
Reality as Possible Experience

Author(s): M. Phillips Mason

Source: *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Aug. 16, 1906, Vol. 3, No. 17 (Aug. 16, 1906), pp. 449-457

Published by: Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2012287>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*

JSTOR

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

REALITY AS POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE¹

THE first volume of Royce's 'The World and the Individual' is a critical exposition of four historical conceptions of being. The first conception, that of realism, defines the real as that which is independent of and external to our idea of it. The second conception, that of mysticism, defines it as the immediate or that which is immediately felt apart from any definition of it. According to the third conception, the conception of critical rationalism, the real is the true or valid. The fourth conception makes it consist in the whole meaning of a system of ideas in a completed experience; this is the absolute of constructive idealism.² The first three conceptions are for Royce inadequate; although the independent, the immediate and the true stand for important phases of the real, it is only in constructive idealism that he find a satisfactory account of reality.

It is the problem of this paper to examine the third conception, the real as the true or valid, and to show that it is an adequate conception of reality. It will be shown that this conception, when taken in the fullest and most accurate form in which it appeared in the history of thought, is a sufficient answer to the problem as to the nature of reality, and that it includes what is good in the first two conceptions and renders the fourth conception unnecessary.

The conception of reality as the true or valid is, according to Royce, the conception of 'possible experience' ('mögliche Erfahrung'), which was first developed by Kant and which has played an important part in the philosophy of science.³ It is not that which is independent of the mind and its ideas, nor is it the immediate experience as it is felt, but it is the 'determinately possible' experi-

¹ Read at the joint meeting of the Section of Anthropology and Psychology of the New York Academy of Sciences and the New York Section of the Psychological Association, held at Princeton University, Princeton, N. J., on February 26, 1906.

² Royce, 'The World and the Individual,' Vol. I., pp. 60, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 205, 233-9.

ence (p. 227). It is that which is ideally defined in universal terms and at the same time embraces all that could come within the realm of experience. It is not limited to the experience which human beings actually have, but it includes all that which is connected with experience, though not directly experienced, and which would be experienced if conditions were other than they are. Reality is then, according to this conception, all actual and possible experience in so far as it is ideally determinate.

Royce criticizes this conception because it makes the real purely universal and allows it no individual character (pp. 240, 241). The world of possible experience is a world of 'more or less valid and permanent ideas.' But such 'valid and permanent ideas' would seem to be 'only forms' without the genuine reality (pp. 243, 244). How can this ideally determinate possible experience as purely possible or formal have the individual concrete quality of that which is real? If we ask what experience is possible, we can only learn by going to actual experience. Yet at the same time we are aware that there is a vast realm of possible experience which can never be put to the test of actual experience (pp. 258, 259). Possible experience is made up of all actual experience plus all purely possible experience. But, says Royce, "What is . . . possible experience at the moment when it is supposed to be only possible?" (p. 260). "What is a mere possibility when not tested?" (p. 269). Just as the truth, the determinate quality, of actual experience depends on actual experience itself and is devoid of meaning without reference to actual experience, so in the case of the purely possible experience taken as truth must we not admit some counterpart of actual experience, something actual to which to refer this purely possible experience? To Royce a 'mere possibility' is equivalent to nothing. In order that the merely possible experience be real it must, according to him, 'be pulsating with the same life of concrete experience' as is the case with our actual experience (p. 261). Thus to make all the possible world replete with actual or immediate experience Royce is obliged to develop his fourth conception of reality, according to which the real is a complete and absolute experience including the whole realm of the possible.

