DOING EPISTEMOLOGY SCIENTIFICALLY: DEWEY VERSUS RUSSELL

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In “The Existence of the World as a Logical Problem,”¹ John Dewey argues that the epistemological project pursued by Bertrand Russell in Our Knowledge of the External World is misguided.² Dewey denies there is a legitimate philosophical problem about the existence of the external world and argues that Russell’s proposal for justifying knowledge of the external world presupposes a discredited theory of experience. As he sees it, Russell fails to appreciate the implications of contemporary science for epistemology and is thus left wandering down a blind philosophical alley.

Russell meets Dewey’s criticisms by arguing that they are irrelevant to scientific epistemology properly construed.³ He embraces Dewey’s view that philosophy ought to be pursued in light of scientific knowledge but insists that, far from being undermined by contemporary science, the epistemological questions he raises are forced on us by physics. Russell concludes that Dewey simply dismisses legitimate philosophical problems about our knowledge of the external world for no better reason than they do not interest him.

In this essay I argue that far from resolving their differences, the debate between Dewey and Russell reveals their disagreement to be more profound and intractable than either of them acknowledges. Dewey does misconstrue Russell’s epistemological project and his criticisms of it are, therefore, easily dispatched by Russell. At the same time, Russell misdiagnoses Dewey’s error and, as a result, fails to appreciate the depth of Dewey’s approach to epistemology and the challenge it poses to Russell’s project. I claim that their disagreement about the nature of knowledge turns on deeper differences over what philosophy is and how its questions are to be settled and these deeper differences are not ‘scientific’—at least not in the sense that either Dewey or Russell gives to this term.

**Dewey on Russell’s Our Knowledge of the External World**

In Our Knowledge of the External World Russell sets out to reconstruct knowledge of the external world on the basis of what he calls ‘hard data’. For him, hard data comprise knowledge that is self-evident, rather than justified by ‘outside evidence’ (OKEW: 75). These data are limited to the laws of logic, certain facts of recent memory and introspection, and the ‘immediate facts perceived by sight or touch or hearing [etc.]’ (OKEW: 75). The question Russell poses is whether ‘the existence of anything other than our own hard data [can] be inferred from the existence of those data?’ (OKEW: 80). This question, he says, involves the further question of whether we can ‘know that objects of sense […] exist at times when we are not perceiving them’ (OKEW: 82).

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Dewey has two main arguments against Russell’s project in epistemology. First, he argues that the problem of the existence of an external world ‘involves a self-contradiction’ (EWLP: 83) and is, therefore, ‘not a question at all’ (EWLP: 84). Second, he urges that Russell confuses the legitimate problem of determining the conditions under which something in the world can be taken to licence reliable inferences about other things in the world with the pseudo-problem of determining whether we can know that anything exists beyond private, immediate, sensory experience. I shall elaborate each objection in turn.

(i) The Incoherence of the Problem of the External World

Dewey first argues that in specifying the nature of hard data—the ‘objects of sense’ from which the existence of the external world is to be inferred—Russell relies on knowledge about things beyond these data. Dewey takes this to show that Russell could not be in a position to call our knowledge of external things into question if he did not already accept that he has such knowledge. Put otherwise, the very knowledge that allows Russell to articulate doubts about knowledge of the external world renders these doubts unfounded. As a result, Russell’s question about the possibility of knowing the external world is ‘self-contradictory’ and ‘unreal’ (EWLP: 83).

To illustrate his point, Dewey cites Russell’s claim that the hard data associated with what would normally be described as walking around a table comprise ‘sensible objects’—where by ‘sensible object’ he does ‘not mean such a thing as a table, which is both visible and tangible, can be seen by many people at once, and is more or less permanent’ but rather ‘just that patch of colour which is momentarily seen when we look at the table, or just that particular hardness which is felt when we press it, or just that particular sound which is heard when we rap it’ (OKEW: 83-84). When walking around a table, Russell insists, ‘[w]hat is really known is a correlation of muscular and other bodily sensations with changes in visual sensations’ (OKEW: 85).

