

the reassessment of josiah royce

A renewed interest by scholars in the history and significance of modern American philosophy has been visible for some time now. Though philosophic climates of opinion often change slower than other cultural fashions, the growing number of biographical studies, thematic monographs, as well as the publication of a first-rate general history of American philosophy signal a dramatic rise in interest in this aspect of American cultural history. A specific example of this broad reappraisal of modern American philosophy, and one significant in its own right, is the recent attention given to the life and career of the Harvard philosopher, Josiah Royce.

Royce (1855-1916) was born in California and spent most of his professional career at Harvard University. As a distinguished member of Harvard's philosophy department during its golden era at the turn-of-the-century, Royce is best known as a defender of philosophical idealism and as the close friend and philosophical antagonist of William James. Royce's writings cover a wide breadth of interests. As a fledgling assistant professor at Harvard, Royce brought out *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885), while in 1900 he gave the prestigious Gifford Lectures, published soon thereafter as *The World and the Individual*, and capped his career with the appearance of *The Problem of Christianity* (1913). Along the way he made major contributions in social ethics (*The Philosophy of Loyalty*, 1908), the history of philosophy (*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, 1892) and logic ("Principles of Logic," 1913).

With a philosophy faculty that included James, Royce, George Herbert Palmer, Hugo Münsterberg and George Santayana, the Harvard department played an important role in shaping the next generation of academic philosophy and, more broadly, culture in America. Royce could number philosophers such as C. I. Lewis, William Ernest Hocking and George Herbert Mead, as well as poets such as T. S. Eliot or presidents such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt among his admiring students.

Yet by the 1920's and 1930's Royce's professional reputation had sunk to its nadir. In *Character and Opinion in the United States*, published in 1920, George Santayana dismissed Royce as a "great-hearted medieval peasant visited by mystical promptings." Eighteen years later, Ralph Barton Perry derided Royce

for importing his philosophy “from the fashion makers of continental Europe.” The result, Perry contended, was a philosophy “rationalistic and *a priori*” and a philosopher who complicated the simple. Even as late as 1954, Perry Miller still judged that Royce was little respected in contemporary American intellectual circles.¹

During the 1950’s and 1960’s, however, important critical studies and scholarly reprints of Royce’s work appeared and signalled a new appreciation of the vitality and relevance of Royce’s thought. John McDermott’s two-volume collection of Royce’s writings together with John Clendenning’s annotated edition of Royce’s correspondence provided students fresh access to Royce’s philosophy. Such students also benefited from the magnificent bibliography of Royce’s publications by Ignas K. Skrupskelis which was appended to McDermott’s volumes. These projects were matched by a trio of interpretive studies. John E. Smith and James Henry Cotton provided closely argued analyses of Royce’s social and religious thought. Peter Fuss, updating and reworking a theme discussed by the French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, assembled Royce’s various ethical reflections and presented them in a systematic fashion. Taken together, these studies posed the range and interrelationship of Royce’s philosophical interests, identified the sources of his thought and reassessed Royce’s particular presentation of philosophical idealism.²

Building on this constructive foundation, three important interpretive developments have emerged in Roycean studies. First, while commentators have consistently noted Royce’s defense of philosophical idealism, recent discussions have shifted the emphasis from Royce the metaphysician of the absolute to Royce the philosopher of community. Second, an intriguing recognition and appropriation of Royce’s thought for work in contemporary hermeneutical theory has taken place. Third, new attention has been given to Royce’s analysis of regionalism and his studies of the American character as well as to Royce’s own biography.