When Royce cites Kant as the 'father' of the conception of 'possible experience' ('mögliche Erfahrung'), it is unfortunate that he does not consider the conception from the Kantian point of view. For by developing it along lines foreign to Kant, he is able to find certain difficulties connected with it; whereas if he would approach it in the Kantian spirit, such difficulties would be avoided. Taken by itself 'possible experience' is ambiguous, for the conception of 'experience' may be used in two different senses. 'Experience'

may either mean the actual immediate experience which human beings have, and this is the sense in which Royce takes it, or it may mean the knowledge gained from such experience. If we examine the 'Critique of Pure Reason' carefully, we shall find that Kant employs the conception of 'experience' in this latter sense. He identifies it with 'empirical knowledge,'⁴ that is, knowledge based on actual immediate experience, but not the immediate experience itself. The *immediate* experience he would call 'perception' ('Wahrnehmung') or 'intuition' ('Anschauung');⁵ but 'experience' is for him a synthesis of perceptions or of intuitions,⁶ it is essentially a kind of knowledge. 'Possible experience' would then mean knowledge which could be based on immediate experience or which it would be possible to verify by means of an intuition or a perception; and in many passages⁷ in the 'Critique of Pure Reason' Kant uses the expression in this sense. On the other hand Royce means by 'possible experience' all that could become actually experienced by human beings if their experience were not limited, as happens to be the case. Thus while Kant lays the stress on the knowledge which can be gotten from actual experience, Royce's interest is centered on the possibility of actually experiencing experience. It is not, therefore, fair to Kant for Royce to mention Mill's conception of the 'permanent possibilities of sensation' as an elaboration of this same theory of reality.⁸ From the whole trend of the discussion of this conception by Mill it is clear that he is attempting to define reality from the point of view of sensation much as Royce does from the point of view of immediate experience. Mill even makes the distinction⁹ between 'actual sensation' and the 'possibilities of sensation,' as Royce does

⁴ Kant, 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft,' Hartenstein's edition, p. 135, where he says: 'Empirische Erkenntniss aber ist Erfahrung'; and p. 175, where he says: '. . . Erfahrung d. i. empirische Erkenntniss . . .'; also pp. 124, 165, 199, 206, 507, 582.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 261.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165, where he says: 'Erfahrung . . . ist also eine Synthesis der Wahrnehmungen, die selbst nicht in der Wahrnehmung enthalten ist, . . .'; and p. 41, where he says: '. . . Erfahrung, die selbst eine synthetische Verbindung der Anschauungen ist, . . .'; also pp. 33, 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 112, 142, 147, 162, 173, 193, 210, 252, 346, 520. These references are simply references to typical passages in which 'possible experience' is used in this sense.

⁸ Royce, 'The World and the Individual,' Vol. I., p. 239. Mill develops this conception in his chapter on 'The Psychological Theory of the Belief in an External World' in his 'Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy,' London, 1889, pp. 225-239.

⁹ Mill, 'Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy,' p. 230.

between actual and possible experience. Neither Mill nor Royce could, therefore, maintain that he was a follower of Kant.¹⁰ For Royce's reality, as well as Mill's, is in terms of immediate experience, whereas Kant's reality is in terms of knowledge.

Since Kant means by 'experience' a certain kind of knowledge, we may well ask if he does not mean to include in his conception of 'possible experience' the conditions of experience. In the 'Postulates of Empirical Thought'¹¹ he tells us just what he means by the 'possible,' namely, the 'formal conditions of experience,' the *a priori* principles which lie at the basis of empirical knowledge. Thus the conception of the 'possible' is the conception of the 'possibility of experience' ('die Möglichkeit der Erfahrung').¹² Although there are many passages, as we said above, in which Kant uses 'possible experience' as knowledge which can be verified by perception, there are other passages in which 'possible experience' comes very close to meaning the 'possibility of experience.'¹³ At least the term 'possible' in 'possible experience' points to the *a priori* conditions as that which renders experience possible; it is the problem to which those conditions form the solution. To preserve the two senses in which 'possible' is used, it would be necessary to call Kant's world the possibility of possible experience. But at any rate to keep the perspective of his thought and at the same time to treat 'possible experience' as a conception of reality, we can not afford to disregard the 'possible' as the fundamental conditions of experience, whatever else we may let it include. And even if Royce intends to leave this side of the conception out of account, he can not identify it with his own conception of the 'possible' in 'possible experience'; for though he admits that experience may be described in universal terms, the center of gravity of his conception lies in the experience as experi-

