

Josiah Royce



*The Conception
of God*

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**Philosophical Discussion concerning the Nature of
the Divine Idea as a Demonstrable Reality**



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INTRODUCTION BY THE EDITOR

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THE first volume of the projected Publications of the Philosophical Union of the University of California, delayed by unavoidable circumstances, here at length appears, as promised at the time of issuing the volume counted as second, — Professor Watson's *Christianity and Idealism*. It consists (1) of the documents of the public discussion held at the seat of the University in 1895, reprinted with only a very few trifling verbal alterations, and, in [Article IV](#), two or three additional sentences; (2) of a new [Supplementary Essay](#) by Professor Royce, in which he develops his central doctrine in a more systematic way, discusses afresh the long-neglected question of Individuality, and, in conclusion, replies to his critics.

The contents of the book very rightly take the form of a discussion, for discussion is the method of philosophy. Of the three chief objects upon which philosophy directs its search, — God, Freedom, and Immortality, — notable as also the essential objects of religion, this discussion, in its outset, aimed only at the first — the nature and the reality of God. But the feature of eminent interest in it is, that in the direct

pursuit of its chosen problem it presently becomes even more engaged on the problem of Freedom, and cannot forego, either, the consideration of Immortality; so true it is that the attempt to conceive God, and to establish his existence, is futile apart from grappling with the other two connected ideals. The interest of the discussion at length unavoidably concentrates about the question of Freedom, and this turn in the pressure of the contest is what gives the debate its significance for the world of philosophy and of religion. One cannot but feel that this significance is marked, and for reasons that will in the sequel appear.

On the initial question: Is the fundamental belief of religion valid, — is a Personal God a reality? all the participants in the discussion are to be understood as distinctly intending to maintain the affirmative. But as soon as this question is deliberately apprehended, it becomes evident that no settlement of it can be reached until one decides what the word “God” veritably means, and also what “reality” or “existence” can rationally mean. Here, accordingly, the divergence among the participants begins. Very largely agreeing in an idealistic interpretation of what must constitute Reality if the word is to have any explicable meaning, they nevertheless soon expose a profound difference as to what Idealism requires when one comes to the question of the reality of spiritual beings, — above all, of a being deserving to be called divine. Thence follows, of course, a like deep difference as to the nature and the conception of God himself. More specifically, these differences concern the following points:

(1) Whether the novel method of proving God real, put forward by the leader of the discussion, and here given a fresh form, different from that in his *Religions Aspect of Philosophy*, is adequate to establish in the Absolute Reality a nature in the strict sense divine.

(2) Whether the conception of God upon which the whole argument of the leader proceeds is in truth a conception of a Personal God.

(3) Whether this conception is compatible with that autonomy of moral action which mankind in its fully enlightened civilisation, and especially under the Christian consciousness, has come to appreciate as the vital principle of all personality.

On the first matter, Professor Mezes and Professor Howison differ with Professor Royce. Professor Le Conte declines any critical opinion upon it, though he prefers, and offers, an entirely different argument for the reality of a Personal God.

On the second point, the extreme division is between Professor Royce on the one side (apparently supported by his pupil, Professor Mezes), and Professor Howison on the other. Here, the question disputed being in fact the question of an Immanent God as against a God distinct from his creation, Professor Le Conte offers a mediating theory, based on the doctrine of Cosmic Evolution, by which he would conjoin the conception of God as immanent in Nature with the conception of man as eventually a literally free intelligence: through the process of evolution, operated by the God indwelling in it, the human being is at length completely extricated from Nature, hence becomes strictly

self-active, and thus intrinsically immortal. To this proposal for reconciling an Immanent God with a Personal God, — the test of personality being the possession by God of a World of Persons, all really free, with whom he shares in moral relations, acknowledging Rights in them, and Duties towards them, — Professor Howison demurs, urging that no such World of Freedom can arise out of a process of natural evolution, as this is always a process of efficient causation, and so works by a *vis a tergo*, whose law is necessitation.

