



## Dewey and Russell on the Possibility of Immediate Knowledge

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In a recent review of my book *Dewey's New Logic* (Burke, 1994), Paul J. Hager (1998) challenges my treatment of Bertrand Russell's epistemology. The review on the whole is even-handed and requires no response, at least from me. But I would like to address one issue that Hager raises.

Hager rightly points out my "mistake of attributing to Russell the view that immediate sense data provide incorrigible foundations for knowledge." In doing this (Burke, 1994, p. 217) I was apparently echoing a common fault among many of Dewey's defenders who seem to be overly inclined to depict Russell as a primary target of Dewey's critique of atomistic empiricism. This does an injustice to Russell's measured endorsement of a Humean empiricism (e.g., 1914, p. 220; 1940, pp. 150, 305, 396, 414). More to the point, it fails to get at the root of the differences between Russell's and Dewey's logical and epistemological views insofar as perception and empirical data are concerned.

The issue is what Dewey refers to as the problem of immediate knowledge. Dewey himself (not only Dewey's defenders) mistakenly attributes to Russell a view "that there are propositions known in virtue of their own immediate direct presence, as in the case of 'There is red', or, as Mr. Russell prefers to say, 'Redness-here'" (Dewey, 1941, LW.14.170).

The view Dewey is referring to is stated in *Our Knowledge of the External World* (Russell, 1914, pp. 62–63), and it is maintained in a more refined form in *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Russell, 1940, pp. 21, 154–156, 168, 171–174, 187, 365–367, 387, 395–396). Of course, Russell denies that we have anything like immediate knowledge in the sense that we might "know our present experiences" simply by virtue of their being immediately present (1940, p. 59). On the other hand he states that "there is an important sense in which you *can* know anything that is in your present sensible field ... [The] most immediate knowing of which we have experience involves sensible present *plus* something more ... [This] may be called "attention". ... Every empirical proposition is based upon one or more sensible occurrences that were noticed when they occurred ... Such occurrences, we shall say, are "known" when they are noticed. ..." (1940, pp. 60–61).

Despite Dewey's simplistic reading of Russell on this point, his criticism of Russell nevertheless pertains even to this latter notion of "the most immediate knowing of which we have experience" as sensible presence plus noticing. That is to say, Dewey finds such a notion lacking, and in any case, not workable within his own theory of experience.

The reasons why Russell's notion of *nearly* immediate knowledge is unacceptable to Dewey ultimately hinge on differences in their respective conceptions of logic. These differences in turn are rooted in their different conceptions of *experience*. For Russell, logic and languages are separable from experience(s). Experiences are viewed as "sensible occurrences" (1940, p. 61); and language is linked to experiences through processes of "verification" (1940, pp. 97–98). Logic in this view is a study of formal features of languages, whereas epistemology addresses their link with experience and how knowledge is linguistically formulated in terms amenable to logical analysis. The interesting consequence of this view is that some kind of bottom rung in the hierarchy of expressible knowledge must be posited at or near the interface between language and experience. Russell treats propositions as formulations of possible beliefs and even knowledge (if only in a fallibilistic sense). And he is obliged then to posit certain "basic propositions" as elementary foundations for the edifice of one's knowledge – where knowledge is conceived of as a group of theories, and where a theory is a system of both observational and inferred propositions. While Russell is often careful to characterize such basic propositions as not infallibly certain, he nevertheless does not hesitate to refer to them as fundamental elements of knowledge or belief. In some instances (1940, pp. 154–156) we see Russell characterizing perceptual data both as "pieces of knowledge" and as "propositions" – which clearly establishes that Russell and Dewey conceive of propositions in fundamentally different ways. Elsewhere Russell distinguishes perceptual propositions from the perceptual data (or percepts) which they pertain to (Russell, 1940, pp. 190–192), whereas earlier he has referred to data themselves as propositions and as pieces of knowledge. This inconsistency may or may not hold negative consequences for his epistemology; but in any case, his treatment of propositions is incompatible with Dewey's.

Russell is of course bent on maintaining a view of propositions that comports with the view of logic set out in *Principia Mathematica* (Russell and Whitehead, 1910–1913) and with subsequent developments of that view (as "mathematical logic") in the first half of the 20th century. In this vein, Russell is compelled to posit a hierarchy of languages (1940, chap. 4) which "must extend upwards indefinitely" but where there must be "a language of lowest type" (p. 76). This lowest "primary or object-language as a language consist[s] wholly of 'object-words'" (p. 79), whereas logical words (*true, false, and, or, not, some, all, etc.*) as such belong only to the secondary and higher languages (p. 95). All of this is part of a view which separates language from experience, and which views logic as being "incurably Platonic" (Russell, 1940, p. 70).

