

Introduction
The Possibility of Experience
c. 1880

Historical Context

Josiah Royce (1855-1916) journeyed back to California in the summer of 1878 to begin his assistantship position in English Literature for the University of Berkeley.¹ Royce had left California in 1875 to pursue graduate studies in philosophy in Germany at the University of Leipzig. There, the young Royce heard lectures in the history of German philosophy, including the post-Kantian idealists, took two courses from Wilhelm Wundt on anthropology and logic, and studied under Rudolf Hermann Lotze at the University of Göttingen. At the University of Göttingen, Royce began his lifelong study of Kant and his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* and bore witness to Lotze's systematic construction of a post-Kantian idealist metaphysics, the type of constructive idealism, which would characterize almost all of Royce's subsequent philosophical endeavors. After Germany, Royce returned to the United States in 1876 to pursue a doctorate in philosophy at the University of John Hopkins in Baltimore. While at John Hopkins, Royce studied in-depth the philosophy of Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer — but Kant would always remain, in the course of his life, the decisive interlocutor and referent throughout Royce's philosophical evolution. Royce submitted his doctoral dissertation, *Of the Interdependence of the Principles of Human Knowledge*, on 2 August 1878 and was awarded his doctorate in philosophy later in that same year.²

Royce himself saw his nascent philosophical project, in the spirit of Lotze, as a continuation of Kant's critical method to analyze the structure of experience to determine how knowledge of reality is possible, and therefore, as the subordination of metaphysics to a systematic theory of knowledge. His doctoral dissertation, in this regard, is an early effort at the construction of such a theory of knowledge. For in that early work, Royce positively enumerates a number of decidedly Kantian theses: Namely, that a reality *in itself* does not exist and anything that is real exists only *for us*, and consequently, nothing exists outside of the confines of experience; that the *Ding an sich* is a practical postulate to aid in the synthetic unification of actual and possible experiences, and consequently, the present moment is an ideal synthesis of past and future experiences in an appearance beyond which we cannot know and does not actually exist. Therefore, our concern is not with *things in themselves* but with *objects as known* by ideas; and our principal concern with ideas is their function in the construction of judgments that unify these experiences according to our present purposes. Hence, the dissertation is not only an early effort at the construction of a post-Kantian theory of knowledge, but also outlines some of Royce's earliest pragmatic commitments: For judgments are not only constitutive of experience but are also reflections of our purposes and products of

¹ For an extensive discussion of this time-period in Royce's life see Clendenning, John. *The Life and Thought of Josiah Royce*. Nashville & London, Vanderbilt University Press 1999: 60-73.

² For an online version see <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/online-royce-volumes/>.

our will, and the ideal syntheses these judgments afford are practical postulates that satisfy our needs as interpreters of our present experience.

Despite his obligations to the Department of English Literature, Royce's arrival to Berkeley was the beginning of a period where he sought to systematically develop the theory of knowledge contained in his doctoral dissertation — eventually culminating in the dismissal of this early epistemology and his conversion to metaphysical absolutism with the publication of *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* in 1885.³ But, in the meantime, the project was an extension of the critical philosophy and Kant remained the interlocutor whose work Royce was in constant dialogue whenever he turned his attention to these epistemological problems. A letter to William James dated 19 September 1880 confirms this is how Royce saw his project at this time.⁴ Kant posed, according to Royce, two great questions: Namely, what are the objects and limits of knowledge. Now, in a noteworthy development from the doctoral dissertation, Royce dismisses the *Ding an sich* as a meaningless phrase. Consequently, everything real is relative to consciousness and there is nothing outside of consciousness. Since consciousness is a rearticulation of experience in thought, the critical method must begin with an analysis of the structure of experience from the standpoint of consciousness. The standpoint of consciousness is a series of actual and possible experiences. The problem of knowledge is therefore reducible to the problem of how a series of conscious states, actual and possible, are known as a series; since the knowledge of that series is the only type of knowledge conscious experience can afford. We always begin in the present moment. Thus, to know a series *qua* series, each state in the series must know every other. But, since this transcends the present moment, the willing activity of the interpreter must postulate past and future experiences in order to ideally construct the series of conscious states within which the present becomes intelligible. Thus, the time-series is a practical postulate necessary for the construction of conscious experience; and therefore, the principles governing this construction are the principles of all thinking, and consequently, the conditions for all experience. From this analysis, we ought be able to deduce the categories, know the difference between past and future, between presentation and representation, as well as felt and figured space; since, without the time-series, the construction of none these are possible. “The final basis of our thought,” Royce concludes, “is ethical [and] practical,” since these “things are so because a given moment of activity must have them so.”⁵ The present manuscript, *The Possibility of Experience*, is thus a continued effort to discover the principles of all thinking in the construction of the time-series, and therefore, the conditions of all experience and all consequent knowledge of reality.

³ For an extensive discussion of this time-period in Royce's life, relevant to the present discussion, see Clendenning 1999: 81-82, 85-89, 94-96, 99, 102-107. For an overview of that period, see 1999: 74-112.

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.

⁵ Royce 1991: 89.

The Possibility of Experience Manuscript

The manuscript is an eleven-page handwritten document located in Harvard Archives Royce Papers (HARP) Box 80. The manuscript is the third document of seven, all of varying topics. The topic of the present manuscript is the serial structure of experience and how experience is knowable as a series. Given that these are themes Royce wrote about in his letter to William James on 19 September 1880, then the date of the manuscript's composition must have been around that time.⁶ At the beginning of the manuscript, Royce states that, whatever else the term 'experience' may signify, most agree that experience consists in a series of conscious states. Through the serial arrangement of the conscious contents of those states, then, knowledge is possible through experience. The problem of knowledge is thus reducible to the nature and possible construction of a series in general. For our epistemic concerns do not restrict to particular series at certain moments, much less to the merely present moment, but rather demand a serial arrangement of our present conscious states that extends indefinitely into the past and future, and then out into the external world. The observation that our experience is a serial order then does not suffice, but we must also understand the conditions under which our experience is knowable as such an ideal series.

As a preliminary, Royce identifies two conditions: We must have a possible memory of past states, and the entire series of such states must exhibit certain sequential regularities. The first condition is necessary because, in the absence of memory, we could know nothing besides the present; but, since we obviously can know something beyond the present, then memory is possible. The second condition is necessary because every classification and generalization depends upon such sequential regularities, and since we can construct classifications and perform generalizations, then these regularities must at least be possible. The remainder of the manuscript concerns the possibility of memory. The question is how memory reproduces the past into the present and thereby aids in the unification of all our conscious states into an entire series with sequential regularities. Royce notes that, if memory is possible, then our past states must effect our present experience and we must be able to become conscious of this effect; as, in the absence of an efficient cause, our memory would not influence the present, and if the effect were unconscious, we could not become aware of the sequential regularities these past states affect. Such an awareness also depends on our ability to recognize these effects and the regularities that they determine; and this recognition depends upon psychological laws of retention, association, and reproduction. Otherwise, no memory is possible. While these psychological laws are often taken as an explanation of memory, there is another factor besides — representation.

⁶ All the information on the manuscript is found in Oppenheim's Comprehensive Index. For an online version see <http://royce-edition.iupui.edu/docu/index.pdf>.

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