¹⁰ There is, to be sure, a passage in Kant ('Kritik der reinen Vernunft,' p. 197), which is quoted by Royce ('The World and the Individual,' Vol. I., p. 237), where Kant distinguishes between 'wirkliche Wahrnehmung' and 'mögliche Wahrnehmungen,' but in doing so he uses the term 'Wahrnehmung' and not 'Erfahrung.'

¹¹ 'Kritik der reinen Vernunft,' p. 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 135, 136, 151, 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 135, where he says of 'mögliche Erfahrung' that the categories make the 'Erfahrung möglich'; and p. 152, where he corrects himself in the use of the term 'möglich' in connection with 'Erfahrung,' thus, '. . . daher sich jene reine synthetische Urtheile . . . auf mögliche Erfahrung oder vielmehr auf dieser ihre Möglichkeit selbst beziehen . . .'; also pp. 171, 280. There are also many passages in which 'mögliche Erfahrung' is used where it is impossible to determine in which sense he wishes it to be understood. I refer to those passages in which he contrasts the field of 'possible experience' with the noumenal world beyond; the following references are to passages of this sort: pp. 8, 19, 37, 138, 201, 216, 245, 287, 476.

enced, while Kant's whole interest is in the 'possible' as a form of knowledge. Had Royce adopted the Kantian point of view in its fullest sense, he would have avoided the difficulties involved in trying to characterize reality as immediate experience. But his interest being ontological rather than epistemological, he avoids those factors in knowledge by means of which 'possible experience' can be rendered a consistent and adequate conception of reality.

But let us return to Royce and allow experience to mean immediate experience as experienced. 'Possible experience' would then mean all the immediate experience we could have under all possible conditions of life. A purely possible experience would be something which we should experience if the conditions of our lives were other than they are. The other side of the moon and the interior of the earth would be examples of purely possible experiences. That this sort of possible experience is as experience a mere nothing, as Royce would maintain, is quite true; that is, taken as experience it is not actually experienced and is therefore equivalent to no experience. But the conception of the 'possible,' as developed by Kant, is not a mere nothing as a means for explaining and limiting actual experience or as a world of conditions according to which actual experience takes place. It is no more necessary for the world of the conditions of experience to be replete or alive with actual experience than it is for the conditions imposed on the will by the moral law to be ever completely fulfilled by the will. The actual experience which we have, fragmentary as it is, is sufficient to give point and life to the conditions of experience. Royce's mistake lies in his taking possible experience from a material point of view rather than from a formal point of view. It is certainly true that this conception of reality is inadequate if we start from the point of view of being and ask how much actual individual being there is and then what its quality is. But if we accept the existence we have in experience, then from the standpoint of knowledge the possibility of experience is the fullest account of reality which we can give. Let us develop this idea more fully.

Reality as possible experience gives us two main terms,—the possible and experience. The possible, we said, stands for the necessary conditions of experience and experience for the actual experience which we as human beings have. Now since both these elements go to compose reality, they must in some way be related to each other. If we took the possible by itself, we might construct all sorts of possibilities, but irrespective of experience we could never find the possibility of *experience*. On the other hand, if we started with experience and never took into account its necessary conditions, we should only have on our hands a lot of incoherent

isolated bits of experience. The relation between the possible and experience must then involve some sort of mutual dependence. This relation can best be explained if we start with some concrete piece of experience and ask what it means. If we ask how many letters there are on this page, in doing so we not only involve the experience of the page with the letters on it, but we also enter the world of the possible, namely, the possibility of number. If we ask further questions, we get to further possibilities, and if we ask for an explanation of all the relations in the experience, no explanation would be sufficient short of the complete possibility of experience, all the fundamental conditions of experience. From this it is easy to see that experience sets a problem to which the possible is the answer. Without experience the possible would have no *raison d'être*, and without the possible experience would be meaningless. Experience limits the possible in the sense that the possible must be a system of conditions such that it explains experience; and the possible limits experience in so far as it is a system of conditions to which experience must conform.

