CHAPTER II

NATURE AND EXPERIENCE

Dewey's chief quarrel with earlier philosophy was that it had confused the true nature and function of knowledge. For the most part, he said, the empiricists had assumed that thinking refers to fixed things in nature, that for each idea there is something corresponding to reality. Again, the experience which we find in Plato and Aristotle is an account of what Greek experience actually is. It agrees very clearly with what the modern psychologist calls the method of learning by ideas. Men tried certain acts, they underwent certain sufferings and affections. Each of these at the time of occurrence is isolated, particular - its counterpart is transient appetite and transient sensation. But memory presumes and accumulates these separate incidents. As they pile up irregular variations get cancelled, common features are selected, reinforced and combined. Gradually a habit of action is built up, and corresponding to this habit these form a certain generalised picture of an object or situation. We come not to know or note merely this particular which as a particular cannot strictly be known at all but to recognise it as man, tree, stone, leather - an individual of a certain kind, marked by a certain universal form, characteristics of a whole species of thing. This regularity

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signifies that the particular case is not treated as an isolated particular, but as one of a kind, which therefore demands a kind of action. From the multitude of particular illness encountered, the physician in learning to class some of them as indigestion learns also to treat the case of the class in a common or general way. He forms the rule of recommending a certain diet and prescribing a certain remedy. All this forms what we call experience. It results in a certain general insight and a certain organised ability in action. Thus, to see something is to have an idea of it. According to this view, which is characteristic of modern Realists as of ancient Platonists,

knowledge is the passive contemplation of an eternal and immutable reality. 1.

Dewey denies both that there is such a permanent reality and that the knower can even restrict himself to the role of a spectator. The things we experience are, he says, interrogation, they set us problems, challenge us. We are forced to modify nature, not merely to contemplate it. The 'spectator' theory reflects a state of society in which men were actually powerless and could not dream of another world in which they might

1. Passmore John, A hundred years of Philosophy, - P. 117.

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achieve the security for which they long. In The Origin of Dewey's Instrumentalism Morris criticises the British theory of mind, the identification of empirical psychology and philosophy, and observes that Dewey delivers a counter attack on those who would dispense with the theory of innate ideas. The British empiricist not only furnished the foundation for his attack on the spectator theory of knowledge but also raised a problem which continued to trouble him for many years - the problem of the relation between psychology and philosophy. Dewey is primarily concerned with learning how to modify Nature. According to him by the use of the experimental method we can make determinable, and hence controllable what is indeterminate and uncontrollable, and thus the doubtful and the confused may be clarified and settled.

But the reverse process was also thought to be true, that a clear idea is to guarantee as the rationalists agreed, that object of thought exist in reality.

In either case, the mind is viewed as an instrument for considering what is fixed and certain in nature. Dewey is not an idealist; he is what an idealist becomes when he incorporates the results of modern biology, psychology and social science. Dewey considered the traditional view of knowledge as static, for one thing and

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too mechanical for another. Influenced by Darwin's theories, Dewey looked upon man as a biological organism. Impact of evolutionary theory upon Dewey's thought introduced a new pattern in his thinking but it also involved a pattern which was similar to Hegelianism. Darwin, like Hegel, could be conceived fighting dualism, but dualism of a different type or variety. He was instrumentalist in that he believed that there was something in common between the behaviour and the development of human being and not human beings. This reinforced the metaphysical unity between human and objects which Dewey took over from Hegel. Together, the opposition to dualism lead to the belief in what Dewey later called the "biological matrix" of all human behaviour which contains no dualism between act and material, subject and object but contains them both in an unanalysed totality —

what is experienced is not objectified by a subject as a sign possessing significance or meaning. Distinctions such as that between subject and object arise only for reflection. 2.

Although Dewey gave up his early Hegelian orientation, he still looked upon a man as enmeshed in a dialectic process, not Hegel's conflict of ideas, but a conflict

in the material or natural environment. Dewey's grand concept was therefore experience, a concept for the purpose of connecting man as a dynamic biological entity with man's environment. If both man and his environment are dynamic, it is clear that a simple spectator-type theory of knowledge will not work. Dewey shakes off the views of sensationistic empiricism and develops what he likes to call experimental empiricism. We can see here a full application of the biological conceptions of knowledge combined with the new conception of physical qualities which have been gaining ground in the writing of present day scientists like Eddington.

All thinking, says Dewey, has two aspects, namely -

- a perplexed, troubled, or confused situation at the beginning and a cleared up, unified, resolved situation at the close. 3.

He gave his theory the new name instrumentalism to emphasis that thinking is always instrumental in solving problems. The mind does not know simply individual thing; it functions as a mediator between man as an organism and

his environment. The mind spreads itself over a range of things as these bear upon the person's desires, doubts and dangers. Knowing may very well consist of a 'cognitive act', of an activity in the mind, but the full description of knowing must include the environmental origin of the problem or situation that calls forth the cognitive act. In this theory instrumentalism differs from empiricism and rationalism, whereas the latter theories of knowledge separate thinking and doing, instrumentalism holds that reflective thought is always involved in transforming a practical situation.