On the third question, which is thus brought strongly to the front, the divergence between Professor Howison and Professor Royce comes out at its sharpest. Here, Professor Howison maintains there is a chasm, incapable of closure, between the immanence of God, even as Professor Royce conceives this, and the real personality, the moral autonomy, of created minds. Professor Royce, in rejoinder, contends there is no such chasm, that a Divine Self-Consciousness continuously inclusive of our consciousness is demanded if a knowable God is to be proved, and that its existence is not only compatible with the existence of included conscious Selves, but directly provides for them, imparts to them as its own members its own freedom, and thus gives them all the autonomy permissible in a world that is moral. In this difference, it may be presumed that Professor Mezes and Professor Le Conte side tacitly with Professor Royce; though Professor Le Conte, of course, would only do so with the reservation that the reconciliation of the dispute must be sought in his theory of evolution. Professor Royce, however, pursues his object by another path, more purely in the region of idealistic psychology, and

devotes his [Supplementary Essay](#), in its main purpose, to a systematic investigation of the nature and the source of Individuation. He seeks in this way to show how Personality, conceived as self-conscious individuality, flows directly and even solely from his conception of God, when the essential implications of this are developed. Here Professor Howison's contention is, that this theory of the Person, making the single Self nothing but an *identical part* of the unifying Divine Will (as Professor Royce is explicit in declaring), gives to the created soul no freedom at all of its own; that the moral individual, the Person, cannot with truth be thus confounded with the logical singular; and that personality, as reached by this doctrine, is so truncated as to cease being true personality. The central topic of the book, proving thus to be this question of Free Personality, marks by the region entered, and by the method of investigation employed, the advance of philosophical thought into a new stadium.

On a different matter, of high philosophical import, with weighty religious consequences, the parties in the discussion all appear to agree. They unite in recognising, in some form or other, an organic correlation among the three main objects common to philosophy and religion, — God, Freedom, Immortality. They differ, to be sure, as to precisely what, and exactly how much, these three elements of the One Truth mean; but they agree that neither of the three can adequately be stated except with the help of the properly correlative statement of the other two. Thus: *No God except with human Selves free and immortal in some sense, in some degree or other*; and so, likewise, *mutatis*

mutandis, of Freedom and of Immortality. The differences here are as to the sense in which Freedom and Immortality are to be taken, — whether with unabated completeness or with a suppression and reduction. On this issue. Professor Le Conte, as to the resulting state of Real Existence aimed at by his method, is at one with Professor Howison: both hold to a God *distinctly* real, in relation with *distinctly* real souls, though Professor Howison questions the conceptions on which Professor Le Conte bases his method for reaching this result. Opposed to them stands Professor Royce. Professor Mezes perhaps supports this opposition with tacit assent, though he has refrained from any open expression.

Restating in the usual but more technical language of the schools the main divergence as now brought out, one would say that it is an issue between two views concerning the Whole of Real Existence — between the view known as Monism, and the view known as Pluralism. Professor Royce, and apparently Professor Mezes, adheres to Monism; Professor Le Conte and Professor Howison hold by Pluralism, though Professor Le Conte colours this with an intermediary Monism, as the means by which the final Pluralism comes to be. Only it is of essential importance to add, that both parties interpret their views in terms of Idealism. To both alike, all reality at last comes back to the reality of Mind; to the primary reality of self-consciousness, and the derivative reality of “things,” or objects ordinarily so called, as real items in such selfconsciousness. The difference is, as to whether there really are many minds, or, in the last resort, there is only one Mind; whether the Absolute Reality is a system of self-active beings forming a Unity, or is after all,

with whatever included variety, a continuous Unit; whether it is a free Harmony, or, as Professor James satirically calls it, a “solid Block.” The one view, then, would be more accurately designated Idealistic Monism, as Professor Royce himself prefers to call it; or Monistic Idealism, as it has sometimes been named; or Cosmic Theism, as still others at times call it, — though this last title is oftener used in an agnostic than in an idealistic sense. The opposed view would in like manner be called Pluralistic Idealism, or Ethical Idealism;^[1] or, again, as its supporter would prefer, simply Personal Idealism, since all other forms of Idealism are, as he thinks, in the last analysis non-personal — are unable to achieve the reality of any genuine Person. Professor Le Conte’s special form of Pluralism has sometimes been called, with his approval, Evolutional Idealism; and this is descriptive of what he regards as the most important factors in it, and is in so far suitable.