Philosophy of religion and metaphysics were always central concerns for Royce, but M. L. Briody and Frank Oppenheim demonstrated that these interests found different expression in Royce’s later work. They observed that Royce’s earlier analysis of absolute idealism was replaced by what Royce now called “a social approach to metaphysics.” More precisely, his earlier argument for the necessary existence of an absolute mind in which truth was known now became an argument for the ideal community in which the genuine reconciliation of individuals and groups took place. Briody further noted that Royce described community as an ideal end and as a particular means to that end, while Oppenheim discussed Royce’s criticism of false communities (e.g., racism, mob spirit), and explicated Royce’s analysis of the conditions for true community. Finally, these two commentators emphasized Royce’s regard for concrete experience as a guide for his doctrine of community and a test of its application. Indeed, while he had set out the conceptual framework for his analysis of community in his *Philosophy of Loyalty*, Royce now applied his principles to the specific issues of race, family and the nation in a series of short essays. In an age of growing industrialism and centralization in America, Royce reminded his audiences of the benefit of a “wise provincialism,” or the gains available from the proliferation of decentralized communities, each bound together and reinforced by its tolerance for the other.³

Royce’s emphasis on the social dimension of human development and community as the context for the truest expression of that individuality was taken up by Jacquelyn Kegley. Kegley’s essay was a contribution to a symposium

focused on person and community in American philosophy, and helped to underscore the importance of this theme in the history of American thought and experience, and especially Royce's contribution in the modern era. Beyond that, she approved of Royce's views as an antidote to "any form of atomistic, reductionistic individualism, on the one hand, and flagrant collectivism on the other hand." Finally, in addition to praising Royce's "holistic view" of human experience, Kegley called on philosophers and social scientists to explore further the "mediating process of community building advocated by Royce." A striking response to this summons has occurred in the recent study, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by the sociologist Robert Bellah and others. Though this book has received much attention, it has gone largely unnoticed that it directly appropriates Roycean terms such as communities of memory and hope and is congruent with the spirit of much of Royce's own analysis of lived communities.⁴

Another index of the renewed interest in Royce comes from those working in Continental European philosophy. Between 1910 and 1946 several of Royce's works were translated into Italian, French, German and Russian, and his work received scholarly reviews in England, France, Italy, Eastern Europe and Russia. Here again, attention was directed primarily to Royce as a representative of idealist metaphysics and as a moral philosopher, a framework duplicated in the special issue of the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* dedicated to Royce in 1967.⁵ More recently, specific connections have been drawn between Royce and the phenomenological and hermeneutical traditions. For the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) phenomenology provided a descriptive account of the structure and meaning of human experience from the standpoint of the individual. Thus Husserl and Royce shared many common areas of interest. Husserl first became aware of Royce's work in 1911. He found aspects of Royce's philosophy of sufficient interest to encourage one of his American graduate students to write his doctoral dissertation on Royce. For his part, Royce not only knew of Husserl's work in logic, he also shared some of Husserl's philosophical views, especially regarding the intentional nature of human consciousness.⁶

More significant than these biographical connections has been the examination of Royce's work for its relevance to contemporary hermeneutical theory. As early as 1950, John E. Smith had charted the influence of Charles Sanders Peirce on Royce's theory of interpretation as presented in *The Problem of Christianity*. Twelve years later Karl-Theo Humbach traced Royce's development of the category of interpretation, particularly as it culminated in an ideal community of interpretation. According to Humbach, Royce presented the category of interpretation as a third form of knowledge, complementing perception and conception. As such, interpretation was a triadic relationship, one in which differences were mediated by a third party. Thus in the social context of his philosophy of community, Royce recommended the transformation of static bipolar relationships into dynamic triadic ones. In the epistemological context, Royce reminded his readers of the semiotic dimensions of human experience and the conditions for a successful and sensitive interpretation of that experience.⁷

It has been Royce's elastic openness to different levels of symbolic meaning and cultural expression—language, gesture, artifact—and his recognition of the need to establish the provenance and social matrix of the item to be interpreted that has drawn the most attention to his work. Indeed, the German hermeneutician, Karl-Otto Apel, called Royce's analysis of interpretation, "a hermeneutical transformation of transcendental philosophy." Placing Royce in the company of

