



# Our Knowledge of the External World

*Bertrand Russell*

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Philosophy, from the earliest times, has made greater claims, and achieved fewer results, than any other branch of learning. Ever since Thales said that all is water, philosophers have been ready with glib assertions about the sum-total of things; and equally glib denials have come from other philosophers ever since Thales was contradicted by Anaximander. I believe that the time has now arrived when this unsatisfactory state of things can be brought to an end. In the following course of lectures I shall try, chiefly by taking certain special problems as examples, to indicate wherein the claims of philosophers have been excessive, and why their achievements have not been greater. The problems and the method of philosophy have, I believe, been misconceived by all schools, many of its traditional problems being insoluble with our means of knowledge, while other more neglected but not less important problems can, by a more patient and more adequate method, be solved with all the precision and certainty to which the most advanced sciences have attained.

Among present-day philosophies, we may distinguish three principal types, often combined in varying proportions by a single philosopher, but in essence and tendency distinct. The first of these, which I shall call the classical tradition, descends in the main from Kant and Hegel; it represents the attempt to adapt to present needs the methods and results of the great constructive philosophers from Plato downwards. The second type, which may be called evolutionism, derived its predominance from Darwin, and must be reckoned as having had Herbert Spencer for its first philosophical representative; but in recent times it has become, chiefly through William James and M. Bergson, far bolder and far more searching in its innovations than it was in the hands of Herbert Spencer. The third type, which may be called “logical atomism” for want of a better name, has gradually crept into philosophy through the critical scrutiny of mathematics. This type of philosophy, which is the one that I wish to advocate, has not as yet many whole-hearted adherents, but the “new realism” which owes its inception to Harvard is very largely impregnated with its spirit. It represents, I believe, the same kind of advance as was introduced into physics by Galileo: the substitution of piecemeal, detailed, and verifiable results for large untested generalities recommended only by a certain appeal to imagination. But before we can understand the changes advocated by this new philosophy, we must briefly examine and criticise the other two types with which it has to contend.

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