

Introduction to the “Graham Lectures” of 1896

Josiah Royce delivered the Augustus Graham Lectures to the Brooklyn Institute during the winter of 1896. In July of the previous year, Franklin Hooper of the Institute had contacted Royce to deliver lectures on theism, specifically “The Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God as Manifested in His Works.” Royce was understandably hesitant about such an endeavor, for, in the words of John Kaag, Royce “was not interested in providing a set of lectures that sugarcoated the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence of the divine by overlooking the problem of evil.”¹ Upon Hooper’s assurance that he would be allowed freedom of expression, Royce finally agreed. Many pages of the manuscript of these Graham lectures are excerpts from passages of lectures delivered five months earlier, later printed as *Conception of God*, although Oppenheim is careful to note that the lectures are “very different in terms of the detail he [Royce] offers.”²

The history of both the lecture series and manuscripts are, unlike other Royce lecture series, fairly straightforward, with the exception of the Third and Fifth Lectures. The Third Lecture is apparently a fragment, albeit one for the most part intact; it stops abruptly following the beginning of Section IV on page 51. As for the Fifth Lecture, it must be noted that the Graham Lectures are located in Boxes 67 and 68 of the Harvard Archives Royce Papers (HARP), where this final lecture was clearly broken off at page 34. In November 2008, however, a “remarkable discovery” was made: in HARP Box 52, containing two distinctive manuscripts of Royce’s well known essay “The Problem of Job,” one is labeled (in Royce’s pen) pages 35 – 87. It seems as if these pages, which later were published in part as “The Problem of Job,” are the very same as the latter half of the Fifth Graham Lecture. The lecture fragment in Box 68 and the “Problem of Job” manuscript numbered 35 – 87 of Box 52 share respective ending and beginning sentence fragments; logical structural flow; a thematic focus on topics including Schopenhauerian pessimism and the “meaning of our ignorance as finite selves;” and, of course, the fit of page numbers. It seems unmistakable, then, that Royce used the latter half of the Fifth Graham Lecture to compose part of “The Problem of Job.”³

In terms of content, Royce is explicit in his aim in the introduction to the First Lecture, “The Present Position of Theism,” delivered January 5: “the present lectures will make some effort to deal with the questions: Whether God exists, and What his nature is, as matters of purely dispassionate consideration, and with the aim of getting as clear an insight as we can.”⁴ “Pure dispassionate consideration” is of the utmost importance, for it is here also that Royce provides his definition of philosophy as the “thorough-going attempt to make truth as manifest as possible, to bring insight with the maximum of unhindered closeness of relation with its accessible objects. The question of philosophy is

¹ Kaag, John. “The Place of ‘The Problem of Job’ in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 33, no. 1 (2012): 36.

² Cf. Oppenheim’s Comprehensive Index to HARP, found elsewhere on this site, for a thorough pagination analysis of these excerpts.

³ NB: at the time of publication, the entirety of the manuscript of the Fifth Graham Lecture, from both Boxes 52 and 68, has yet to be typescripted, although “The Problem of Job” is of course widely available.

⁴ Royce, Josiah. “Augustus Graham Lectures,” HARP Box 67, Lecture 1: 4.

not: What ought I to believe? but: What can I clearly see?”⁵ Royce’s ostensible goal at the outset is neither to disparage nor praise faith, but to understand it.

To this end, Royce outlines three historical tendencies of theism, followed by three contemporary ways of theistic thinking. The first source is ethical and developed out of necessity from Israel and was codified in the Old Testament; the second has its roots in the Greek tradition through to scholastic Thomism, emphasizing the theoretical First Mover; and finally the Oriental tradition, which posits God as the Absolute, “by contrast with whose fullness of being every finite thing is relatively speaking, unreal.”⁶ It was these traditions that guided contemporary theistic understandings. Royce, somewhat haphazardly, finds parallels between these historical tendencies and the doctrines of Mechanism, Agnosticism, and Idealism. The first is opposed to the Aristotelian scientific paradigm and is purely scientific in a modern sense, if not altogether scientific; Royce maintains that the empirical sciences cannot by their very nature explain God. Royce uses Agnosticism to mean not uncertainty as to the existence of God, but rather in a Kantian sense meaning we are bound by our human capacities for knowledge; but, like Kant, we may still hold theistic beliefs as a deontological imperative, and thus Agnosticism is linked, for Royce, to the ethics of the Old Testament. Finally, as a sort of bridge between Mechanism and Agnosticism, Royce introduces Constructive Idealism, which holds that one may “achieve a positive, if provisional, understanding of reality”⁷ as Spirit.⁸ While the First Lecture is without a doubt challenging and thought-provoking, it would behoove the historian to research the accuracy of Royce’s historical and contemporary analyses.

The remaining lectures’ content will be reviewed briefly. With the Second Lecture, entitled “The Philosophical Conception of God” and delivered January 19, Royce is concerned with the “conception of God as the Highest Reality,”⁹ taking the position of the Constructive Idealist. Here Royce is critical of common sense and appeals to tradition as unphilosophical, noting that

tradition is indeed in one sense the source of all our insights, even the highest, in so far as we can only learn to think about what tradition has first suggested to us; but, on the other hand, in so far as we learnt to think independently, the very contents of tradition are likely to get for ourselves a transformation as we proceed.¹⁰

Due to the unreliability and ambiguity of common sense understandings, Royce suggests understanding reality not as individual observations but instead as “either that which is present to an absolutely organized experience inclusive of all possible experience, or that which would be presented as the content of such an experience if there were one.”¹¹

The Third Lecture, “The Moral World as the Revelation of God,” delivered February 2 and incomplete as mentioned above, regards God’s means of knowing. For Royce, Absolute reality is the perpetual potential for any conceivable experience. Royce

⁵ Ibid., Lecture 1: 4a.

⁶ Ibid., Lecture 1: 21.

⁷ Kaag, John. “The Place of ‘The Problem of Job’ in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 33, no. 1 (2012): 38.

⁸ Royce, Josiah. “Augustus Graham Lectures,” HARP Box 67, Lecture 1: 62.

⁹ Ibid., Lecture 2: 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., Lecture 2: 5.

¹¹ Ibid., Lecture 2: 40e.

asserts, quite technically, “For every true proposition with an *if* in it, it is reducible to or dependent upon a proposition with a categorical *is* as its essential form of expression. You can’t really have a conditional sentence without some underlying ‘is.’”¹²

In the Fourth Graham Lecture, “God and Nature: Evolution and Ethics,” delivered February 16, Royce suggests that Nature is positioned between us and the Absolute, and the attempt to understand Nature, never more than provisionally possible, necessarily hinders the understanding of God. As noted above, the final Lecture has unfortunately yet to be typescripted, so even a brief analysis must wait. The forthcoming typescripting of this Fifth Lecture is crucial, for, as Oppenheim notes, “Though philosophically challenging to read, Lecture Five seems to represent Royce’s most penetrating and detailed engagement with the problem of evil thus far in his career.”

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¹² Ibid., Lecture 3: 40.