Schleiermacher, Hegel, Dilthey and Gadamer, Apel concluded that “Royce’s philosophy of interpretation is without doubt the American philosophy closest to the tradition of German hermeneutics.” Thus both in terms of historical connections as well as direct applications, Royce’s work has been of renewed interest to those working in Continental philosophy and hermeneutics. It also serves as a reminder of the interplay between American and European philosophy.⁸

A third type of scholarly reassessment of Royce’s significance has been undertaken by historical and literary critics. In his presidential address to the Pacific branch of the American Historical Association, Earl Pomeroy discussed Royce’s historical monograph, *California*, as well as others of his occasional writings dealing with the American west. Royce’s *California* was a study of the decade 1846-1856, and covered the American conquest, the Gold Rush and the San Francisco vigilantes. Yet it was also a study of the American character and as such, it gave Royce the philosopher an opportunity to investigate historically such broad themes in the American experience as the tensions between individualism and the building of community or that between greedy aggrandizement and moral idealism. In his examination Royce denounced the shabby treatment which white Americans handed out to the Spanish and Chinese populations of California and criticized the duplicity and mock heroics of John Frémont (thereby becoming embroiled in controversy with the so-called “Conqueror of California”). But Royce praised those who worked to fashion social harmony out of the chaos of individualism and generally regarded the American character as more complex than might have been apparent at first glance. In assessing Royce’s regional study, Pomeroy applauded Royce’s concern with the struggle for social stability in early California rather than the typical fascination with the picaresque and reckless experiences of the mining camps, and associated Royce’s historical questions and attitudes with those of a later and more advanced generation of historians.⁹

In 1950 Daniel S. Robinson had insisted that Royce’s Californian roots played a significant role in his development of the doctrine of community. Writing in a complementary direction, Kevin Starr has also assessed Royce’s relation to California in his study of California’s place in the American consciousness. Starr found Royce’s association with his Californian heritage to be paradoxical. On the one hand, it had a formative and perdurable influence on the established Harvard philosopher, it was repeatedly invoked and provided a set of associations which animated his public and private meditations. Yet on the other hand, Royce refused more than one professional offer to return and teach in California, and his appraisals of public life in his home state could be withering. Despite this ambiguity though, Starr linked Royce with John Muir and Henry George in the three Californians’ essential belief in a regional heritage and the duty to strive for its preservation.¹⁰

Royce had a life-long love for literature, and he lectured often and published occasionally in the field of literary criticism. In 1887 he also completed a novel, *The Feud of Oakfield Creek*, which was, like his history, a study of the American character rooted in a regional context. Royce admired the realism of William Dean Howells and the moral tension of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, and his novel reflects those allegiances. The plot shares with Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, the theme of conflict over the California lands, and reflects the characteristic Roycean interest in the struggle for community and social order.

Contemporary reviews of Royce’s novel were unenthusiastic, and a recent study of American literary realism called it “one of the most bodiless and juiceless

narratives in the history of fiction.” The first book-length monograph on Royce the writer, however, defended his literary efforts. Especially appreciative of Royce’s historical pieces, Vincent Buranelli countered the low opinion of Royce’s writing and explicated the relation between Royce’s belletristic works and his technical philosophy. More recently, John Owen King has construed Royce’s career as an elaborate exercise in self-understanding and an engagement with the particularly modern recognition of the social-psychological forms of alienation and estrangement. Royce’s use of the terms “alienation” and “estrangement” reflected his immersion in Hegelian philosophy. For King, then, Royce’s literary and philosophical work constantly juxtaposed the malaise of the estranged individual, shut up in the prison house of his isolation and verging on the edge of a neurotic breakdown, with the healing power of working with others to build a true community. King concluded that Royce had peered deeply into the dark corners of modernity, especially in its American forms, yet he judged that by the middle of the twentieth century, Royce’s appeal to absolute idealism as an answer to this quandary smacked of authoritarianism.¹¹