Dewey objects that Russell’s characterization of the objects of sense as ‘muscular,’ ‘visual,’ and ‘bodily,’ presupposes knowledge beyond what these data disclose in and of themselves (EWLP: 89). That a patch of colour is something visual (as opposed to auditory or tactile) ‘is a proposition about colour and it is a proposition which colour itself does not utter’ (EWLP: 85). Taken by itself, a bare patch of colour does not reveal how it is sensed, or even that it is sensed, and so Russell’s identification of a patch of colour as something visual implies knowledge that exceeds anything present in the patch and, by Russell’s definition, is knowledge of an external world.

Similarly, Dewey maintains that there is nothing in a bare patch of colour that reveals it to be an object of knowledge, never mind an object known immediately, without appeal to outside evidence. Inasmuch as Russell’s characterization of the patch of colour as a self-evident datum involves knowledge external to the patch itself, his explanation of the terms of his question concerning knowledge of the external world ‘already assumes an answer to the question which [he] has put’ (EWLP: 85).

Finally, Dewey thinks Russell’s talk of the correlation of visual and muscular sensations as hard data is also illegitimate. Such a correlation involves (i) a spatio-temporal ordering of changes in visual sensations, (ii) a similar ordering of muscular and other bodily sensations and (iii) a point-to-point correspondence between the elements of these series. Dewey thinks any such ordering of elements in space and time is part of the public, external world, rather than part

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4 According to Dewey, all that is required for the existence of a patch of colour is that certain physiological conditions me met and these can be realized without the colour actually being seen. Thus, he says, Russell’s ‘argument implies over and above the existence of color something called seeing or perceiving—noting is perhaps a convenient neutral term. And this clearly involves an assumption of something beyond the existence of the datum—and this datum is by definition an external world’ (EWLP: 85).
of a private realm of objects. ‘It may not be a very big external world,’ he says, ‘but having begged a small external world, I do not see why one should be too squeamish about extending it over the edges’ (EWLP: 90). However, even supposing that the visual and muscular sensations correlated in our experience of walking around a table belong to the private experience of a single knower, as Russell suggests, Dewey maintains that these sensations could neither be individuated nor ordered in space and time without determining their connection to the public objects required to fix their location and duration. ‘[W]e can know that a red [patch] is a momentary or transitory existence only if we know of other things which determine its beginning and its cessation’ (EWLP: 89). Since knowledge of these ‘other things’ goes beyond knowledge contained in the red patch, it seems, again, that in formulating his project Russell assumes the very sort of knowledge that ‘is professedly called into question’ (EWLP: 86).

Dewey thinks it is no accident that Russell is forced in spite of himself to appeal to knowledge of external things in his characterizations of hard data. He claims that rather than derive knowledge of the external world from prior knowledge of private, sensory objects, as he professes, Russell starts from an understanding of the external world as a space-time continuum and proceeds within this world to make fine-grained distinctions among sensory qualities as a means to better predict the effects of objects on knowers. For Dewey, it is plain that:

the correlation of correlative series of changes which defines the object of sense perception [for Russell] […] signifies the result of an analysis of the usual crude empirical data, and an analysis which is made possible only by very complex knowledge of the world. It marks not a primitive psychologic datum but an outcome, a limit, of analysis of a vast amount of empirical objects (EWLP: 93).

According to Dewey ‘hard data’ as conceived by Russell are not the starting point for inquiry into the external world but rather the product of such inquiry. Russell’s correlations of sensations are not given prior to knowledge of the world but rather are arrived at through the discrimination of elements within the world and these discriminations are made possible by advances in experimental science—including psychology and physiology. Given this, Dewey is confident that the contradictions he finds in Russell’s views are not the result either of Russell’s reliance on common sense locutions for ease of expression or his failure to exercise sufficient care in the formulation of his questions.

(ii) The Psychology of Cognitive Experience

In his second objection to Russell’s project, Dewey argues that the ‘formal fallacy’ just outlined results from a confusion between the legitimate question of how to determine when the effects of objects on our senses serve as a basis for reliable predictions and the question of how to infer that there is an external world from private experience. The former question deals with connections between elements in one and the same world—namely, nature—while the latter one deals with an alleged relation between elements in two disparate worlds—an inner world of subjective experience and a world of public objects thought to lie beyond it. Dewey thinks this confusion arises from Russell’s mistaken belief that ‘hard data’ are psychologically primitive—that is, the belief that they constitute knowledge given immediately in experience and provide our only clues as to what the world outside private experience is like.