Although the possible is thus dependent on experience for its problem, it has its own degree of independence. Not only must it be consistent with experience, but it must also be consistent with itself. For it is a body of principles forming a system of the conditions of experience, and such principles can not be valid unless they are internally consistent. To make this clear let us return to the example, used above, of the number of letters on the page. In so far as we fall back on experience for the actual letters and the page which we can see, the possible number of letters found is dependent on experience; in so far, however, as we look for the inner consistency of number itself, that is, in so far as we might take into account that fifteen plus sixteen makes thirty-one, we should be concerned with something independent of experience. If we asked for the particular part of space which this page occupied, we should be forced into the problem of a three-dimensional space, but all that is true of a three-dimensional space, the truths of geometry, etc., could be constructed independently of experience. The possible is then ideal truth. It is constructed for the express purpose of knowing the conditions of experience, but it has its own principles and its own interrelations which hold quite apart from its application to any particular problem.

But it may be objected that the possible, being a constructed system of ideal truth, is necessarily constructed by the mind, and since what takes place in the mind is a part of experience, the possible is ultimately a phase of experience. But this is to misunderstand the nature of ideal truth. It may be true that it takes a

mind to actually construct a system of truth, and it may be true that the principles of truth are in the form of ideas and hence as ideas involve a mental relation; but the essential meaning of truth can not be characterized in this way. When the mind constructs a system of ideas, it can not construct them as it pleases, nor does it construct them according to some mental principle; it constructs them according to the criteria or principles of truth, according to the principles of identity and difference, unity and multiplicity, etc., which principles are far more universal and objective than any mental principle. Truth as a system of ideas can not be characterized as simply ideas in the mind. The truth contained in ideas has nothing to do with their relation to the mind; it lies entirely on the side of the meaning of the ideas. That fifteen plus sixteen equals thirty-one, is not dependent on the relation of fifteen plus sixteen or thirty-one to the mind, but on their relations to the principle of identity. In fact, the relation of a system of ideas to the mind is a relation over and above the truth contained in the system. Not only can we say that the principles of truth can not be reduced to mental relations, but no mental relation can be determined without a reference to the principles of truth. Just as the possible taken as a system of conditions is dependent on experience for its problem, so it is also dependent on the mind to put these conditions together; but the principles of the possible, the relations it involves and their necessary implications, are as independent of the mind as they are of experience.

We have now developed the essential characters of the conception of possible experience, and those characters include the main elements which Royce finds in the first three conceptions of reality which he develops, namely, the elements of independence, immediacy and ideal determinateness. It is not necessary to develop a fourth conception of reality, as Royce does, to unite all these elements, for we have shown how they all have a place in possible experience. The element of independence is to be found in the freedom of the principles of ideal truth from any principle of the mind, the element of immediacy in the actual living experience, and the element of ideal determinateness in the very nature of the possible as the ideal truth which conditions experience. The independent and the immediate are the poles of possible experience, while the ideal determinateness expresses their interrelation. We may, then, define reality as an ideal system of relations constructed independently of mental relations according to the criteria of truth for the purpose of making experience intelligible, and including the immediate experience itself.