According to legend, Royce desired that no biography be written of his life. Until recently, with the exception of his own autobiographical remarks in 1915, little more than vignettes of his life were available. Though most commentators on Royce sought to demonstrate his relevance to some current issue, Bruce Kuklick’s profile explicitly rejected the task of arguing for Royce’s present-day relevance. Moreover, where most commentators had fixed upon Royce’s social and religious thought, Kuklick concentrated on Royce’s work in logic and insisted that transformations in this area contained the key to Royce’s thinking. While Royce had always been interested in logic, it was the admonition of Peirce that impelled him to renew and deepen his logical studies. The result, as discussed by Kuklick, was Royce’s further study in the fields of symbolic logic and mathematics. In concentrating on this element in his exposition, Kuklick’s work made a fresh contribution to Roycean studies.¹²

A more comprehensive and traditional accounting of Royce’s life and career occurred with John Clendenning’s full-scale biography. Clendenning had previously produced the critical edition of Royce’s letters and his mastery over the documentary materials established his credentials for undertaking the biographical assignment. Clendenning’s narrative is rich in detail, locating Royce in his professional context, tracing the development of his thought and assessing the dimensions of psychological trauma and personal tragedy which shaped his life. Royce often spoke of himself as a wanderer, and Clendenning’s book should last for some time as a guide to the various directions and meanings of that journey.¹³

Others have also undertaken the task of assessing Royce’s significance in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American culture. Bruce Kuklick, for example, followed up his biography of Royce with a big book on the fate of philosophy at Harvard University. Here he traced the professionalization of philosophy as a scholarly discipline and the transformation of the individual philosopher into a university-trained and -rewarded professor of philosophy. Royce witnessed this radical reformulation and represented a transitional figure between that which had been and that which was to be. Indeed, his introduction of symbolic logic into the Harvard curriculum was a harbinger of future directions, while his view that technical philosophy was legitimate only insofar as it threw light on the wider practical problems of mankind symbolized the past.¹⁴

In his evaluation of the context and nature of this public philosophy, particularly as it dealt with social and political problems, Kuklick found Royce to

be inadequate and uncritical in his thinking. This negative appraisal of the meaning of Royce's social thought has been echoed by others as well. As early as 1954, James Harry Cotton had observed that Royce wrote as if Marx had never existed. R. Jackson Wilson's evaluation reiterated the point in his comment that Royce's "critique of individualism was psychological and metaphysical, not economic or political." For Wilson, Royce was a conservative whose fear of the rapid pace of change in America provoked a straightforward reaffirmation of the traditional rights of property and obligations of obedience. Jean B. Quandt found Royce's approach to the issue of community fascinating, but ultimately faulted it as a "serious retreat from the problems of national society." She too saw the Harvard philosopher as politically conservative, and his call for provincialism little more than a wish to return to a mythical era of small villages and face-to-face communication. For Morton White, Royce represented "a sort of frontier Lochinver" sent to rescue Eastern culture from agnosticism. In his socio-political concerns, White suggested that Royce won the support of many Americans who were likewise alarmed by the restless spirit of turmoil abroad in the land. For White though, Royce's commitment to idealism cost him many allies, as a new generation began a revolt against formalism and turned to James and Dewey as their guides. Yet if Royce was a conservative, his analysis was a keen one, as Robert V. Hine has argued. Indeed, rather than read Royce back through the lens of Dewey's program (as did White) or from the charge of a failure to realize his goals (as did Wilson), Hine sensitively reminded his readers of the subtlety of analysis, the challenge of moral responsibility and the recognition of ambiguity and potentiality in human affairs which highlighted Royce's thought.¹⁵

The study of Josiah Royce has not yet developed into a scholarly cottage industry of equal proportions to that concerning puritanism or pragmatism. Nevertheless, a reassessment of Royce's importance has taken place, one which has revised the criticisms of an earlier era, and developed its own fresh lines of inquiry. Royce's insights into the paradoxes, tensions and contradictions of American culture have found a new audience. His analysis of community displays the complexities of social life and uncovers the context in which the familiar emphasis on American individualism finds new meaning. Despite differences of approach and assessment, a clear consensus has emerged, one which recognizes the importance of the social dimension as a key element in all aspects of Royce's thought. This element has even been acknowledged in Royce's literary work as his role as a literary critic and student of American culture has begun to receive long overdue attention. No longer simply an icon of the Golden Age of American Philosophy, the career and reputation of Josiah Royce have been reviewed and his significance for philosophical and cultural studies reasserted.