So much for the chief sides represented in the discussion. Its significance for the existing situation in philosophy and religion can be made duly clear by exhibiting its place in that larger movement of thought which has most prominently marked the century now passing away.

This movement, so far as it affected our English-speaking communities, was in its bearing on the rational foundations of religion professedly defensive; but only so by intent, and on the surface of its thinking; in its deep undertow it was from its springs profoundly negative, — destructive in tendency. When in the mind of the early century the question first clearly uttered itself: “What will all our scientific discoveries, all our independent philosophisings,

all our historical, textual, and other critical doubts, leave us of our religious tradition? — above all, is the Personal God of past faith to remain intact for us?” the pressure of the situation, having borne the anthropomorphic supports of Theism indiscriminately away, forced thinking people to ask further: “What, then, do we indeed mean by ‘God,’ since we are no longer to think him ‘altogether such an one as ourselves’? — has the meaning gone out of the word ‘God’ entirely?” To many — as, for instance, to Sir William Hamilton — it seemed that, substantially, the answer must come in this form: “God, surely, is the *Absolute*, the one and only unconditioned Reality; the universal Ground of all, which it is impossible not to account real: for it is impossible not to believe that *Something is real*, and therefore impossible not to believe there is an Ultimate Reality, What is sensibly present is finite, is thereby only derivatively real, and thus is intrinsically conditioned by this Ground of all, which is thus, again, intrinsically the Unconditioned. Hence, though God therefore certainly is, he is forever unknown and unknowable: because to know is to think, to think is to condition, and to condition the Unconditioned is a self-contradiction.” In this way the so-called being of God was supposed to be saved at the cost of his essence; and the mysteries of traditional faith were held to be further preserved and vindicated, because, as it was announced, need was now shown, and a way made, for Revelation, since our human knowledge had been demonstrated incompetent.

In contrast to this attempted theistic Agnosticism, there appeared almost simultaneously, issuing from France

through Comte, an Agnosticism openly atheistic. It was entitled Positivism, as restricting, its credence to the only things certain by “positive” evidence — the immediate and autocratic evidence of sensible experience. It said: “Let there be an end now, not only to theological, but to all metaphysical Entities quite as much; for all are alike the illusory products of mere abstraction and conjecture.” As the substitution of the “Ultimate Reality” for God had turned God into something unknowable, God — and the “Ultimate Reality” too, as for that — became, as the positivist justly enough observed, an affair of no more concern to us knowers than if he or it didn’t exist. So, let human life be organised without any reference to any “Reality” beyond phenomena, and let us confine our knowledge to its authentic objects, namely, “the things which do appear.” Comte brought to the task of this “positive” organisation of life a comprehensive acquaintance with the results and the general methods of all the sciences, and a noticeable facility in classified and generalised statement. These qualities, joined with an ardour of conviction and an insistence of advocacy that lent their possessor something of the character of the prophet and the apostle, earned for the new cause an attention sufficient not only to found a new sect, intense in cohesion, if limited in numbers, but to spread the contagion of its general empirical view wide through a world interested in the theory of knowledge, however indifferent to the religious powers claimed for the new doctrine. A philosophy insisting on the sole credibility of scientific evidence, and chiefly busied in formulating scientific truths in generalisations so rarefied as to seem

from their unexpectedness like new scientific discoveries, naturally appealed to many a scientific expert, but still more to the ever-swelling throng of general readers who fed upon scientific “results,” and gradually formed the public now known to the venders of “popular science.”