While Dewey grants that many psychologists take patches of colour, sounds, ‘kinaesthetic qualities’ etc. to be more primitive than knowledge of spatio-temporal objects, he is quick to point out that these same psychologists readily admit that their account of the primitives

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5 ‘A moderate amount of unbiased reflection will, I am confident, convince anyone that apart from a reference to the same existence perduing through different times while changing in some respect, no temporal delimitation of the existence of such as thing as sound or colour can be made’ (EWLP: 89).
in experience is the product of inquiry in physiology, anatomy and other experimental sciences (EWLP: 94). Whatever insight into primitive data psychology contributes is, then, part and parcel of our knowledge of the external world and cannot be used to cast wholesale doubt on the possibility of such knowledge.

Dewey further observes that many psychologists—William James foremost among them—doubt that the primitives from which our knowledge develops consist of the finely discriminated particulars that Russell calls ‘hard data’. For these psychologists, knowledge grows ‘from a confusedly experienced external world to a world experienced as ordered and specified’ (EWLP: 94-95) but ‘at no point’ in this development is the mind ‘confronted with the problem of inferring the world’ (EWLP: 95). As Dewey explains:

> What psychological analysis contribute[s] [is] not primitive historic data out of which a world has somehow to be extracted, but an analysis of the world, which had been previously thought of and believed in, into data making possible better inferences and beliefs about the world (EWLP: 96).

Whereas Russell labours under the mistaken view that knowledge of the external world is rooted in the immediate apprehension of private objects given prior to, and independently of, knowledge of nature, Dewey thinks psychology confirms (what his first argument against Russell suggests) that ‘[t]aken for what they really are [Russell’s hard data] are elements detected in the world serving to guide and check our inferences about it’ (EWLP: 96).6

Dewey draws at least two important morals from his critique of Russell’s epistemology. First, he thinks Russell’s inability to formulate his doubts about our knowledge of the external world without presupposing such knowledge makes clear that epistemology can only be pursued in light of our general understanding of human beings and their natural environment:

> what is doubtful is not the existence of the world but the validity of certain customary yet inferential beliefs about things in it […] [N]ever in any actual procedure of inquiry do we throw the existence of the world into doubt, nor can we do so without self-contradiction. We doubt some received piece of ‘knowledge’ […] and then set to work as best we can, to rectify it. The contribution of psychological science to determining unambiguous data […] is an important aid in the technique of such rectifications (EWLP: 97).7

Second, the fact that Russell arrives at his analysis of hard data by distinguishing features of the natural world suggests to Dewey that this analyses is best viewed as an attempt to define objects in terms of their experiential effects on perceivers in various circumstances. What Russell takes to be a characterization of private worlds is, Dewey insists, better understood as a description of possible perspectives within nature. Similarly, Russell’s talk of correlations among the entities in disparate private worlds involves nothing more than a recognition that these possible perspectives lie within a single, spatio-temporal continuum. For Dewey, then, the significance of Russell’s analysis of objects in terms of sensory data does not lie in its accuracy as an account of private experience underlying knowledge of the external world. Rather, it lies in the predictive power of the correlations he finds between the behaviour of objects and their

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6 Put otherwise, ‘the particulars of perception, taken as complete and independent, make nonsense. Taken as objects discriminated for the purposes of improving, reorganizing, and testing knowledge of the world they are invaluable assets’ (EWLP: 96).

7 In light of this, Sidney Hook thinks ‘Dewey’s position here not only undercuts the traditional epistemological problem but any view that professes to start with a wholesale skepticism or one which successively challenges the validity of any sense observation which confirms a judgment on the ground that it itself may be hallucinatory or a dream’ (S. Hook, “Introduction,” in John Dewey: The Middle Works 1899-1924, vol. 8: 1915, J. Boydston (ed) (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979): xxiii.)
effects on organisms. For Dewey, Russell’s hard data are to be viewed as signs—alongside other physical signs like litmus paper or blood tests. They are elements in the world that give rise to reliable inferences about the state of other things in the (very same) world.⁸

**Russell’s Reply to Dewey**

In light of Dewey’s critique, one might expect Russell to defend himself by arguing, on the one hand, that the problem of the external world can be formulated in terms that do not presuppose knowledge of it and, on the other hand, that hard data are given in experience prior to knowledge of the external world. However, Russell does no such thing. To the contrary, he responds to Dewey’s objections by claiming that ‘in passages dealing with my own views, I have often found that the only thing I disagreed with was the opinion that what was said constituted criticism of me’ (DEEL: 5). As far as Russell is concerned, Dewey’s objections do nothing to undermine his philosophical project and are entirely beside the point.

