CHAPTER IV

SITUATION AND THE LOGIC OF INQUIRY

The two key concepts of Dewey's logical theory are situation and inquiry. The concept of the situation is, evidently, the most fundamental logically; it is used to define the term "inquiry". On the other hand, in practice inquiry comes first and it is through inquiry that situation can be known or discussed.

Before we discuss the pattern of inquiry it is better to know what is "situation" and what is meant by the term "inquiry".

Concerning situation, Dewey writes:

what is designated by the word 'situation', is not a single object or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgements about objects and events in isolation; but only in connection with the contextual whole . . . . . . In actual experience, there is never any such isolated singular object or even; an object or event is always a special part, a phase or aspect, of an environing experienced world - a situation. 1.

1. Logic 'The Theory of Inquiry', P P.66 - 67
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That object which are taken as parts of context or aspects of an "environing experienced world" included in situation are living organism creatures experiencing situation. Logical theory will be concerned with human situation or more accurately with contexts in which human intelligence, purpose and action - affect what is experienced. But it is to be noted that all human situations are no longer required but only in reference to contexts. There are certain kinds of situations which qualify as logical, namely those that are "indeterminate" or "doubtful" and in which inquiry is a natural development. It is of the very nature of the indeterminate situation which evokes inquiry to be questionable. Unless a situation is uniquely qualified in its very indeterminateness, there is a condition of complete panic, response to it takes the form of blind and overt activities. A variety of names serves to characterize indeterminate situations. They are disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure. Situations are contextual wholes possessing various qualitative traits. For Dewey, it is the immediately pervasive quality that makes any situation a "whole" and unique or individual.

Regarding situation Dewey also states,

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it is the situation that has three traits - pathological, psychological and biological. There is always doubt in regard to situation as the situation is inherently doubtful. Personal state of doubt that are not relative to some existential situation are pathological. 2.

If states of doubt belong to us only rather than to the existential situation, it is subjectivistic psychology. The biological antecedent conditions of an unsettled situation are involved in the state of imbalance in organic - environmental interactions. It is a mistake to suppose that a situation is doubtful only in a subjective sense. Complete determination would not hold of existences as an environment. Nature is an environment only as it is involved in interaction with our organism, or self. Every such interaction is a temporal process, not a momentary cross sectional occurrence. The situation in which it occurs is indeterminate. Organic interaction becomes inquiry when existential consequences are anticipated. Resolution of the indeterminate situation as active and operational. If the inquiry is adequately directed, final existential situation is possible.

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Naturally the question is what do we mean by inquiry?

Dewey's conception of inquiry is heavily indebted to Peirce's theory; for Dewey, as for Peirce, inquiry is a process by which doubtful or unsettled situation may be settled. The goal of inquiry is the attainment of belief, a search for truth, the product or outcome of competent inquiries is knowledge. More than Peirce, Dewey, describes the process of inquiry and the situation in which the process occurs from the biological, social, evolutionary point of view.

Inquiry is defined as:

the controlled or directive transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situations into a unified whole. 3.

Situation demands some resolution, and therefore, we must attempt to articulate the problem or problems that are to be solved. In this connection it may be recalled 3. Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, P P. 104-105 Contd...P/63.
that according to Dewey situations are "contextual wholes" possessing various qualitative traits. If the qualities are endless, the situation may be tragic. It is then the whole situation may be indeterminate, doubtful, disturbed and confused.

In order to avoid such circumstances Dewey introduces his new theory of logic. According to him a proper inquiry is possible when it takes the help of suggestions. The first stage of inquiry consists in the recognition that situation itself is a problem. "To see that a situation requires inquiry is the initial step of inquiry". The indeterminate situation becomes a problematic situation. In the formulation of problem we find two major consequences -

(i) It identifies the situation, correctly or not, as to the specific problem it deals with and it interprets the situation as possessing some questions for which an answer is required;

(ii) and the formulation of problem leads us to the attainment of solution of the problem.
How the problem is conceived decides what specific suggestions are entertained and which are dismissed; what data are selected and which rejected; it is the criterion for relevancy and irrelevancy of hypotheses and conceptual structures.

The second stage of inquiry consists of the formulation of hypothesis or possible relevant solutions to the problem. Hypotheses are anticipations of consequences; that take a conditional form, being forecasts of what would happen if certain operations are performed with respect to certain conditions. Facts and observations will function as "suggestions"—that is to suggest ideas; and ideas will function as suggestion of possible operations and consequences. An hypothesis is called true when it leads the persons entertaining it to act which have effect that he desires.

In the third stage we may use hypothetico deductive reasoning in some complicated cases in order to refine our hypothesis and to ascertain the logical consequences of the hypothesis and set of hypothesis.

4. Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, P. 108
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Regarding reasoning Dewey says,

Reasoning is an examination of ideas in an attempt to discern the relevancy and pertinence of their function within inquiry and its movement toward a solution. 5.

and,

Reasoning operates with symbols, with propositions and propositions develop the meaning - contents of ideas in their relations to one another. 6.

Reasoning is the fourth stage in the process of inquiry and it concludes in the last stage with an experiment as stated below.

Finally there is a stage of experimental testing in which we seek to confirm or disconfirm the suggested hypothesis. If our inquiry is successful, the original indeterminate situation is transformed into a unified whole. Knowledge may be defined as the object of inquiry


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that anything is an object or object of knowledge or objective can be determined by the further inquiry or in further action. Now objects which have been established as the objectives of previous inquiry may be counted as the means of further inquiry or further action. If the objects which are taken, become questionable, it turns out to be the subject-matter of judgment and no longer required as the means of further inquiry due to its uncertainty. We now distinguish two ways in which things appears as objects or objects of knowledge:

1. As a result of previous inquiry, objects are so settled that we treat them simply as objects.

2. As a result of present inquiry we transform ill-defined subject-matter into definite data, and in so far as there is still a problem, we continue to call these objects data evidence or signs.