So matters stood, in the world that was balancing between the interests of philosophy and of religion, till about the middle of the century. At that juncture, following upon the latest developments in the sciences, particularly in the field of biology, Herbert Spencer appeared with his project of a “Synthetic Philosophy,” based on the principle of Evolution carried out to cosmic extent. This view presently received an almost overwhelming reinforcement, at least for the general scientific intelligence, by the unexpected scientific proofs of biological evolution, worked out chiefly by Darwin. The change of front in the scientific world, upon the question of Species and of Origins, was almost as immediate as it was revolutionary. The conception of the origin of natural things in a direct act of “creation” — a supposed instant effect of a Divine Will operating without any means — thus seemed to the popular mind to be assailed in the seat of its life. Many felt, indeed, that this view, so ingrained in the religious tradition, had received its deathblow. In this feeling, as fact requires us to acknowledge, they had at any rate the countenance, if not the direct leading, of many of the scientific experts who promoted the new evolutionary theory. The nature of the Eternal Ground of things appeared to need a radical reconception, to adjust it to the evidences, felt to be irresistible, of the presence of evolution in the world. The

way was thus made, over a field widely prepared, for the favourable reception of a philosophy that proposed nothing less than the harmonious satisfaction and fulfilment, in an alleged Higher Synthesis, of the conflicting interests reflected in the Agnosticism of Hamilton, in the Positivism of Comte, in the evolutionary results of science, and even in the Theism of the traditional religious consciousness. The theist was to be shown right, in so far as he resisted the positivist by asserting the fact of an "Ultimate Reality"; for this was not only an "absolute datum of consciousness," but the unavoidable presupposition of the fact of evolution, which could only be explained by "the reality of an Omnipresent Energy." The positivist, in his turn, was to be shown right, in so far as he maintained against the theist, theological or metaphysical, traditional or philosophical, the weighty discovery that all knowledge is necessarily relative to the constitution of the knowing subject, therefore cannot be the knowledge of any Ultimate Reality, nor of things as they are in themselves, but must be knowledge of phenomena only — of things as they appear to conscious experience, limited as this is by correlation with a specific nervous organism. The agnostic, however, was to be shown the most comprehensively right of all: for his was the truth that embraced and harmonised the truth of the positivist and the truth of the theist, at once and together; his was the immovable assurance of the fact of an Ultimate Reality, whose nature nevertheless could only be stated as the "Unknowable," or as the Power present in all things, the Eternal Mystery immanent in all worlds; his was the possession, too, of a boundless cosmos of phenomena,

indefinitely receding into the mysterious recesses of the past, and unfolding by orderly evolution, ever more richly complex both in psychic and in physical intricacy, into the indefinite mystery of the future. Thus he was able, moreover, to meet the genuine demands of the religious consciousness, and to meet them supremely; namely, by an Eternal Power immanent in the world, instead of by an anthropomorphic God transcendent of the world, — to meet them supremely, because religion, at its authentic base, was founded in Solemnity and Awe, and these had their only secure footing in the unfathomable and the mysterious — the omnipresence of the Omnipotent, from which none can escape, whose ways are past finding out. Thus, finally, — let it not be overlooked, — the belief of traditional religion in the Personality of God, in the self-conscious purposive Wisdom and Love at the root of all things, was to disappear. Not, to be sure, in behalf of Materialism; not in behalf of Atheism, taken as the dogmatic *denial* of God; but in behalf of Agnosticism, the far subtler *avoidance* of a Personal Absolute, — an avoidance all the more plausible from its appeal to the impartiality which is of the essence of reason; an appeal to the rational neutrality that would no more deny than it would assert God, would no more assert than it would deny the eternity of Matter, but with disciplined self-restraint would confine itself to the affirmation, declared alone defensible, of simply some Ultimate Reality, whose nature was impenetrable to our knowledge.