In response to the charge that his characterizations of hard data presuppose knowledge of the external world, Russell pleads guilty. He thinks all philosophical theorizing begins by taking certain ‘data’ for granted—and by ‘data’ here he does not mean ‘hard data’ but rather ‘matters of common knowledge, vague, complex, inexact, as common knowledge always is, but yet somehow commanding our assent as on the whole and in some interpretation pretty certainly true’ (OKEW: 72). In epistemology, the data from which we start include knowledge rooted in experience of ‘particular objects of daily life—furniture, houses, towns […] and so on’ (OKEW: 73), knowledge based on the testimony of others (e.g. history, geography and journalism) and the systematization of all this knowledge in the physical sciences. Russell starts from our current understanding of the world ‘not [because] common knowledge must be true’ (OKEW: 74), but because ‘we possess no radically different kind of knowledge derived from some other source’ (OKEW: 74). For Russell, no less than for Dewey, ‘[t]here is not any superfine brand of knowledge, obtainable by the philosopher, which can give us a standpoint from which to criticize the whole of the knowledge of daily life’ (OKEW: 73):

> Philosophy cannot boast of having achieved such a degree of certainty that it can have authority to condemn the facts of experience and the laws of science. The philosophical scrutiny, therefore, though sceptical in regard to every detail, is not sceptical as regards the whole. That is to say, its criticism of details will only be based on their relation to other details, not upon some external criterion which can be applied to all the details equally (OKEW: 74).

In the absence of an external standard by which to evaluate beliefs—the absence of a God’s Eye View—Russell thinks ‘[t]he most that can be done is to examine and purify our common knowledge by an internal scrutiny, assuming the canons by which it has been obtained, and applying them with more care and more precision’ (OKEW: 74).⁹ It is clear, then, that Russell agrees with Dewey that any doubts he raises about our knowledge of the external world rest on claims to know that world (OKEW: 74).

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⁸ Thus hard data ‘are not the elements out of which perceptions are composed, constituted or constructed’ but ‘simply the most unambiguous and best defined objects of perception which can be secured to serve as signs’ (‘The Logic of Judgements of Practice’ [hereafter LJP], John Dewey: The Middle Works 1899-1924, vol. 8: 1915, J. Boydston (ed) (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979): 58

⁹ ‘We are quite willing to admit there may be errors of detail in this knowledge, but we believe them to be discoverable and corrigible by the methods which have given rise to our beliefs, and we do not, as practical men, entertain for a moment the hypothesis that the whole edifice may be built on insecure foundations. In the main, therefore, and without absolute dogmatism as to this or that special portion, we may accept this mass of common knowledge as affording data for our philosophical analysis’ (OKEW: 73).
But whereas Dewey thinks Russell’s reliance on knowledge of the external world renders the central problems of his epistemology incoherent, Russell disagrees. As he sees it, it is precisely because the doubts he raises rest on beliefs drawn from common sense and science that they are pressing and cannot be lightly dismissed. It is ‘[p]sychologists,’ he says, who ‘have made us aware that what is actually given in sense is much less than most people would naturally suppose, and that much of what at first sight seems to be given is really inferred’ (OKEW: 75). And it is physics that tells us the effects an object has on us (its appearing green, for example) depend not only on the object but on ambient conditions and the state of our physiology. In light of this knowledge, it is conceivable—i.e. physically and psychologically possible—that one might undergo the experiences normally caused by a table in front of one without there being a table there and, moreover, that one might have the experiences associated with seeing this table on different occasions without there being a single table that persists between viewings. He writes:

We naturally believe, for example, that tables and chairs […] are still there when we turn our back upon them. I do not wish for a moment to maintain that this is certainly not the case. But I do maintain that the question whether it is the case is not to be settled off-hand on any supposed ground of obviousness […]. As soon as the question is seriously raised whether, because we have seen them, we have a right to suppose they are there still, we feel that some kind of argument must be produced, and that if none is forthcoming, our belief can be no more than a pious opinion (OKEW: 77).

