The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce, Volume I

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Part III

The European Background

Philosophical idealism is often associated with the abstract and speculative, over against the concrete concerns of empiricism. Aside from the historical inaccuracy of this judgment, it blinds us to the original version of experience to be found in Idealism. Certainly Royce did not see his affection for the Idealist perspective as cutting him off from experience. In his commentary of the role of Hegel in American thought, Royce points out that: “Some of us take ourselves to be pretty pure empiricists, Hegel merely seems to us to throw some light not upon the a priori construction of experience, but upon the significance of experience now that the empirical world is there.”¹ For Royce, “The Rediscovery of the Inner Life,” is a contribution to the understanding of the texture and quality of human experience, and, it should be noted, that he ranks Hume and Locke ahead of Berkeley in this revolution. Actually, the revolution is one in human self-consciousness and Royce sees the work of Goethe, Shelley and Byron as of a piece with that of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. Further implications of this judgment of Royce, can be found in George Herbert Mead’s

¹ This text is cited by Cotton, Royce on the Human Self, p. 156. The original source is found in Royce’s Papers at Harvard University Archives, Widener Library, Folio 43, p. 16. The entire essay was published by Royce as “Systematic Philosophy in America in the Years 1893, 1894 and 1895,” Archiv fur systematische Philosophie, 3 (1897): 245–66. See also Royce’s affirmation of idealism as built into the fabric of American culture and his denial that it is a “new and foreign feature grafted on to the life of the country by the Transcendentalists, or by their most recent successors amongst technical philosophers” (Josiah Royce, “Introduction” to L. van Becelaere, La Philosophie en Amérique [New York: Eclectic Public Co., 1904], p. xiv).
Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century, a book Roycean in theme and inspiration.²

The following selections are an unhappily brief indication of Royce’s writings on European literature and philosophy. Nonetheless, even so short a presentation yields Royce’s unusual fusion of an insight to voluntarism, coupled with what Jacob Loewenberg has called Royce’s “most characteristic motive,” the “social motive.”³

² (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936)

³ Jacob Loewenberg, “Preface,” LMI, p. xii.