Confronted as our human intelligence always is with the fact of our ignorance, and bred as the religious thinking of that day had been in apologetics based on an agnostic

philosophy such as Hamilton's; impressed, too, as the general public was, religious and non-religious alike, with the steadfast march of natural science towards bringing all facts under the reign of physical law, — above all, under the law of evolution, — we need not wonder that this public was widely and deeply influenced by this philosophy. It is accessible to the general intelligence, and its evidences are impressive to minds unacquainted with the subtleties inseparable from the most searching thought, while its refutation unavoidably carries the thinker into the intricacies of dialectic that to the general mind are least inviting, or are even repellent.

Since the diffusion of the doctrines of Darwin and Spencer, the more alert portion of the religious world has exhibited a busy haste to readjust its theological conceptions to the new views. In fact, these efforts have been noticeable for their speed and adroitness rather than for their large or considerate judgment; in their anxiety for harmony with the new, they have not seldom lost sight of the cardinal truths in the old. Memorable, unrivalled among them, was the proposal of Matthew Arnold, in the rôle of a devoted English Churchman, to replace the Personal God of "the religion in which we have been brought up," and in the name of saving this religion, by his now famous "Power, not ourselves, that makes for Righteousness": a proposal which while sacrificing the very heart of the warrant for calling the religion Christian — the belief in the divine Personality — was put forward in the most evident good faith that it was Christian still, and in a form so eminent for literary excellence that it beyond doubt increased the spread of its

agnostic views in the very act of satirising the “Unknowable,” and preserved for the New Negation, in a lasting monument of English letters, the aesthetic charm which it added to the cause.

Agnosticism thus became adult and adorned, and made its conquests. But it was to meet a mortal foe; a foe, too, sprung from its own germinal stock. The successive stages of its growth, by the express declaration of their authors, all had their impulse in doctrines of Kant. Though their religious negations were connected with Kant by a more or less violent misinterpretation of his philosophical method and aim, Kant’s own way of dealing with what he called Theoretical as distinguished from Practical Reason was doubtless still largely responsible for these results, so erasive of Personality, in all its genuine characters, from the whole of existence. The counter-movement in thought was also founded on Kant, by another one-sided construction of his doctrines.

For meanwhile, indeed during a whole generation prior to these negative movements in the English-speaking world and in France, there had followed Kant’s thinking, in Kant’s own fatherland, a succession of systems deriving from his theoretical principles, and distinguished by the great names of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, each aiming to surmount the Agnosticism lurking in Kant’s doctrine of knowledge. If Kant made the bold attempt to remove religion beyond the reach of intellectual assault forever, by drawing around the intellect, under the depreciatory name of the Theoretical Reason, the boundary of restriction to objects of sense; if he thus left religion in the supposed impregnable seat of the

Practical Reason, which alone dealt with supersensible things, — with God, with Freedom, and with Immortality, — but dealt with them unassailably, as the very postulates of its own being and action; and if to him this made religion, in all its several aspects of devotion, of aspiration, and of hope, the direct expression of human rational will: to all of his great successors, on the contrary, this rescuing of faith by identifying it with pure will, after depriving it of all support from intelligence, seemed in fact the evaporation of freedom itself into a merely formal or nominal power, meaningless because void of intelligible contents; and hence the method, so far from being the support, appeared to be simply the undermining of religion. So, in ways successively developing an organic logic, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel set seriously about the task of bringing the entire conscious life, religion included, within the unbroken compass of knowledge. But as they all alike accepted one characteristic tenet of Kant's theory of knowledge, namely, that the possibility of knowledge is conditional upon its object's being embraced in the same "unity of consciousness" with its subject, they either had to confess God — for religious consciousness the Supreme Object — unknowable and unprovable (as Kant had maintained in his famous assault on the standard theoretical arguments for God's existence), or else had to say that God must henceforth be conceived as literally immanent in the world, not as strictly transcendent of it. God, as an intelligibly defensible Reality, thus appeared to become indisputably immanent in our human minds also: this, too, whether our minds were conceived, with Fichte, as having the physical