This ideal system of relations is to be found in the world of

physical science. That the physical world is largely independent of actual experience and extends far beyond it is due to the relations which space and time involve in so far as they are based on the criteria of truth. The immediate experience characterized irrespectively of the ideal system corresponds roughly to the psychical world. That the whole physical world is filled up with immediate experience, or that it is as a whole immediately experienced, we have no right to assume, for there is not ground for assuming the existence of immediate experience except where we know there are psychical centers. Immediate experience is only to be found at certain points of the ideal system; the physical world and the psychical world are not coextensive. To make reality an ideal system teeming with experience,¹⁴ as Royce does, is quite unnecessary and is mainly due to a mistake in the motive for setting up a reality. The only reason we develop a system of reality at all is to give unity and connection to the various phases of experience, or, as it is more usually put,—interest in the problems of reality is interest in the ultimate unity and higher relations of life. The ideal system of the physical world is a system which gives unity and connection to experience. After thus unifying experience nothing is gained by bringing the separate centers of experience together in one experience or by having the gaps between those centers of experience in some way experienced. There is nothing in the nature of experience as experience which requires that it be one rather than many. The demand for unity is a purely ideal demand, and the physical system gives us just what this ideal demand requires. The ideal demand makes no stipulation as to the oneness or manyness of experience as experience, it only postulates the intelligibility of experience, its ideal unity and relations. Therefore, a metaphysical unity of experience, such as Royce develops, can neither be verified empirically nor can it from an ideal point of view be proved.

But after all, it may be asked, what is the criterion of the real? Is reality real because it falls within an ideal system or because it can be experienced and immediately felt? Reality, we should answer, would not be real unless it were both an ideal system and in

¹⁴ By saying that Royce's reality is 'teeming with experience' we do not mean that experience is a sort of stuff thrown into the ideal system after it is constructed, but simply that whatever the reality turns out to be ideally, even if it involves an 'infinite totality' (Royce, 'The World and the Individual,' Vol. I., p. 583), it must be such a world that it is 'not merely valid, but presented' as an experience to an absolute self. According to Royce there are infinite possibilities from among which the absolute will chooses certain possibilities to make up its ideal world. This world is thus fundamentally a result of the will, and it is chosen by the will as that ideal world which shall be 'presented in experience' (p. 573). This being present in experience or being experienced is essential to Royce's conception of reality.

some sense involved experience. The ideal system gives us the meaning, the scope and the implications of reality. It is also a test of the real that it be experienced, but this does not mean that all that the ideal system defines must necessarily be actually experienced. In order to distinguish the ideal system of the physical world from any possible world that might be imagined it must be understood as that system which includes immediate experience somewhere within it; the experience is simply a point of departure into the ideal world, and it is an essential point of departure. We may, if we choose, limit the term reality to the ideal system, and call experience existence. But ultimately we must admit both elements into our world; and in such a world we have experience standing for the problematic factor and the ideal system for its complete meaning and final order.

We started out in this paper with a consideration of the conception of possible experience as developed by Royce. We went on to point out that he did not develop it along Kantian lines, but that by taking it from Mill's point of view he was able to show its inadequacy, and in consequence the need of his own constructive idealism. We then developed briefly the Kantian conception, and thereby we made clear not only that possible experience was an adequate conception of reality, but that Royce's constructive idealism was based on a mistaken motive. We should, furthermore, be willing to maintain that possible experience is the only adequate conception of reality, though it is impossible to show this within the limits of this paper. The great advantage, however, of this conception is that it gives us a sufficient ideal basis for science and at the same time keeps within the bounds of experience. Though physical science may develop new concepts within the possible and experience may give us new problems, we can never hope to get beyond the realm of possible experience.

M. PHILLIPS MASON.

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

TWO TYPES OF CONSISTENCY

IN a previous article¹ consistency was defined as the immediate self-maintaining quality of experience. This does not mean a mere tendency in activities to repeat themselves mechanically. No scheme of stereotyped activities is conceivable in which friction and self-erosion are not present. No list of moral rules covering the activities of life can be so constructed that they can always be obeyed. In obeying one we are sure at times to disobey another. No system of mechanical formulæ has ever been devised which does not leave

¹This JOURNAL, Vol. III., No. 5.