Russell is well aware that we are all inclined to dismiss the possibility we are dreaming or the victim of deceptions engineered by an evil demon. He even agrees, it is important to note, that we are reasonable in doing so. But what he thinks needs explaining is what justifies our dismissal. As he says, “I find myself, when I begin reflecting on the external world, full of hitherto unquestioned assumptions, for many of which I quickly realize that I have as yet no adequate reason. The question then arises: what sort of reason could I hope to discover?” (DEEL: 20). The challenge that he is concerned to address, then, is as follows: given my current knowledge about the world, my belief in the existence and persistence of tables can coherently be doubted. Yet I do not doubt it. When I look to justify my lack of doubt, I find I have nothing to offer. As Russell sees it, the sceptical challenge is best viewed as a reductio ad absurdum of science and common sense—it is a challenge to our knowledge of the external world based on that knowledge. It is because this challenge arises from within our current system of belief that failure to meet it threatens the coherence of our view of the world. So much for Dewey’s first objection to Russell’s project.

What, then, of Dewey’s second objection—the objection that Russell is wrong to suppose human beings are given isolated tastes, sounds, smells etc as hard data on which to base conjectures about the existence and persistence of objects in the world, that hard data are not the starting point for knowledge but rather the product of inquiry into the external world, and that psychology shows that human beings never face the problem of having to make out the nature of the external world on the basis of sensory data alone?

As with the previous objection, Russell does not take issue with the psychological claims behind Dewey’s criticism. He argues instead that psychological facts are irrelevant to his enterprise. As he sees it, the question of what comes first temporally in the acquisition of knowledge is of no philosophical importance:

What earlier beliefs preceded those which we now entertain, either in the individual or in the race? What vaguer state than ‘belief’ precedes the growth of even the earliest beliefs? […] All these are questions of psychology [i.e. not epistemology]. They are questions which I, for my part, have not attempted to discuss. Nothing that I have said on the problem of the external world is intended to be applicable to them (DEEL: 8).
In calling hard data ‘primitive’ Russell does not mean to imply that they come first in the psychological order of things. When ‘I speak of […] ‘hard data” I am not thinking of those objects which constitute data to children or monkeys’ (DEEL: 7). Nor does he deny that the identification of hard data requires a sophisticated scientific understanding of the external world. When ‘I speak of […] ‘hard data” […] I am thinking of the objects which seem data to a trained scientific observer […] the state of mind that I am imagining in investigating the problem of the physical world is not a naïve state of mind, but one of Cartesian doubt’ (DEEL: 7). Russell, then, does not take issue with Dewey’s claims about the psychological origins of cognitive experience. He even grants that knowers do not in the course of their lives ever infer the existence of the external world on the basis of private objects of sense.

On Russell’s view, data is not ‘hard’ because it is given apart from knowledge of the external world or comprises the first knowledge written on our tabulas rasa. What makes data hard is that it is knowledge that ‘resists the solvent influence of critical reflection’ (OKEW: 77-78), unlike ‘soft data’ ‘which, under the operation [of internal critical scrutiny], become to our minds more or less doubtful’ (OKEW: 78). For him, the claim that the table I see exists and persists when I am not observing it is ‘soft’ because critical scrutiny reveals it to be in need of justification. What I see when looking at the table is not identical to the physical table I claim to know and so an argument is needed to justify my beliefs about the table if those beliefs are to be anything more than ‘pious opinion’. On the other hand, the claim that I feel something solid and see something rectangular, though not psychologically (i.e. temporally) primitive, is hard data (i.e. epistemologically primitive) because it does not need further justification. Critical scrutiny of such claims reveals them to be justified by the mere presence of certain experiences and as a result no demand for further justification of them arises. In such cases our beliefs are caused by the very things these beliefs assert and we could not be out of touch with these things because they “are there, and as far as their momentary existence is concerned, no further argument is required” (OKEW: 77). Russell’s project, then, is not—as Dewey supposes—to explain how we manage to discern what the world is like solely on the basis of private experience—he agrees with Dewey that we have not done this. The question that concerns Russell is rather:

How do we, ordinary persons with a working knowledge of physics, organize our beliefs from a logical point of view? What, if we are challenged, and an attempt is made to make us doubt the truth of physics, shall we fall back upon as giving us a basis for our belief which we are not prepared to abandon? (DEEL: 8)

Contrary to what Dewey’s critique implies, Russell does not share the Lockean view that knowers are cut off from the world by a veil of subjective experience. A more apt analogy for his view is that we are like expert witnesses testifying in court about the nature of the world and forced to justify our claims under cross examination by a sceptic who turns our own beliefs against us. It is the need to establish a strict logical connection between the hard data that need no justification and the soft data that critical scrutiny shows to be in need of justification that is Russell’s main concern.

Having easily dispatched Dewey’s two main arguments against his project, Russell seeks to explain Dewey’s confusion. He thinks Dewey goes astray because he is interested in uncovering the psychological origins of knowledge and reads Russell’s work as if it were an attempt to provide an answer to this question. Russell agrees with Dewey that his views are indefensible as psychology but is not moved by this criticism since they are not intended as a contribution to psychology at all.

It is important to note, however, that Russell’s account of Dewey is no fairer than Dewey’s critique of Russell. Whereas Russell contrasts epistemology and psychology, Dewey is
interested in connecting them. This is not because he refuses to distinguish descriptive psychology and normative epistemology but rather because he is convinced that epistemology undertaken without a proper understanding of the nature of organisms and their environment will not yield improved methods of inquiry. He examines how human beings acquire knowledge, not because he is interested in the temporal origins of beliefs, but rather because he thinks a scientific theory of how we learn is the best place to look for ways to better engineer learning—in science, education, politics, ethics and even esthetics.

As Dewey sees it, biology tells us that organisms modify their behaviour in attempting to adapt to discrepancies between their activities and the demands of their environment. He develops a model of knowledge according to which the growth of intelligence is a refinement and development of this basic fact of biology. Pursuing this hypothesis he concludes that the experimental method is fundamental to justifying knowledge claims. This method proceeds by effecting changes in the world in an effort to bring about events that one’s beliefs would lead one to expect and assessing the truth or falsity of beliefs on the basis of what occurs. Results attained through experimentation are objective only to the extent that they are intersubjectively verifiable and replicable. On this view, the private sensations an inquirer may or may not undergo in inquiry are of no epistemological relevance. Scientific observation is not a matter of introspecting private objects but rather of responding reliably to features of the natural world (e.g. to dinosaur bones, DNA samples, changes in blood pressure etc). Since Russell’s project of justifying scientific knowledge in terms of private experience has no bearing on the ways in which human beings produce and justify knowledge, Dewey thinks it as of no philosophical interest.

However, what seems to Dewey to be a compelling scientific case against Russell’s view of epistemology, looks to Russell like a dismissal of deep philosophical problems. Russell has no interest in denying the biological and psychological facts Dewey cites in his epistemology, nor does he take issue with the account of knowledge Dewey defends. Indeed, in a late work he describes a theory of knowledge very close to the one Dewey offers as both “legitimate and important”. What he does insist on, however, is that knowledge drawn from biology and psychology is soft data and that to proceed as Dewey does is to ignore the critical scrutiny that leads to a legitimate demand for justification of these data:

> Physics assures us that the occurrence which we call ‘perceiving objects’ are at the end of a long causal chain which starts from the objects, and are not like to resemble the objects except, at best, in very certain abstract ways. […] The observer, when he seems to himself to be observing a stone, is really, if physics is to be believed, observing the effect of the stone upon himself […] and therefore the behaviourist [i.e. Dewey], when he thinks he is recording observations about the outer world, is really recording observations about what is happening in him (IMT: 15)\(^{11}\)

Dewey does indeed ignore the problem Russell alludes to in this passage but only because he thinks a truly naturalistic account of knowledge—one grounded in biology and psychology—forces us to dispense with talk of private worlds and subjective evidence. He does not deny that physical objects leave traces on organisms in the form of retinal images, chemical changes on the tongue, etc. Nor does he deny that these effects are unique to each organism.