world immanent in them; or, with Schelling, as being embraced in Nature as component members of the Whole informed with God; or, again, with Hegel, as standing over against the members of Nature, members in a correlated world of Mind, and implicated together with Nature in the consciousness of God, — components in that Consciousness, in fact, — items in the Divine Self-Expression unfolding from eternity to eternity. By this theory of a Divine Immanence, fulfilling the “Divine Omnipresence” of the traditional faith, they aimed at once to convict Kant of construing God as a “thing in itself,” — of the very fallacy of “transcendental illusion” which he had himself exposed in his *Transcendental Dialectic*, — and to refute his criticism, made in the same place, of the Ontological Proof for the existence of God. Drop, they said, this whole illusion of the “thing in itself,” shown to be meaningless and therefore null, and God, human freedom, and human immortality would once more fall within the bounds of knowledge, since the being of God would become continuous with the being of man, the being of man with the being of God.

The condition of this apparent victory for religion, however, as we must not fail to note, was the acceptance of the Immanent God, the all-pervasive Intelligence; precisely as later, in the system of Spencer, the solution of the tension between Positivism and agnostic Pietism was the acceptance of the Immanent Unknowable. But more worthy of note is the fact, that in the continuous dialectical development involved in the self-expression of the “Divine Idea,” as this was worked out by Hegel, provision had been made, as if ready to hand, not only for the great law of

evolution in the creation, but — of far greater significance — for its explanation by something more illuminating than a “final inexplicability,” — the utmost explanatory reach of the “Unknowable.”

These sketches of the historic thought lying directly behind us, barest outline though they are, suffice to explain the issues in which we at this day are engaged. If the scientific doctrine of Evolution, taken with all its suggestions, has been to the religious conceptions inherited by our century the surpassing summons to prepare for a radical change; and if to those friends of the deep things in the traditional faith who incline to hearken at the summons the Spencerian construction of evolution in terms of the “Unknowable” seems a revolution amounting to the abandonment of all religious conceptions worth human concern, — since it puts an end to the conscious communion of the creature with a conscious Creator and Saviour, and in its depths unmistakably forebodes the eventual extinction of personal being from the universe, — if these things are so, then it is easy to understand how the idealistic conceptions of Kant’s successors, especially in the form given to them by Hegel, should appeal as strongly as they have appealed, and are still appealing, to those who would preserve to their conviction the Personality of the Eternal, and all that this carries with it for religion. For this idealistic philosophy seems by one and the same stroke to assure them of God’s reality, and to adjust his nature, and his way of existence, to their minds “as affected by modern knowledge.” It assigns to him such an immanence in his works as explains evolution by presenting it as “continuous creation,” and it

gives, at last, what seems like a real meaning to the traditional dogma of his Omnipresence.

In this light, the conflict existing in thought down to the present day, so far as it bears on religion, appears to lie between the conception of the Immanent God and the conception of the Immanent Unknowable, — between a world-informing Person, whom it is supposed this idealistic Monism secures us, and a world-pervading Power, perpetually transforming its effects, which is all that the agnostic Monism leaves us. On this view. Monism would appear as if settled: there would only remain, as the reflecting world so far appears to think, a choice between its two species. It was therefore with pertinence that Mr. Balfour, in his *Foundations of Belief*, set these two systems, under the titles of “Naturalism” and “Transcendental Idealism,” in a contrasting agreement in lack, and, exposing some of their incurable defects, while assuming them to exhaust the possibilities of rational ingenuity, made this assumption the basis of his subtle and rather telling plea for a return to external authority, as the only foundation for religious stability. The day has assuredly gone by, however, when men, confessing there is no support for religion in reason, are willing to rest it on decrees and on might; or, going M. de Voltaire one better in his cynicism, are “for the safety of society” not only willing to “invent a God,” but are ready to enforce him. “When it comes to that,” the minds of this generation surely would say, “it is time to give religion over, and to let God go.” On the other hand, quite as surely, multitudes of them are still of firm hope, and even of persuasion, that religion, in its highest historic meaning, is