

***Introduction to
The Interpretation of Consciousness
c. 1880***

Historical Context

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) began his career as a philosopher in 1878 teaching English Literature at the University of California.¹ Despite the teaching obligations owed to the Department of English, Royce's primary focus at this time was an elaboration of the theory of knowledge contained in his doctoral dissertation, *Of the Interdependence of the Principles of Knowledge*, written earlier in that same year. To elaborate that theory, Royce turned his attention to a number of related projects intended for publication. Concerning one such project, W.T. Harris wrote to Royce asking for a review of Shadworth Hodgson's *Philosophy of Reflection*² to appear in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*.³ A letter to William James dated 19 September 1880 expresses Royce's reservations about writing the review: Royce felt unable to complete the task at the time, and initiated a correspondence with Hodgson to correct any potential misinterpretations in his criticism of the book.⁴ Such erudition was a sign of respect for Hodgson as a philosopher, and indeed, Royce favorably reviews some aspects of Hodgson's philosophy, while being critical of others. Ultimately, the review remained unfinished and Royce instead wrote another essay, 'Of the Will as the Principle of Philosophy,' which restated the theory of knowledge contained in his doctoral dissertation.

Royce's doctoral dissertation was an attempt to develop a post-Kantian theory of knowledge. During his time at Berkeley, Royce sought to elaborate this theory of knowledge, and therefore, saw his project as an extension of the critical philosophy. Royce, in that letter to James, rejects the *Ding an sich*, and concludes that all of reality is relative to consciousness. Consequently, there is nothing real outside of conscious experience. Hence, the critical method must begin with an analysis of experience from the standpoint of consciousness in order to determine how knowledge of reality is possible. Given the structure of experience is a series of conscious states, whether actual or possible, the possibility of knowledge is thus reducible to the problem of how a series of conscious states is knowable as a series. Yet, since we are always only ever in the present moment, and the series of past and future states transcends the present, then the interpreter must willfully postulate past and future as an indefinitely extending series that unifies every conscious state into a whole. Only within such a series of time does the present become an intelligible

¹ For an overview of Royce's graduate studies, dissertation, and early years at Berkeley relevant to the present manuscript see Dillabough, Joseph. 'Introduction to The Possibility of Experience,' *The Writings of Josiah Royce: A Critical Edition*. February 2019. Available online at <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/transcribed-manuscripts/>.

² Hodgson, Shadworth. *Philosophy of Reflection*, vol. I-III. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1878.

³ Clendenning, John. *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*. Nashville & London, Vanderbilt University Press 1999: 81.

⁴ Royce, Josiah. *The Letters of Josiah Royce*, vol. 1, ed. John Clendenning. Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press 1991: 86-91. The letter is worth reading in its entirety as a statement of how Royce saw his present project as extension of Kant's critical philosophy, the letter is also discussed in Dillabough 2019.

experience. Now, the problem is how a series of conscious states is possibly knowable as the time-series which governs all thinking, and therefore, conditions all experience and knowledge of reality. Royce, in an incomplete manuscript, *The Possibility of Experience*, begins to solve this problem. His solution is to appeal to the possibility of memory as the cognitive power through which the past affects the present, and plausibly, how the past and present can thereby become representations of a postulated future not presently known. With the aid of memory, and through the vehicle of representation, the sequential regularities within the time-series are thus knowable as a series.

Within this context, Royce's appreciation of Hodgson's *Philosophy of Reflection* becomes apparent. Like Royce, Hodgson's project in 1878 was largely an extension of the critical philosophy. Furthermore, Hodgson also felt that the critical method must begin with an analysis of experience from the standpoint of consciousness. Except, unlike Royce's pragmatic approach to the conscious construction of experience — with an emphasis on the volitional and practical aspects of the constitutive function of judgments in the synthetic unification of experience, — Hodgson had a more purely phenomenological approach. According to Hodgson, everything is relative to consciousness. Yet, *pace* Kant and the post-Kantian idealists, the fundamental distinction is not between subject and object but rather between consciousness and its object. From the standpoint of consciousness, there is an internal division between the objective aspect, which is the object of awareness, and the subjective aspect, which is the awareness itself, and these two aspects are related in and through consciousness by knowledge. Thus, the proper province of philosophy is the reflective analysis of the subjective structure of consciousness as the internal condition for every object of any type; since, outside of consciousness, there are no objects at all.⁵ Royce, doubtlessly aware of the phenomenological dimensions of the critical philosophy and post-Kantian idealism, probably could not help but view Hodgson's work favorably. Not only were the two philosophers working in the same tradition, but Royce himself was beginning to work on a project that similarly began with an analysis of consciousness, and must have seen Hodgson's philosophy as both a source of potential insight and an important contrast to his own philosophical endeavors at this time.

