

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

JOSIAH ROYCE

1855—1916

---

*A Biographical Memoir by*  
ROBERT S. WOODWORTH

*Any opinions expressed in this memoir are those of the author(s)  
and do not necessarily reflect the views of the  
National Academy of Sciences.*

*Biographical Memoir*

COPYRIGHT 1959  
NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES  
WASHINGTON D.C.



*Josiah Royce*

# JOSIAH ROYCE

*November 20, 1855-September 14, 1916*

BY ROBERT S. WOODWORTH

WHEN the University of California, in 1873, first opened its doors on the Berkeley campus, one of its entering students was a red-haired youth who had prepared for college in the San Francisco schools, after spending his early years in the gold-mining region. His parents had come across the Sierra in a covered wagon in 1849 and settled in the town of Grass Valley, where his father set up the "general store," and his mother continued her career as a school teacher by conducting a private school at home. Young Josiah's aspiration was to become a mining engineer, but he did not neglect the humanities—not by any means; his love of poetry and interest in religion converged into a graduation thesis on the theology of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

That commencement address of 1875 proved to be a decisive turning point in Royce's career. Its outstanding excellence convinced some men in the audience that here was a young man who should have the opportunity of studying philosophy at the fountainhead! They accordingly raised a fund enabling him to spend a year or more at the German universities. On the way over he managed to stay a few days in Boston and make the acquaintance of William James, George Herbert Palmer, and others, on whom he made a very favorable impression. William James, especially, became his lifelong friend, and was instrumental a few years later in adding Royce to the brilliant and stimulating group of philosophers at Harvard.

Meanwhile, on returning from Germany, he secured a fellowship

---

in the just-opened Johns Hopkins University from which he obtained the Ph.D. in 1878. No adequate position in philosophy being available at the moment, Royce went back to Berkeley as instructor in English literature and logic. He held this position for four years, keeping up his philosophical activity by writing and by offering occasional short lecture courses. He also published his first book, *Primer of Logical Analysis for the Use of Composition Students*, designed to combat a certain "vagueness" which he observed in their writing. The subject of logic was indeed an abiding concern of Royce, especially in much later years.

An important event of this Berkeley period was his marriage in 1880 to Katharine Head, well remembered by generations of Harvard students as the gracious hostess of his pleasant home in Cambridge and the mother of two boys. She kept in close touch with his work and was able to collaborate in certain studies. The students used to credit her with a humorous description of his mode of lecturing: "This is the way Josiah lectures. First he tells you what he is going to say. Then he says it. Then he tells you what he has said; and finally he points out that he has said what he said he was going to say!" Royce's lecture style was in fact flowing and conversational, repetitious and abounding in pat examples, but never losing the thread or wandering from the point. He aimed to keep the class well oriented, knowing at all times whence they had come and whither they were going. This lecture style appears clearly in his published lectures on the *Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (1892).

In 1882, through the influence of James and Palmer, Royce was called from California to Harvard, at first on a temporary basis, but he was soon made a permanent professor and at Harvard he remained for the rest of his life. He did not become a "sessile organism," however, but journeyed hither and thither, giving lectures and lecture courses at many colleges and universities. The most notable of these lectureships were at Aberdeen in 1898-1900 and at Oxford in 1913. Several of his lecture courses are perpetuated in well-known books.

Royce's distinctive personality was well described, years after his death, by his Harvard colleague, George Herbert Palmer:

"He was a picturesque figure, a prodigious worker, a stimulating teacher, a heroic character, a playful and widely loved friend.

"His appearance was strange. His short stocky figure was surmounted by a gigantic round head well sunk in his shoulders. The top of it was sprinkled with red hair, while the strongly freckled face seemed to himself and to every stranger unparalleled in homeliness. . . . But no one who knew him well could wish a line of that face changed. Every inch of it expressed wisdom, modesty, humor. . . . His slowly sauntering gait was characteristic. And if you were short of time, it was not safe to ask him a question, however simple. . . .