University of North Carolina-Wilmington

Walter Conser, Jr.

notes

1. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York, 1920), 137-138; Ralph Barton Perry, *In the Spirit of William James* (New Haven, 1938), 25, 37; Perry Miller, ed., *American Thought: Civil War to World War I* (New York, 1954), xiv.

2. John McDermott, ed., *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce* (Chicago, 1969) (2 vols.); John Clendenning, ed., *The Letters of Josiah Royce* (Chicago, 1970); John E. Smith, *Royce's Social Infinite: the Community of Interpretation* (New York, 1950); James Harry Cotton, *Royce On The Human Self* (Cambridge, 1954); Gabriel Marcel, *La Métaphysique de Royce* (Aubier: Editions Montaigne, 1945); Peter Fuss, *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce* (Cambridge, 1965).

3. M. L. Briody, "Community in Royce: An Interpretation," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 5 (Fall 1969), 224-242; Frank M. Oppenheim, "A Roycean Road to Community,"

International Philosophical Quarterly, 10 (September 1970), 341-377. See also Royce's *Race Questions, Provincialisms, and Other American Problems* (New York, 1908).

4. Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley, "Josiah Royce on Self and Community," *Rice University Studies*, 66 (Fall 1980), 33, 47; Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, 1985).

5. See the literature review in Karl-Theo Humbach, *Das Verhältnis von Einzelperson und Gemeinschaft nach Josiah Royce* (Heidelberg, 1962), 191-195.

6. See Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 2 vols., (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 2nd ed., 1971), I, 144-146, II, 740-741; Jacquelyn Ann Kegley, "Royce and Husserl: Some Parallels and Food for Thought," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 14 (Summer 1978), 184-199.

7. Humbach, *Das Verhältnis*, 128-157.

8. Karl-Otto Apel, "Szientismus oder transzendente Hermeneutik?" *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, 2 vols., Rudiger Bubner et al., eds. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970), I, 126, 131. See also Robert S. Corrington, "A Comparison of Royce's Key Notion of the Community of Interpretation with the Hermeneutics of Gadamer and Heidegger," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 20 (Summer 1984), 279-302.

9. Earl Pomeroy, "Josiah Royce, Historian in Quest of Community," *Pacific Historical Review*, 40 (February 1970), 1-20.

10. Daniel S. Robinson, "Josiah Royce—California's Gift to Philosophy," *The Personalist*, 31 (1950), 352-68; Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York, 1973), 150-151, 189.

11. Warner Berthoff, *The Ferment of Realism*, (New York, 1965), 171; Vincent Buranelli, *Josiah Royce*, (New York, 1964); John Own King III, *The Iron of Melancholy*, (Middletown, 1983), 198-253.

12. Bruce Kuklick, *Josiah Royce: An Intellectual Biography*, (Indianapolis, 1972).

13. John Clendenning, *the Life and Thought of Josiah Royce* (Madison, 1985).

14. Bruce Kuklick, *The Rise of American Philosophy* (New Haven, 1977).

15. Kuklick, *Ibid.*, 307-314; R. Jackson Wilson, *In Quest of Community: Social Philosophy in the United States, 1860-1920* (New York, 1968), 163; Jean B Quandt, *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, 1970), 155; Morton White, *Science and Sentiment in America* (New York, 1972), 218, 236; Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier* (Norman, 1980), 8-14.