\(^{11}\) ‘When the behaviourist [i.e. someone like Dewey] observes the doings of animals, and decides whether these show knowledge or error, he is not thinking of himself as an animal, but as an at least hypothetically inerrant recorder of what actually happens. He ‘knows’ that animals are deceived by mirrors and believes himself to ‘know’ that he is not similarly deceived. By omitting the fact that he—an organism like any other—is observing, he gives a false air of objectivity to the results of his observation. As soon as we remember the fallibility of the observer, we have introduced the serpent into the behaviourist’s paradise’ (IMT: 15).
Nevertheless, he insists that these physical effects are mere events, not cases of knowledge, and taken in themselves they are of no epistemological significance. Retinal images are occurrences and do not affirm or justify anything. While sensations cause knowers to make judgements, these judgements have implications that go beyond what occurs on the surface of our skin and are subject to experimental verification like any other knowledge claim. As Dewey sees it, then, a properly scientific epistemology reveals that knowing does not consist in the mere having of sensory bombardments, but rather in acquiring intersubjectively reliable responses to features of the natural world. For him, having one’s nerve endings stimulated is no more the essence of inquiry than it is the essence of farming or bridge building. While Russell is right that sensations cause judgements and judgements are susceptible to error, Dewey thinks the only problem this raises for philosophy is to determine the conditions under which judgements triggered by sensations yield reliable inferences. Solving this problem is not a matter of determining the relation between entities in disparate worlds—private and public—but, as noted earlier, of determining the relations between the expectations prompted by sensations and the way the world is. In solving this problem appeal to private worlds and subjective evidence is otiose and indeed doubly unhelpful since it gives rise to intractable problems about the connection of mind and body, the existence of other minds and of bridging the gulf between the private and public worlds. Thus, when Russell writes that ‘men of science […] are willing to condemn immediate data as “merely subjective” while yet maintaining the truth of the physics inferred from these data’ and ‘it is therefore necessary to find some way of bridging the gulf between the world of physics and the world of sense’ Dewey replies:

I do not see how anyone familiar with the two-world schemes [i.e. the outer world of physics and the inner world of the mind] which have played such a part in the history of humanity can read this [Russell’s] statement without depression (LJP: 61).

From Russell’s perspective, however, Dewey response is simply an evasion:

The desire to escape from subjectivity in the description of the world (which I share) has led some modern philosophers astray—or so it seems to me—in relation to theory of knowledge. Finding its problems distasteful, they have tried to deny these problems exist. That data are private and individual is a thesis which has been familiar since the time of Protagoras. This thesis has been denied because it has been thought, as Protagoras thought, that, if admitted, it must lead to the conclusion that all knowledge is private and individual. For my part, I admit the thesis, I deny the conclusion; how and why, the following pages are intended to show.12

Conclusion
While much more could be said about this debate, I hope at least to have shown that the critical exchange between Dewey and Russell goes very little distance towards resolving their differences. Dewey’s criticism is based on an epistemology that he thinks is grounded in contemporary psychology and biology. And yet it has no force against Russell precisely because Russell does not see his epistemology as contradicting any scientific claims, including those that Dewey makes. At the same time, it is because Russell dismisses Dewey’s epistemology as a mere psychological explanation of the acquisition of knowledge, rather than as an attempt to provide a foundation for knowledge, that he is unable to appreciate the challenge Dewey’s view poses to his project of justifying knowledge in terms of first-person subjective data. Faced with Russell’s defence of his project, Dewey appeals to empirical facts about human beings and their cognitive capacities. But for Russell, the issue is not about biology or psychology. It is rather

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about how best to logically order our beliefs in light of what critical reflection reveals about their evidential warrant.

This disagreement between Dewey and Russell encompasses differences over the nature of knowledge, experience, and mind—as if that were not complicated enough—but it also turns on beliefs about what sort of enterprise philosophy is and how philosophical questions are to be settled. These latter disagreements are not, as Dewey thinks, resolvable by appeal to psychology or biology (for Russell does not disagree with Dewey about such things). Nor are they resolvable by the method of logical analysis that Russell pursues. It is for this reason that I claim the debate between these two proponents of scientific philosophy is not a scientific one—at least not in the sense that either Dewey or Russell gives to this term.