"All knowledge was his province . . . psychology, logic, metaphysics, . . . mathematics, biology, . . . music and poetry, . . . the literature of England, Germany, France, and Italy, . . . common affairs of the day. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

It was through religion that Royce was first attracted to philosophy. Bible stories read to him by his mother appealed to him strongly, while on the other hand rigid Sabbath observance was very repellent and the dogmatic theology he had to listen to aroused his "boyish fury." He felt that there were "problems" involved that could never be resolved by a dogmatic approach. His first major work was entitled *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885) and almost his last was *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). He was not concerned with specific denominational creeds; he wished to discover whether any basic, "absolute" knowledge was possible regarding reality and man's duty. He always insisted that knowing and doing were inseparable, so that what man could know and what he ought to do were integral parts of the same philosophic problem.

From his intensive study of Kant and the post-Kantian German idealists his own conclusion was a form of idealism. Reality must consist in experience—actual human experience continuous with in-

<sup>1</sup> In *Contemporary Idealism in America*, edited by Clifford Barrett (N.Y., Macmillan, 1932), pp. 3 ff.

finite realms of possible experience, our fragmentary experience continuous with a total, wholly organized experience. Any other philosophy he held to be radically self-contradictory, and he believed he could prove it to be so. Realism, for example, as an assertion of reality completely divorced from experience, independent of all experience and therefore unknowable, he held to be a self-destructive doctrine, a position which you could not defend without virtually abandoning it. "The realistic theory, . . . by its own explicit consequences, and just because its real objects are totally independent of its ideas, has nothing to do with any independently real object, and has no relation to the independent external world that its own account defines" (*The World and the Individual* [1900], I, 136).

The philosophical climate of the early twentieth century was by no means hospitable to Royce's idealism. Few of his many able students, devoted to him though they were, remained his adherents. His teaching fostered critical discussion and independent thinking, so that independence on the part of his pupils was to be expected. Yet, towards the end of his life, he "would sometimes express doubts about his own effectiveness as a teacher, because so many of the doctrines which he regarded as most distinctively original . . . seemed to him to have been still-born in the sense of having been received with barren respect, instead of being accepted, expounded, developed."<sup>2</sup> The realistic philosophy refused to die in spite of Royce's destructive criticism; a school of neo-realists emerged, some of them among his former students. Dependence, they argued, is a one-way relation so that our experience of a real object depends on the presence of the object, while nevertheless the existence of the real object is independent of our experience.

A glowing tribute to Professor Royce's personal interest in his students came from a leading member of the neo-realist group, W. P. Montague:

"I not only got from Royce my knowledge and appreciation of

<sup>2</sup> R. A. F. Hornlé, in Barrett's *Contemporary Idealism in America*, p. 300.

philosophy, but I got from him the kindest and most painstaking assistance in working out my own philosophic problems. He gave me this technical help through my five years of advanced study, and he accompanied it with continuous personal interest and affectionate counsel. . . . I owed everything to him, and it seemed mean and disloyal for me not to become his disciple. He was my dear teacher, and I longed to call him master, but I couldn't because his idealistic premises seemed to me false."<sup>3</sup>

The author of the present memoir, a contemporary of Montague, can add his word of testimony to the unselfish interest of Royce in his students. When the time arrived for me to make a choice between philosophy and psychology, I had a heart-to-heart talk with Royce and emerged from his study with a clear conviction in favor of psychology!

The intellectual spirit of those times, so strongly influenced by the theory of evolution, was especially hospitable to pragmatism, the view that human truth-seeking and investigation must be an outgrowth of the biological struggle for existence; any proposition would accordingly be "true," if, when put into practice, it contributed to the satisfaction of human needs. The major early proponents of pragmatism, Charles Peirce and William James, were much admired and respected by Royce. The issue of pragmatism versus absolute idealism was actively debated between Royce and James; and apparently James won Royce over to a certain extent. Indeed, Royce had always refused to separate knowing from willing; thinking was for him a form of purposive activity, even as the pragmatists asserted. But they could not dispense with the ideal of absolute truth as a goal to be approached by continued investigation, so Royce insisted. And how could they be sure that their practical success or failure was predictable from their hypotheses, unless they assumed the validity of logical deduction?