Thinking, therefore, is not a quest for the "truth", truth conceived as a static and eternal quality in things. Thinking rather, is the act of trying to achieve an adjustment between man and his environment. It is to be noted that when Dewey speaks of effecting a change in the environment, he refers not merely to man's physical environment, the world of physical nature, but to the cultural environment as well. As he says,

The environment in which human beings live, act and inquire, is not simply physical. It is cultural as well.

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And a clash of values in a given society gives rise to problematic situation, the resolution of which would effect a change in the cultural environment. The best test of value of any philosophy, says Dewey, is to ask,

Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful. 5.

The mind or more specifically intelligence is for Dewey not a fixed substance and knowing is not a set of static conception. Intelligence is the power man possesses to cope with his environment. Thinking is not an individual act carried on in privates in isolation from practical problems. Thinking or active intelligence arises in problem situation, thinking and doing are intimately related.

Knowledge, on Dewey's account of the matter is a reflective or intellectual grasp of situation, which grows out of, but is not identical with experience. Experience, he defines as a non-reflective way of meeting a situation.

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The characteristic mistakes of the philosopher, he consider, is to suppose, that his reflection upon experience is experience itself. The sensation of blue, for example, is obviously not the kind of thing we meet with in experience. Our experience, Dewey argues, is of things in situation; the sensation of blue is a product of philosophical reflection upon experience. He rejects traditional empiricism on the ground that for it immediate experience is composed of a sequence of such sensations. Thus empiricism entirely falsifies by intellectualizing the character of our concrete experience.

It is no less a serious error, he maintains, to imagine that concrete experience is of discrete substances. A thing, properly understood is, he writes,

res an affair, an occupation, a cause, something which is similar to conducting a practical campaign or getting rid of an over stock of canned to tomatoes matres or going to school or paying attention to a young woman -- in short, just what is meant, is non-philosophical discourse by an experience. 6.

It is thing in this sense, not substances, which makes up our experience. As Dewey says,

Experience in general is said to be transaction, a process of doing and undergoing, an active relation between an organism and its environment. 7.

Just an account of its diversity, experience contains conflict and points of tension. Out of which a conflict - a problem - inquiry arises and to resolve the problem is to modify experience. The first thing in inquiry, says Dewey, is to analyse the problem and envisage means of dealing with it (hypothesis). The diagnostic procedure Dewey will not admit to be knowledge; they are the means by which knowledge is pursued. We have knowledge only, Dewey says, when we have so organised our situation that we can overcome our difficulties it sets for us.

From his conception of knowledge as the outcome of inquiry follows his theory of truth. We might expect the question of truth to arise at two points in inquiry, as Dewey describes it, first when we diagnose a problem and secondly when we solve it. But Dewey denies that our


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diagnostic statements - proposition - can properly be designated 'true' or 'false'. Since they are merely instruments in our inquiry, they can be effective or ineffective - but certainly not true or false. Only the judgements to which proposition leads us can be true. He suggests that we should replace 'true' by the less misleading phrase 'warranted assertability'. According to Dewey thinking is not an individual act carried on in private in isolation from practical problems. Thinking or active intelligence arises in "problem situation", thinking and doing are intimately related.

The claim to formulate a priori the legislative constitution of the Universe is by its nature that may lead to elaborate dialectical developments. But it is also one that removes these very conclusions from subjection to experimental test, for, by definition, these results make no difference in the detailed course of events. 8.

In rejecting the claims and methods of idealism, Dewey did not reject the hope that intelligence methods could be found to integrate and unify our understanding.

8. The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays, PP 17-18. Contd... P/43.
of things. He retained the idealists confidence in intelligence and intellectual methods as well as their goal of seeing things unified. However, he was left with a serious problem which he continued to study for the rest of life, that of devising a method of intelligence, that would do justice to the complexity of experience and nature and at the same time to the order and unity of things. A method was needed that would apply to all subject matters and that was, in addition, self corrective and objectively testable. He came to see that both scientific and pragmatic methods fulfilled these requirements, but that a theoretical and practical demonstration was needed to show that this was the case - Dewey interpreted the works of Darwin as showing that living things including man, were definitely susceptible to understanding through naturalistic and scientific methods. The conception of evolution signified not merely that life and man were truly natural but that a dynamic continuity exists between man and nature or experience and the external environment. Human experience is neither an exception to natural processes or events, nor an isolated self-enclosed, ghost like phenomenon, rather, it takes place in nature and involves transactions or interactions with natural world.
Experience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature - stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity and soon. Things interacting in certain ways are experience, they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object - the human organism - they are how things are experienced as well.

