

Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J.  
A Recollection

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I had known of Frank Oppenheim long before I met him. As a graduate student at Fordham working in American philosophy, I had the good fortune to study with John McDermott and John Smith, giants in the field of American thought. Smith taught a course on American Philosophical Idealism as a visiting professor from Yale in the Bicentennial year of 1976. His course, as one would expect, was firmly centered according to Smith himself, was the foremost authority on Royce's work. That scholar was Frank Oppenheim. When chance brought me to Xavier a couple of years later, John McDermott made me promise to make Frank's acquaintance immediately. I didn't have to, as Frank invited me to have lunch shortly after my arrival in Cincinnati.

Since that day, and up until Frank moved away from Cincinnati after his retirement, he has remained a friend and a scholarly inspiration to me. I soon learned just how right Smith and McDermott were in their appraisal of Frank's knowledge of Royce's thought. Graduate students writing dissertations would seek him out for source material and references. Frank was in the midst of organizing the mountain of unpublished papers and manuscript notes in Harvard's Royce Archive, and literally no one knew that material better than he. We actually taught a course together in my second year in the department, I assigned the James material while he did, no surprise, Royce. Students of American philosophy are quite familiar with the James-Royce relationship; colleagues at Harvard, next door neighbors in Cambridge, and life-long friendly antagonists in "The Battle of the Absolute". It was likely, then, that our joint course would contain a renewal of that quarrel, albeit on a much-diminished scale. I must confess that my defense of James's pluralism that semester suffered mightily at Frank's relentless Roycean onslaught. Frank simply had too many weapons in his arsenal. I learned a lot that semester.

Frank would readily admit that his greatest talents were never on display in the classroom. His scholarship was where he felt most at home, and where his powers were most effective. His major contributions were his studies of Royce's late metaphysics, his mature ethics, and his philosophy of God. While clearly drawn to this more speculative aspect of Royce's work, Frank also developed a deep knowledge of Royce's novel advances in mathematical logic, especially the System Sigma which exerted considerable influence on the logical work of his one-time student C.I. Lewis, and through Lewis, W.V.O. Quine and Roderick Chisholm. Above all, Frank was especially drawn to the problem of community as Royce explored it in *The Problem of Christianity*. That text would be Royce's final major publication and, in turn, would serve as the focal point of Frank's life's work.

Being such a devotee of Royce, Frank once made a pilgrimage to the house in Cambridge where the philosopher had lived during his career at Harvard. It sits on Irving Street, not far from Harvard Yard and right next door to the house where William James had lived. Frank told the story of knocking on the door unannounced only to be met by what he described as a rather large woman with a quite deliberate and nasal manner of speech. Introducing himself as a "philosopher" working on Royce, and stating his eagerness to see the home, she graciously allowed him to tour the house at his leisure. Upon leaving, he thanked her and noticed her kitchen, replete with high-end brass cookware and professional quality cutlery. Only much later did he discover that the woman in question was Julia Child who was then the current owner of the Royce house! No matter who she was, what mattered to Frank was that he had

stood in the same room where Royce composed the works that made up his own professional preoccupations.

In departmental affairs, especially during my early years at Xavier, Frank always sought out that path of conciliation. Xavier University was passing through a period of accelerated change in the 1980's and, as always, change brought tension. This was especially the case in the philosophy department where a group of more conservatively-minded colleagues expressed dismay at the direction in which the University was going. In this overheated environment, the undergraduate core curriculum and philosophy's role in it, came under discussion and ultimately, revision. As you might imagine, those department meetings were quite difficult. Frank had once been arrested protesting with Cesar Chavez and had spent some time in El Salvador during the Civil War there assisting refugees in flight; this at considerable personal peril. Clearly, he wasn't afraid of the consequences of challenging colleagues upset at metaphysics being dropped from the philosophy core.

Like all of us, Frank had his share of quirks which served to entertain and endear as much as to exasperate, depending on the hour. His habit of subjecting decisions, especially those surrounding hiring and promotion, to the most complex and serpentine analyses, often resulted in nothing but paralysis of decision. Even less significant judgments would find themselves imprisoned within an overly-elaborate schema that hindered as much as served the task of coming to decision. Yet all of this was as much a part of the man as the extraordinary Royce scholarship that he was able to produce in a department which, in those years, was not known for its scholarly activity. Indeed, perhaps it was his temperamental affection for Royce's Absolute Idealism that led Frank to impose grand and complex structures on matters of particular and mundane import.

Frank's final years found him confined to a bed as his health gradually deserted him. Speaking became difficult, and eventually an impossibility. Indeed, several summers ago, a serious turn for the worse made it appear as if he would momentarily pass from this world. In spite of the grim prospects, he recovered enough to continue working on Royce, and even sent me a short congratulatory note on the occasion of one of my James articles appearing in *The Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*. Happily for me, his note did not include any critical remarks on what I had written. Throughout his long career at Xavier, Frank did his work with a quiet dedication that did little justice to his stature in his chosen field, or in the wider philosophical community. Rather, his was a faithful service to his philosophical vocation and to his faith. He belonged to a generation of scholars, now sadly passing away from us, who advocated tirelessly for the American philosophical tradition in established professional circles that had little time or respect for it. He also proved to be an advocate for me at a time when it was most needed. For that, I remain forever grateful. His work on Royce will serve as the necessary starting point for anyone who intends serious work on that thinker. What is more, his legacy, in print and in fond memory, will continue to inspire those of us who had the honor of being his colleague and friend.