"In brief, Pragmatism presupposes a certain unity in the meaning

<sup>3</sup> *The Ways of Things: A Philosophy of Knowledge, Nature, and Value* (N.Y., Prentice-Hall, 1940), pp. 653-54.

and coherence of experience taken as a whole—a unity which can never at any one moment be tested by any human being. Unless the propositions which assert the existence and describe the nature of this presupposed unity are themselves true, Pragmatism has no meaning. But, if they are true, Pragmatism presupposes a sort of truth whereof it gives no adequate account. To say this is not to say that Pragmatism gives a wholly false view of the nature of truth, but is only to insist upon its inadequacy. It needs to be supplemented.”<sup>4</sup>

“In so far as the validity of certain logical laws is concerned, we are obliged to maintain a position which we may characterize by the term Absolute Pragmatism. . . . There are *some* truths that are known to us *not* by virtue of the special successes which this or that hypothesis obtains in particular instances, but by virtue of the fact that there are . . . certain laws of the rational will, which we reinstate and verify, through the very act of attempting to presuppose . . . that these laws are not valid.”<sup>5</sup>

These “laws of the rational will” are, for example, the axioms of logic, geometry, or the theory of numbers—not regarded as self-evident but as postulates which, if maintained consistently in a logical or mathematical investigation, will generate a whole system of inter-related conclusions. Such a system, though purely theoretical in origin, is sometimes found to be of great value in applied logic or mathematics.

Royce’s interest in logic was of long standing; symbolic logic was a hobby of his. So, when Charles Peirce, himself a truly great logician, urged him (about 1900) to improve his philosophical argumentation by a serious study of modern logic, Royce was easily led in that direction, and his later contributions to logical theory were indeed substantial. In his *Principles of Logic* (from which an extract on pragmatism has just been quoted) he made a radical departure from the traditional sequence of topics. Instead of beginning

<sup>4</sup> Royce, “Error and Truth,” in *Royce’s Logical Essays*, ed. by D. S. Robinson (1951), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Royce, “Principles of Logic,” *ibid.*, pp. 364–65.



with the laws of thought as laid down in formal logic, and then proceeding to scientific methods, Royce began with an analysis of inductive methodology, and then proceeded to show how logical thinking depends on the general theory of order, of which the traditional formal logic furnishes only one instance. This treatment developed from the celebrated seminar in logic which Royce conducted for many years—a highly important and original course, as indicated in the obituary minute adopted by the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences in 1916:

“His most notable contribution to the teaching of the University was made through his seminar in logic, which became a veritable clearing-house of science. Men of widely different training and technique—chemists, physiologists, statisticians, pathologists, mathematicians—who could not understand one another, were here interpreted to one another by Royce, who understood them all.”

This seminar left a powerful impression on those who were privileged to participate. As one of them has recently written, “It was said of Royce in this Seminar that he put out a challenge to anybody who had some idea to come in and fight. . . . Philosophical coöperation we got, . . . the clash of opposites under the guidance of a shrewd master who was the first among equals.”<sup>6</sup>

Royce found these joint discussions on scientific methodology of great value to himself in the development of his own ideas. One of his most interesting lectures (“Some Relations between Philosophy and Science in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century in Germany,” published in *Science* [1913] and partially reproduced in Robinson’s book, *Royce’s Logical Essays* [1951], pp. 260–67) was addressed to a group of Boston pathologists. For a couple of decades after 1800, as he informed his audience, the modern scientific movement had scarcely begun to take hold in the German universities. What was prevalent was the romantic school of idealism with its “philosophy of nature.” This *Naturphilosophie* practiced a method-

<sup>6</sup> H. T. Costello, “Recollections of Royce’s Seminar on comparative methodology.” *Journal of Philosophy*, 53 (1956): 72–77.

ology which was almost the antithesis of scientific. It paid no heed to the principle of fair sampling, nor did it endeavor to formulate exact hypotheses from which deductions could be drawn and submitted to the test of experiment. Its aim was, by self-conscious insight and intuition, to organize the physical, chemical, and biological information then available into a rational idealistic system—as beautiful a system as could be conceived. The members of this school were engaged in an enthusiastic speculative enterprise. Nature, they felt, must have a basic unity pervading all its multiplicity. The human spirit demands that all truth shall hang together, and this was therefore a fundamental principle, a “leading idea” of the *Naturphilosophie*. Electricity, magnetism, light, the life processes must all be manifestations of a single force. The complex must evolve from the simple, and the way to understand the complex was to trace its development, its embryology.