All of our experience involve a situational context that is not only spatial or temporal but continually changing and potentially rich in meaning, knowledge and value. The important feature of our experience is that they have continuity and future consequences. Experience signified a building up of habits and thoughts in response to the need of living and growth. As such it is always changing, indicating a dynamic interaction between the organism and its environment. Hence, there is not just one kind of experience; rather, experience is multisided involved social, aesthetic, intellectual, moral or religious meanings. However, Dewey says that when we speak of using

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the scientific method we mean a kind of useful or progressive experience - the experience of intelligent problem-solving. The advantages of scientific method or approach, however, is not just that it accepts or admits of change, but that it actually induces changes experimentally in order to predict and control results. This means that the scientific method is operational or pragmatic in character since it sets upon certain operations, to be performed and then looks to be experienced or observable results or test of its hypothesis.

Dewey gives credit to Peirce for conceiving the pragmatic or operational method as the only objective way of determining the meaning of concepts. He further gives credit to James for broadening the pragmatic method to include a theory of truth and making its application to all of man's basic life concerns. Dewey claims that it lies in the nature of pragmatism that it should be applied as widely as possible. 10.

The scientific method is pragmatic in as much as it gives meaning to its ideas in terms of their anticipated

consequences. And the pragmatic method, because it is experimental, is scientific, it calls for exclusively operational tests of meaning.

For Dewey the pragmatic and scientific method are not two separate methods with restricted applications; rather, they both signify the method of intelligent inquiry which selects the approximate means for achieving worthwhile purpose. This is Dewey's instrumentalism, that all meaningful true or valuable ideas are experimental instruments for the intelligent solution of the problems. Problems and their solution are inter-related, and they always involve an existential context which is cultural or social as well as biological. Problems neither arise nor can they be solved in a vacuum. Here is where Dewey's naturalism meets his instrumentalism. Ideas as mental instruments are not mere subjective existences in some mind, but rather they are objectively discoverable modes of interaction occurring in the natural world. According to Dewey, not only are habits necessary to human nature and conduct, they are also excellent examples of interaction between the organism and its surroundings.

Dewey says that there is no gulf between theory and practice or between theoretical knowledge and applied
knowledge. Any separation that is made between the theoretical and the practical is based on misconceiving the instrumental and integrated character of all genuine knowledge. According to Dewey psychology can only study experience in terms of behaviour. It, therefore, must study what the organism does under experimentally controlled situations. But this means that psychology has to consider the biological and social environment. The psychological, biological and social factors of experience must be integrated if our knowledge of what experience really is, is to be in any way complete and factual. The need for integration in our knowledge of experience is based on the observable facts of a dynamic continuity or integration of factors in existence.

The problem of restoring integration and co-operation between man's belief about the world in which he lives and his beliefs about the values and purpose that should direct his conduct is the deepest problem of modern life. It is the problem of any philosophy that is not isolated from that life. 11.

11. The Quest for Certainty, P. 255.

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This means that philosophy can never succeed if it attempts to become isolated from life. Dewey's naturalism assumes that all meaningful inquiry begins and ends with the natural world. For Dewey the deepest problem of modern life - the problem of co-ordinating facts and values - is fundamentally philosophic in character. Philosophy, if it is true to life, can not afford to be merely speculative and reflective.

Dewey's major works like Experience and Nature, The Quest for Certainty and Reconstruction in Philosophy expound his views on the need for integration between experience, thought and scientific method. The Quest for Certainty and Reconstruction in Philosophy develops his basic instrumental theory of knowledge. According to Dewey, philosophy can play an important role in the improvement or reconstruction of life. Philosophy can be expected to see the value of perfecting both theory and practice of logic. As a method of inquiry logic should be conceived as both normative and factual and as theoretical and practical.

Dewey defines knowledge as "warranted asser
tability" since consequences have to be anticipated and tested in order to know its certainty. If we could know anything directly or indirectly, the question of its certainty
truth does not require any experimentalism. Hence immediate reactions or experience do not involve any problem solving.

Before we conclude this chapter it should be noted that scientific method is simply a name for problem solving. The virtue of scientific method is its objectivity or correctability, not its absolute certainty in dealing with problems. It is a method mainly needed for solving theoretical and practical problems. For Dewey all meanings, truths and values must be operationally defined and experimentally tested. Dewey also admits that the experimental method has not been always used successfully in the solution of problem in the context of human affairs or in the field of nature. But this does not imply that there is any separation between human affairs and nature or theory and practice. He cannot accept any conception of experience which is not integrated with logical thinking, because he holds,

logical thinking is thoroughly naturalistic in its context, instrumental in its workings, and experiential in its felt quality of experience.

Stroh Guyw, American Philosophy from Edwards to Dewey, P. 247.