Before we discuss the main features of Dewey's new logical theory we shall discuss Peirce's logic which undoubtedly influenced Dewey's logic.

Peirce's theory of Inquiry is remarkable on several counts. The novelty of the construction alone is of great interest, though not of exclusive importance.
Much of the outward form of the theory has affinities with an older idealism; that thinking is a means to establishing an equilibrium and restoring our momentarily severed connections with reality; that every thought (or belief) is but a partial half-truth falling short of the totality of truth; that the goal of thought is the cessation of thought in one's becoming one with the whole. Peirce effects a radical recasting of interpretation of the function of thought. Most noteworthy in this respect is the attempt to construe thought within a more inclusive theory of organic behaviour.

The resulting hypothesis, and the core of the theory is that thought is one intervening phase of a single behavioral process mediating between a phase of a sensory stimulation and a phase of purposeful resolution. As a process its occurrence span and termination will differ under differing stimulus conditions.

In brief and in general, for Peirce - 'doubt' is an irritating condition usually originating externally from surprise. 7.

Doubt is a state of uneasiness and hesitancy; habits of action - and thereby in some cases action itself have come up against an interfering obstacle. The resolution of doubt or the removal of an obstacle is attained by 'belief'. This struggle Peirce calls 'inquiry'.

Inquiry or thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained, so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought.  

Belief not only brings doubt to an end but also contains a reference to action. This is not to say that belief is action nor that belief always produces action. Belief, says Peirce, is the establishment of a habit - that is, a rule of action. Belief has three features. It is an item of awareness (that is, we are conscious of our belief); it destroys the irritation of doubt, and it produces a habit.

What has come to be regarded as a characteristically pragmatic consideration is introduced by

8. Ibid, P. 491.
Peirce into his theory of inquiry as follows. Since belief produces a habit, beliefs are to be distinguis-

1) Beliefs depend on rules of action, and hence whether they will differ or not depend on whether the rules of action they provide will differ or not,

2) the significance of a belief is determined by the rule of action it prescribes.

As habits provide the criterion by which we can distinguish different beliefs or avoid making false distinctions, a similar procedure to habits. Habits are to be distinguished and their significance understood by action. 9.

Peirce also speaks of situation in which language is used correctly or senselessly. Clarity of thought and our use of language is function of certain kind of habit

of behaviour in a certain kind of situations leading to certain kinds of sensible results.

To quote Peirce,

our ideas of anything is our idea of its sensible effects. 10

Before concluding the topic we may take note of some distinctive features of Dewey's logic.

The pattern of inquiry which has been discussed already is a general schema for all inquiry. But specific procedures and testing type of evidence can be used differently for different kinds of inquiry. The rules, procedures and evidence required for inquiry can be derived from successful inquires. The norm, rules also can be obtained from the successful conclusion, if necessary norms may be verified in the course of further inquiry. But a specific inquiry can not be completely isolated from the context of other inquires.

10. Ibid, P. 401.
Dewey had once tended to define truth as the 'working' or satisfactory product of thought, "the verified" idea or hypothesis. 11.

but subsequently preferred to speak of 'warranted assertibility'. The assertion warranted by inquiry is to be thought of as related to the indeterminate situation in much the same way that a solution is related to a problem. The conditions imposed by a problem must be met by an answer; the problem determines the conditions of an answer, but the answer resolves the problem. According to Dewey, inquiry or interpretation and analysis of the problem will be required to have an answer, a warranted assertion.

All inquiry presupposes a social or public context that is the medium for finding the warranted conclusion and norms for further inquiry. In this respect Dewey agrees with Peirce emphasis on the community of inquiries. Inquiry both requires a community, and helps to further development of this community. Dewey relates this idea of community to Democracy. For essential principle

of Democracy is that of community. Discovery of the right action requires an evaluation of inquiry itself. Judgment, for Dewey, with which inquiry closes, involves an appraisal of the adequacy and value of the indeterminate course of inquiry and of the properties that are being prepared for a final settlement. Judgment involves an evaluation of the means being formulated inquiry with respect to their relevance to the problem and its solution. The warranted assertion of inquiry is the result of judgment, it is the evaluated solution that terminates inquiry. In this sense inquiry concludes with what ought to be or is the right solution to the problem.

Dewey's theory of inquiry is a self-corrective process. It differs from epistemological view of philosophers who speak of natural insight. Dewey is an empiricist and naturalist in recognising the derivative role of thought, the dependence of thought upon a non-logical subject matter. He becomes a rationalist due to the emphasis of context in an inquiry which can obtain warranted assertability. When inquiry takes its task to produce warranted conclusion, it must proceed according to certain rules or stipulations.
If anything has a certain property, and whatever has this property has a certain other property, then the thing in question has this certain other property. This logical 'law' is a stipulation. A postulate is thus neither arbitrary nor externally a priori. It is not the former because it issues from the relations of means to the end to be reached. It is not the latter, because it is not imposed upon inquiry from without, but is an acknowledgement of that to which the undertaking of inquiry commits us.

According to Dewey logical theory will be concerned with human situations, or more accurately, with contexts in which human intelligence, purposes, and action affect what is experienced. But not every situation is of concern or relevant to logical theory. And it is only certain kind of situations that can be said to qualify as logical - those that are 'indeterminate' or 'doubtful' and in which inquiry is a natural development.

For Dewey, as for Peirce, inquiry is a process by which doubtful or unsettled situation becomes settled.


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The goal of inquiry is the attainment of belief; the product or outcome of competent inquiries is knowledge. 13.