The young German scientists of that era, especially in biology and medicine, were likely to be indoctrinated in this *Naturphilosophie* and to respond to the appeal of its “leading ideas.” As genuine scientific investigation began to take hold, however, this philosophic approach was seen to be a false lead. It was scornfully rejected by men like Johannes Müller and his pupils, Helmholtz the physiologist and Virchow the pathologist. Yet, as Royce took pains to show, its leading ideas remained as permanent guides in scientific advance.

In drawing the moral of his tale, Royce urged that, besides the inductive techniques of fair sampling and the testing of definite hypotheses, “. . . the progress of science largely depends upon still another factor, viz., upon the more or less provisional choice and use of what I have already called, in this paper, *leading ideas*.

“A leading idea is, of course, in any given natural science, an hypothesis. But it is an hypothesis which decidedly differs from those hypotheses that you directly test by the observations and experiments of the particular research wherein you are engaged. . . . It is usually of too general a nature to be tested by the means at the disposal of

your special investigation. Yet it does determine the direction of your labors, and may be highly momentous for you.

“Such a leading idea, for instance, is the ordinary hypothesis that even in the most confused or puzzling regions of the natural world law actually reigns, and awaits the coming of the discoverer. . . .

“The value of such leading ideas for a science lies in the sorts of research that they lead men to undertake, and also in the sorts of work that they discourage. . . . They awaken interest in vast ranges of observation and experiment, and sustain the patience and enthusiasm of workers through long and baffling investigations. They organize science, keep it in touch with the spirit of the age, keep alive in it the sense of the universal, and assure its service to humanity. Specialism, without leading ideas, remains but a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

“The sources of useful leading ideas seem to me to be various. Social, and in particular industrial interests, suggest some of them. . . . The comparison of the results of various sciences awakens such leading ideas. . . . But another source . . . has been, upon occasion, philosophy. Philosophy itself might be defined as a systematic scrutiny of leading ideas.”<sup>7</sup>

The titles of some of Royce's later books convey the impression of a shift of interest from logic and metaphysics to social psychology or sociology. Why should he speak so much of the “community,” of “loyalty,” and of “interpretation”? To such a question he replied that the community had fascinated him since his boyhood in the “young community” of the California gold rush and since his early history of that dramatic period. Gradually the mutual relevance of these two great interests of his had become clear to him. His studies of logic and of the mathematical theory of groups—strange as it may seem—established a bridge for him between the community and his metaphysics. A group of people achieves community of goal and loyalty by virtue of the internal “operation” of communication or, as he pre-

<sup>7</sup> Royce, *Science*, n.s., 53:581, 583.

ferred to say, of "interpretation." A group of two persons is in a "dangerous" situation, for while loving each other they are likely to be mutually irritated and the hate will grow at the expense of the love. This "dyadic" situation can be greatly improved if transformed into a "triadic" relationship by the presence of a third person who adopts the role of a mediating interpreter. In larger groups, as well, the interpretative function is essential for harmonious and effective community action.

A well-functioning community can be regarded as a concrete infinite, like the series of whole numbers, or like the exponential growth curve. When you have defined the whole, your definition applies also to a part of that whole, since the series is self-repeating. A scientific community, consisting of the past, present, and future investigators in a certain science and their cumulative discoveries, is certainly a concrete reality; yet it is infinite in the sense that it has no determinable stopping place. It is self-repeating. And the role of the interpreter is obvious: past achievements must be made clear to the present generation; and each new discovery must be communicated to the scientific community, present and still to come. The role of the interpreter is especially obvious when scientific controversies arise.

