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ABBOT AGAINST ROYCE

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: Mr. Peirce's letter on this subject in your last week's issue unfortunately brings it before the larger public; and, since Mr. Peirce professes to be a neutral judge, it may leave on your readers an impression unfair to Prof. Royce if nothing more gets said. May I take a little of your space to record my opinion of the merits of the case?

First, the facts, Professor Royce, one of the editors of the *International Journal of Ethics*, wrote, in its first number, a review, seventeen pages long, of Dr. Abbot's 'Way Out of Agnosticism.' This review was altogether technical in character, but hostile in content, impugning both the value and the originality of Dr. Abbot's philosophy. Reviews of philosophical books in technical journals are apt to be destructive—that is, what philosophers expect of each other; and in this review there was nothing unusually intolerable, as reviews go, till the page before the last, in which (set in some sentences of a rhetoric characteristic of Prof. Royce) the following passage occurred:

"But Dr. Abbot's way is not careful, is not novel, and, when thus set forth to the people as new and bold and American, it is likely to do precisely as much harm to careful inquiry as it gets influence over immature or imperfectly trained minds. I venture, therefore, to speak plainly, by way of a professional warning to the liberal-minded public concerning Dr. Abbot's philosophical pretensions. And my warning takes the form of saying that if people are to think in this confused way, unconsciously borrowing from a great speculator like Hegel and then depriving the borrowed conception of the peculiar subtlety of statement that made it useful in its place—and if we readers are for our part to accept such scholasticism as is found in Dr. Abbot's concluding sections as at all resembling philosophy—then it were far better for the world that no reflective thinking whatever should be done. If we can't improve on what God has already put into the mouths of the babes and sucklings, let us at all events make some other use of our wisdom and prudence than in setting forth the 'American theory' of what has been in large part hidden from us."

This passage is Dr. Abbot's chief ground of complaint. It contains the expression "professional warning," which certainly has a conceited sound. Dr. Abbot assumes that by "professional" Prof. R. meant *professorial*, and that he claimed the authority of Harvard University for the warning conveyed. This is the basis of his application to the President and Fellows of Harvard to punish in some way their employee.

That an author should feel sore at being so handled by a critic is inevitable. That he should wish to reply is natural. Dr. Abbot replied, Mr. Peirce says that the editors first postponed, then excluded this reply, and finally threatened legal proceedings if it were published apart. A false impression of the facts cannot be imagined than this statement gives. The editors were liberal as few editors are. An editor's first duty, if controversy must be, is to restrict it to one number so

that it may not disgust the readers by trailing its slow length along. Dr. Royce and his colleagues, accordingly, in accepting Dr. Abbot's reply (although it was some thirty pages long and bitterly personal), insisted that a rejoinder from Prof. R. should appear after it *in the same number*. Dr. Abbot agreed to the rejoinder, but stoutly protested that it should not appear *in that number*. On condition, however, that the rejoinder should have appended to it a retort from him which should close the controversy, Dr. Abbot agreed that one number might contain both his own and his reviewer's words. These negotiations and the documents they demanded could not be finished in time for the then pending number of the review, which consequently appeared without the controversy in it. Mr. Abbot charges the editors with wilful delay; one as familiar as Mr. Peirce with the conditions of getting a "number" out might easily imagine less far-fetched reasons.

The July number was then in order, and the editors, who had not yet got Abbot's retort, now claimed that it should "not exceed Royce's rejoinder in length," that it should "not raise new issues," and that, since the twenty-eight-page reply was full of personal aspersions, these last words from Abbot "should not assault Royce's personal character, and should be parliamentary in form, and free from personally abusive language." To this proposal Dr. Abbot's reply was, to quote the words of his memorial to the President and Fellows, "a short and dry rejection *in toto*."

Then came rumors of a lawsuit and a pamphlet on the part of Dr. Abbot. Is it wonderful that Dr. Royce should now consult a lawyer as to how the growing tide of unpleasantness might best be minimized? The lawyer warned Dr. Abbot that to publish a pamphlet might make him legally liable, this being of course an ordinary routine precaution against future legal trouble of any sort. Mr. Peirce, following Dr. Abbot's *ex-parte* statement, treats it as part of a plan to "stifle" the latter's reply. Now Dr. Abbot (though in general correct in his record of the facts) has omitted the important fact that in the very letter in which the lawyer conveyed the warning as to liability, he also made an offer to Dr. Abbot from Prof. Royce to print his long reply in the next *Journal*, with no editorial comment in that number, provided Dr. A. would prune it of degrading personalities, leaving the argument untouched. The *quid pro quo* seems fair enough; yet the sacrifice demanded was intolerable to Dr. Abbot, and he published his memorial to the Harvard Corporation instead.

A more grotesque accusation of unfair editorial treatment than that made by Dr. Abbot and echoed by Mr. Peirce was consequently never made.