Basic propositions serve then as “a sub-class of epistemological premises, namely those which are caused, as immediately as possible, by perceptive experiences” (Russell, 1940, p. 171). These basic propositions – which are cast as “atomic propositions” in a predicate calculus – in themselves contain no inferential elements; but without them an account of knowledge cannot get off the ground. They constitute lowest-level instances of knowledge.

In contrast to all of this, Dewey casts experience as a kind of interactive life-behavior which may or may not include uses of language (Dewey, 1938, chaps. 2, 3). Inquiry is itself a kind of experience in which language and thought plays an integral role in rectifying and determining facts and possibilities. “Sensory occurrences” are features of experience, but then so are reflective and linguistic processes. And logic, as the theory of inquiry, is a study of generic (formal) features of a certain kind or class of experiences, specifically with emphasis on the nature and use of language *in* those experiences. In this view there is no gap or interface or link between language and experience as separable concerns, though there is some story to be told (and Dewey tells such a story at great length) about how language functions in experience.

Both Russell and Dewey are fallibilists, in their own respective ways. In Dewey’s case, this is evident in his preferring to talk in terms of warranted assertibility in place of knowledge as the goal of inquiry (Dewey, 1938, LW.12.14–15). We can call this goal “knowledge” as long as we recognize that knowledge in general is fallible. In Dewey’s logical theory, propositions (technically speaking) are not formulations or assertions of knowledge even in this fallibilistic sense, but rather that is what *judgments* do. This is of course a functional distinction regarding the respective roles of propositions and judgments in inquiry, not an absolute distinction posited in an account of meanings of sentences independent of any such context. But an account of knowledge, even in its simplest forms, must address the general nature and pattern of inquiry as a whole, and cannot get off the ground with references simply to verified basic propositions, much less to sensory occurrences plus noticing. There is no *immediate* knowledge because processes of inquiry always mediate the acquisition of knowledge. Strictly speaking, the phrase ‘immediate knowledge’ is an oxymoron.

The question then is how it is that Dewey’s conception of propositions precludes speaking of them as formulations of possible knowledge. Dewey certainly distinguishes propositions about observational data from inferred propositions or propositions with inferential constituents. But he holds that “propositions about data are not cases of knowledge but means of attaining [knowledge].” Likewise, “[*inferential* propositions] are means of attaining the goal of knowledge as warranted assertion, not instances or examples of knowledge” (Dewey, 1941, LW.14.181). That is to say, using Dewey’s terminology, no propositions of any stripe are cases of knowledge, nor of belief for that matter; but they are rather *means to attaining* knowledge as warranted belief. This is not a denial that there is something like direct knowledge (i.e., “apprehension”), nor is it a denial of observational data

independent of inference in inquiry. It is rather a different conception of the nature and function of propositions in inquiry, where to say that they formulate knowledge is simply a category mistake. If we were to look into what knowledge may be embodied in a given proposition in itself, we would no longer be regarding it as a proposition. We would be altering the context in which we regard it and in which it thus will have a different functional status. On the other hand, when we consider systems or hierarchies of propositions as such, including those about observational data as well as those that are inferred, we are not talking about elements of knowledge at all, neither at some alleged simplest level nor at any other level of complexity involving systems of inference.

Along such lines, Dewey views logic as one avenue of development of a theory of experience. This renders logic inseparable from a theory of knowledge, and quite curable of any strains of Platonism. But it is not thereby rendered any less formal in its concerns. I will not go into details here, but Dewey's logical theory is not constrained by the kinds of formalism that Russell championed. On the contrary, Dewey's theory requires more complex formal techniques than what a simple predicate calculus can provide (Burke, 1997). Thus he had neither the need nor the inclination, as Russell did, to somehow link simplest instances of knowledge with atomic propositions of a predicate calculus.

Dewey's view of logic has a number of consequences for education which Hager discusses in his review and which I will not recount here. I might briefly add to his remarks by saying that, in Dewey's view, logic is not incurably Platonic and hence the acquisition and systematic formulation of knowledge is not geared to formal constraints imposed on experience from without. Knowledge is not empirical in a Humean sense but is experiential in all of its aspects – given of course the reconstructed notion of experience assumed by Dewey's logical theory. Likewise, human cognition does not fit the formal-computational paradigm that has dominated the cognitive sciences in the latter half of the 20th century view of logic and the 18th century view of epistemology which Russell championed. Any theory of learning based on that paradigm will have to be re-examined if we take Dewey at his word. Suffice it to say that the essence of a good education is not just the inculcation of current knowledge or the acquisition of technical skills. A decent education also involves the acquisition of intelligence, namely, of skilled capabilities and good habits of inquiry which make possible the discovery and growth of knowledge in new and unforeseen situations outside of the classroom. A decent education is thus harder to achieve than many educators may wish to admit, but it is probably better to face that fact up front than presume to think it simpler than it actually is.

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