In seeking for the broadest possible principle of community ethics, Royce reached the conclusion that "loyalty" was the best name for such a "leading idea"—loyalty to a cause, to the goal of the community. To be sure, the goals of different communities may be mutually conflicting and irreconcilable, as during a war. "Loyalty to loyalty" is still good, but the ideal must be the Great Community which can be beloved of the whole human race. A businesslike approach to such a universal community, Royce suggested in his 1914 book, *War and Insurance*, might be made by the establishment of an international insurance system, which could insure individual nations against the calamities of earthquakes, pestilences, hurricanes, famines, and finally against the war risks of any nation which abstained from committing the first act of a war. "In so far as our in-

surance company undertook to pay any war expenses, it would get a businesslike interest in averting the causes of war . . . until we get such a community of interpretation formed as to teach the nations, by the potent devices of mutual insurance, the art of loyalty to the community of mankind."

During his lifetime, Josiah Royce received many honorary degrees and other marks of high esteem. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1891, to the National Academy of Sciences in 1906, and to the American Philosophical Society in 1908.

He was president of the American Psychological Association in 1901, and of the newly formed American Philosophical Association in 1903.

In spite of the apparent eclipse of Royce's philosophy shortly after his death in 1916, recent years have brought much renewed recognition of his outstanding contributions, as shown by the following books and articles: Herbert W. Schneider, *A History of American Philosophy* (N. Y., 1946); John E. Smith, *Royce's Social Infinite* (N. Y., 1950); D. S. Robinson, ed., *Royce's Logical Essays* (Dubuque, Iowa, 1951); James Harry Cotton, *Royce on the Human Self* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954); "In Memoriam Josiah Royce" (articles by ten American philosophers), *Journal of Philosophy*, 53(1956):57-139.

## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- Calif. Univ. Bull. = California University Bulletin  
 Educ. Rec. = Educational Record  
 Internat. Jour. Ethics = International Journal of Ethics  
 Internat. Mo. = International Monthly  
 Jour. Philos. = Journal of Philosophy  
 Jour. Spec. Philos. = Journal of Speculative Philosophy  
 Philos. Rev. = Philosophical Review  
 Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc. = Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society  
 Proc. Amer. Soc. Psych. Res. = Proceedings of the American Society for Psychological Research  
 Psychol. Rev. = Psychological Review  
 Trans. Amer. Math. Soc. = Transactions of the American Mathematical Society

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Sources: Benjamin Rand, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Josiah Royce. Philosophical Review*, 25 (1916): 515-22; John E. Smith, *Addenda to the Bibliography of Benjamin Rand*, in: *Royce's Social Infinite: The Community of Interpretation* [N.Y., 1950], p. 171.)

1875

The Intention of the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. Calif. Univ. Bull. 25 pp.

1878

The Interdependence of Human Knowledge. Doctoral dissertation, Johns Hopkins University.  
 Schiller's Ethical Studies. Jour. Spec. Philos., 12:373-92.

1881

Primer of Logical Analysis for the Use of Composition Students. San Francisco. 77 pp.

Kant's Relation to Modern Philosophic Progress. Jour. Spec. Philos., 15: 360-81.

"Mind-stuff" and Reality. *Mind*, 6:365-77.

1882

Mind and Reality. *Mind*, 7:30-54.

1885

The Religious Aspect of Philosophy. Boston, Houghton Mifflin. xix, 484 pp.

1886

California from the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco (1956): A Study of American Character. Boston, Houghton Mifflin. xv, 513 pp.

1889

Report of the Committee on Phantasms and Presentiments. Proc. Amer. Soc. Psych. Res., 1:350-526, 565-67.

1891

Is There a Science of Education? Educ. Rev., 1:15-25, 121-32.

1892

The Spirit of Modern Philosophy. Boston, Houghton Mifflin. xv, 519 pp.

1893

On Certain Psychological Aspects of Moral Training. Internat. Jour. Ethics, 3:413-36.  
The Knowledge of Good and Evil. Internat. Jour. Ethics, 4:48-80.

1894

The External World and the Social Consciousness. Philos. Rev., 3:513-45.  
The Case of John Bunyan. Psychol. Rev., 1:22-23, 134-51, 230-40.