Now as to Mr. Peirce's talk about Prof. Royce's "cruel purpose" of "ruining Dr. Abbot's reputation." When did a critic ever deny the value of a book *without* the purpose of ruining the author's reputation—his reputation, namely, for competency in that field? That Prof. Royce had any animosity to Dr. Abbot's reputation in *other* relations of life is too silly a charge even for denial. And what Mr. Peirce means by the affair being a "brutal life-and-death combat from the first," I confess is too dark a thing for me to understand. Had I written a book with such ambitious aims as Dr. Abbot's, I should expect my differently-thinking compeers to handle me without gloves, and should despise them if I suspected

that the fear of wounding my feelings, stayed their hand. Were Prof. Royce's review one of my book, I should probably be considerably stirred-up by his low opinion of me, and should feel the genial latitude of his style, when expressing the same, to be peculiarly exasperating. At the same time I should recognize the inevitableness of such differences of understanding, and should feel that I had no avowable *grievance*, since, unlike those critics who dismiss a volume of poems or a novel with a sneer for which no grounds are given, Prof. Royce had given his own reasons for all that he had said. My only remedy would lie in beating down my critic's philosophy and strengthening my own. Mr. Abbot's remedy of heaping personal outrages upon Prof. Royce and his motives, admits of no excuse but a pathological one. It is truly deplorable that the quarrel should spread beyond the academic world. But since Mr. Peirce has served it up for your readers in what they also may imagine to be an "impartial" statement, it seems but fair that one with a less *ex-parte* knowledge of the facts should also be heard.

WILLIAM JAMES.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, November 15, 1891.

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THE SUPPRESSION OF DR. ABBOT'S REPLY

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: Since Mr. Peirce has thought fit to bring this subject before your readers, and to comment on Prof. Royce's conduct, as charged by Dr. Abbot, in stifling Dr. Abbot's reply by a threat of legal proceedings, I feel compelled to ask you to publish the evidence on that point in full.

Dr. Abbot bases his charge upon a letter written by me, as Prof. Royce's counsel. In a pamphlet addressed to the governing boards of Harvard College (but widely circulated and put on public sale), Dr. Abbot characterizes that letter as an attempt, on Prof. Royce's part, "to gag the man he had injured," and formally sums up his accusation by asserting that Prof. Royce "has sought, with incredible cowardice and meanness, to deprive me of all opportunity of being heard in self-defence."

I now give the letter (of which Dr. Abbot publishes only the few lines of formal protest), and also Dr. Abbot's reply. I should premise that I knew nothing of the controversy until Prof. Royce sought my advice in consequence of threat of a law-suit from Dr. Abbot. At that time Dr. Abbot's reply had been set up in type by the *Journal of International Ethics* with the expectation of publishing that as it stood, together with a rejoinder by Prof. Royce, and a final retort which Dr. Abbot was to write, all in the July number. This plan had broken off, as stated by Dr. Abbot in his pamphlet, because Dr. Abbot could not agree with Dr. Adler as to the tone in which he should write his final reply; Dr. Adler requiring a parliamentary tone, while Dr. Abbot demanded a freedom which he called "the freedom of the courts." It is Dr. Abbot's main reply, already in type, which is referred to in my letter. Dr. Adler and Prof. Royce are both editors of the *Journal*.

BOSTON, June 9, 1891.

Dr. Francis E. Abbot, Cambridge, Mass.:

MY DEAR DR. ABBOT: Your article entitled "Dr. Royce's Professional Warning" has been submitted to me as a part of the case upon which my professional advice is sought, and I must call your attention to some passages in it which I trust you will think it well, upon deliberation, to revise.

I will say at the outset that, considering the severity of Dr. Royce's article, I think, for my own part, that you are justified in replying with spirit, and that you should perhaps be allowed more warmth than the ordinary discussion of such subjects calls for. Of that Dr. Royce, I know, would not complain, but in the heat of your reply you have in some places used language which I think you will hardly wish, upon cooler judgment, to allow to remain to lower the tone of your argument.

Conceding, for the moment, that you are right in thinking that Dr. Royce has transgressed the limits of courteous controversy, I must say that your article, in some places, goes far beyond anything that he has said.

On Dr. Royce's behalf, I must warn you that he protests against the publication, or any circulation of it, in its present shape, and must point out to you that it may, if circulated, entail a serious legal responsibility.

In it you charge Dr. Royce with being guilty of "a slanderous attack" and of "libel," and with having called you an "impostor"; you seek to belittle and injure him in his profession and business as a teacher in Harvard College; you imply that he is guilty of wilful misrepresentation; you seek to bring him to contempt by a degrading comparison; you charge him with untruth, with having made a wanton and injurious attack upon your personal reputation, having abused his academical position, compromised the dignity of Harvard College, degraded the office of professor, publicly traduced and libelled a fellow-citizen; and finally you pronounce him professionally incompetent.

Such language, even though used in controverting an irritating review of your book, so far exceeds the proper limits that in my judgment you cannot indulge in it without danger of legal liability.

Permit me, too, as a cool spectator of the controversy, to say that this language greatly weakens and lowers a very forcible argument, and must have the effect of distracting attention from the points you wish to make, and stamping the whole discussion as a strangely undignified attack for such a combatant. And aside from the effect of such an article upon yourself, let me call to your attention the scandal which is brought upon Harvard College by such a public wrangle between two of her instructors.

I have not read carefully the whole of Dr. Royce's article, but I have read the parts which must be most offensive to you; and while I do not defend, in all respects, the tone of the review, I think that you have greatly exaggerated and misinterpreted it. As I said to you on Sunday evening, Dr. Royce has disclaimed, in the strongest way, any intention to wound you, or to reflect in any way upon your personal character; and after this, is it not a perversion to insist upon putting the worst and most personal construction on all that he says, omitting the qualifications which go far to soften his hostile expressions?