The Interpretation of Consciousness

The manuscript is an incomplete thirty-three page document, found in Harvard Archives Royce Papers (HARP) Box 79. The document is a fragmentary review of Shadworth Hodgson's 1878 book *Philosophy of Reflection*, in three volumes, with extensive quotations from the author. The review proposes to reconstruct and evaluate Hodgson's definition of philosophy, the division of consciousness into direct

⁵ For a very brief treatment of Hodgson's philosophy see 'Shadworth Hodgson' in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available online at <https://www.iep.utm.edu/hodgson/>. For an analysis and critique of Hodgson's *Philosophy of Reflection* see Stout, G.T. 'The Philosophy of Mr. Shadworth Hodgson' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 2, no. 2. Oxford University Press, 1892-1893: 107-120.

and reflective modes, epistemological consequences of this division, and the interpretation of consciousness as a stream of presentations and representations. The primary task of philosophy is, according to Hodgson, the analysis of ultimate notions. A notion is ultimate if that notion is not analyzable into any others, and Hodgson regards the notions of mathematical science as exemplars of ultimate notions. Concerning every notion, we may ask what is the object to which that notion refers. As a consequence, we can distinguish the objective from the subjective aspect of consciousness: The objective aspect is the object of awareness, while the subjective aspect is the awareness itself, and these are different modes of one and the same consciousness. Thus, an ultimate notion, while unanalyzable from the perspective of science, is analyzable from the standpoint of consciousness: For science an ultimate notion simply refers to whatever object is the referent; but, for philosophy, that object becomes the referent of an ultimate notion through the subjective structure of consciousness. Therefore, the proper province of philosophy is the subjective analysis of ultimate notions, which, from the perspective of science, appear unanalyzable.

If the province of philosophy is the subjective analysis of ultimate notions, and subjectivity is a mode of consciousness, then the principal task of philosophy is the interpretation of consciousness. Hence, the method of all philosophy is that mode of self-consciousness by which we observe the phenomena that manifest in consciousness. Such is what Hodgson denominates the method of reflection. The method of reflection does not begin with any determinate object, nor presupposes what objects will appear in consciousness, but assumes only that there is a conscious stream within which phenomena may appear. Such a conscious stream contains all that is analyzable and classifiable. The stream of consciousness, according to Hodgson, is analyzable into three elements: The series of feelings and thoughts in themselves, the surrounding objects, and the self experiencing those feelings, thoughts, and objects. Given its possible to experience feelings and thoughts without necessarily having a knowledge of the self that feels and thinks (e.g., infants), and that such feelings and thoughts do not necessarily refer to any surrounding objects, then the series of feelings and thoughts in themselves are separable from the self and the surrounding objects felt and thought about. Yet, since we come to a knowledge of the self and experience surrounding objects through feelings and thoughts, the necessary content of consciousness is this series of feelings and thoughts in themselves. Hodgson denominates this series primary consciousness. Thus, philosophy begins with an analysis of primary consciousness.

The starting-point for philosophy is primary consciousness, and since knowledge of self and the experience of surrounding objects is through a series of feelings and thoughts, then those objects and the self must emerge out of primary consciousness. Our primary consciousness is a series of relations among feelings and thoughts. These relations unify our feelings and thoughts into a stable world of objects, knowledge of which transforms primary into reflective consciousness. Now, there is no longer a series of conscious states but a series of objects. To recognize the feelings as feelings, and thoughts as thoughts, in

contradistinction to the series of objects felt and thought about, is how reflective consciousness comes to a knowledge of self. How does this separation of the subjective world of feelings *qua* feelings, and thoughts *qua* thoughts, from the world of objects felt and known arise? There is a mediation between primary and reflective by direct consciousness. First, direct consciousness bundles feelings together into groups. Among these groups of feelings, one such group becomes associated with the body of the observer. Second, the observer recognizes that other groups of feelings are dependent upon the body. Third, the observer recognizes that some groups are independent of the body and cluster around things instead. Therefore, the body and its groups of feelings become the subjective world of the self and all the other groups become the world of objects. Over time, the seemingly immaterial part of the self is separated from the material body and the separation becomes more extreme until the soul is imagined as the subject of feelings and the source of unity between them and the material body. Thus, direct consciousness comes to mistakenly regard the subjective and objective aspects as separate but that primary dictates and reflective consciousness knows as inseparable in reality. Such a mistake leads to the illusion of an absolute existence apart from consciousness, whereas everything actually originates in primary consciousness, which forms the content of reflective consciousness, and that content determines the experience of direct consciousness.

Written by Joseph Dillabough
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