1895

The Conception of God. Berkeley, Calif., Philosophical Union. 84 pp. (2nd ed., N. Y. & London, Macmillan, 1897. xxviii, 354 pp.)  
Self-consciousness, Social Consciousness, and Nature. Philos. Rev., 4: 465-85, 577-602.  
Some Observations on the Anomalies of Self-consciousness. Psychol. Rev., 2:433-57, 574-84.  
Preliminary Report on Imitation. Psychol. Rev., 2:217-35.  
Natural Law, Ethics and Evolution. Internat. Jour. Ethics, 5:485-500.

1898

- Studies of Good and Evil: A Series of Essays upon Problems of Life and Philosophy. N. Y., Appleton. xvii, 384 pp.  
 The Psychology of Invention. Psychol. Rev., 5:113-44.

1900

- The World and the Individual (Gifford Lectures). 2 vols. (1900-02). N. Y. and London, Macmillan. xvii, 588; xx, 480 pp.  
 The Conception of Immortality. Boston and N. Y., Houghton Mifflin. 98 pp.

1901

- Joseph Le Conte. Internat. Mo., 4:324-34.

1902

- Recent Logical Inquiries and Their Psychological Bearing. Psychol. Rev., 9:105-33.  
 The Concept of the Infinite. Hibbert Journal, 1:21-45.

1903

- Outlines of Psychology. N. Y. and London, Macmillan. xxvii, 392 pp.

1904

- Herbert Spencer, an Estimate and a Review, Together with a Chapter of Personal Reminiscences by James Collier. N. Y., Fox Duffield. 234 pp.  
 Wie unterscheiden sich gesunde und krankhafte Geisteszustände beim Kinde. Langensalza, H. Beyer & Sohn.  
 The Sciences of the Ideal. Science, n.s., 20:449-62.  
 The Eternal and the Practical. Philos. Rev., 13:113-42.

1905

- The Relation of the Principles of Logic to the Foundations of Geometry. Trans. Amer. Math. Soc., 6:353-415.  
 Kant's Doctrine of the Basis of Mathematics. Jour. Philos., 2:197-207.

1906

- The Present State of the Question Regarding the First Principles of Theoretical Science. Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc., 5:82-102.



1908

- The Philosophy of Loyalty. N. Y., Macmillan. xiii, 409 pp.  
 Race Questions, Provincialisms, and Other American Problems. N. Y. and  
 London, Macmillan. xiii, 287 pp.

1910

- The Reality of the Temporal. *Internat. Jour. Ethics*, 20:257-70.

1911

- James as a Philosopher. *Science*, n.s., 34:33-45.  
 William James and Other Essays on the Philosophy of Life. N. Y., Mac-  
 millan. xi, 301 pp.

1912

- The Sources of Religious Insight. N. Y., Scribner. xvi, 297 pp.  
 Prinzipien der Logik. In: *Encyclopädie der Philosophischen Wissen-  
 schaften*. Tübingen, Mohr. (English translation by B. Ethel Meyer, in:  
*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, I, 67-135. London, Macmil-  
 lan, 1913.)  
 On Definitions and Debates. *Jour. Philos.*, 9:85-100.

1913

- The Problem of Christianity. 2 vols. N. Y., Macmillan. xlvi, 425; vi, 442 pp.  
 Relations between Philosophy and Science in the First Half of the Nine-  
 teenth Century. *Science*, n.s., 38:567-84.  
 An Extension of the Algebra of Logic. *Jour. Philos.*, 10:617-33.  
 Articles in: *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. by James Hastings.  
 N. Y., Scribner. (They were reprinted in *Royce's Logical Essays*, ed. by  
 D. S. Robinson [Dubuque, Iowa, W. C. Brown Co., 1951]: Error and  
 Truth, pp. 98-124; Axiom, pp. 125-38; Mind, pp. 146-78; Negation,  
 pp. 179-203; Order, pp. 204-31.)

1914

- War and Insurance. N. Y., Macmillan. xlviii, 96 pp.  
 The Mechanical, the Historical and the Statistical. *Science*, n.s., 39, 551-66.

1916

- The Hope of the Great Community. *Yale Review*, 5:269-91.  
 With F. Kernan. Charles Sanders Peirce. *Jour. Philos.*, 13, 701-9.