of description and appreciation runs through several writings of Royce. It appears for the first time in *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892). Royce articulates this distinction in *The World and the Individual* (1899-1901), and, in the end, he integrates these notions with that of community of interpretation in *The Problem of Christianity* (1913).

12. Royce, J. (1899-1901), p. 122: «The discrimination process plan is truly a self-renunciation plan. There is a heroism of sacrifice in it. I will abandon myself to the facts for what is in me. I will find myself only by losing myself in the careful observation of what already exists».
13. Similar statements are also found in *Crisis* Appendix VII, p. 382: « The life-world is the world that is pregiven, valid constantly and in advance as existing, but not valid because of some purpose of investigation, according to some universal end. Every end presupposes it; even the universal end of knowing it in scientific truth presupposes it and in advance; and in the course of [scientific] work, it presupposes it ever anew, as a world existing, in its own way to be sure, but existing nevertheless. The scientific world (nature in the sense of natural science, world in the sense of philosophy as universal positive science) is a purposeful structure extending to infinity - a structure [made by] men who are presupposed, for the presupposed life-world. Now, though we must further make evident the fact that the life-world itself is a "structure," it is nevertheless not a "purposeful structure," even though to its being, which precedes all-purpose, belongs, men, just as we encounter them and become acquainted with them as a matter of course with all their purposes and their works, which, as developed by men, henceforth also belong as a matter of course to the life-world. Here is again something confusing: every practical world, every science, presupposes the life-world; as purposeful structures, they are contrasted with the life-world, which was always and continues to be "of its own accord."
14. Royce J., (1913). *The Problem of Christianity*, pp. 322, 324, 331: «The individual observer's discoveries have first to be interpreted to the scientific community and then substantiated by the further experience of that community before they belong to science. In other words, the work of science is what, in the athletic phrase, is called teamwork. The spirit of science is one of loyalty to a community of interpretation»/«The individual has made his discovery, but it is a scientific discovery only in the case it can become, through further confirmation, the property and experience of the community of scientific observers»/«Isolated observations of individuals, even when these individuals are of the highest grade of expertness, are always unsatisfactory... The acknowledged facts of a natural science are the community's possessions».

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