CHAPTER 6

EXPERIENCE AND NATURE
The discussion in this chapter is confined to an examination of the scope of Dewey's empirical naturalism. It is concluded that if clarified and supplemented with respect to its methodology, his empirical-cum-hypothetical metaphysics offers a sound and comprehensive theory of the universe. Dewey's metaphysical universe includes not only men as biological and social beings, whom Darwin's theory of nature has rendered continuous with the physical nature, but it grants empirically intelligible status to the ideal enterprizes of men like science, values and art; in doing so his empirical naturalism provides promising grounds for philosophic criticism.

Metaphysics in its traditional sense registers man's a-priori access to the realm of reality beyond the reach of ordinary human experience. Through some transcendental means or by purely deductive reason metaphysicists claim to arrive at the ultimate origin of natural objects or at an eternal structure that underlie natural objects. Dewey's experiential thinking rejects the above kind of a priori claims of metaphysicists, for it adheres strictly to the primacy and
the ultimacy of human experience as a source of totality of human beliefs. Dewey is of the opinion that no human belief can completely transcend all the limitations imposed upon it due to the spatio-temporal predicament of the human observer. His empirical naturalism puts forward the sole empirical-cum-hypothetical possibility at man's disposal for distinguishing and relating the things of the universe. His empiricism in this wide context registers the claim of believing in the existence of only those objects which "are capable of entering into specifiable connections with the organism and the organism with them."¹ One of the perennial and most controversial problems of philosophy is that of distinguishing and relating the two existences the physical and the psychic in the world. According to Dewey this issue is an empirical matter. Psychic denotes only a highly complex conditions of organization of material events. Human mind, to be sure, if mysterious, has just the same mystery that there is to any other event in the universe. If scientific account of any simple event, say, water requires an experimental inquiry, then

certainly an objective account of a complex event like human mind requires an extension of this methodology into intricate domain.

Since Cartesian identification of mental with the private had already been replaced by a conception of mind which is the product of biological-cum-social inheritance and education, it became very easy for Dewey to conceive a program of an extension of scientific method to social, psychological and moral issues. His very elaborate efforts to inquire into the nature of scientific methodology so that it could be applied to totality of human problems defined, in fact, the function and scope of a critical or scientific philosophy. Dewey not only conceives moral action in terms of intelligent action or well informed action; he does not spare even the religions from a scientific reduction. In his book A Common Faith he gives the name God to an active relation between the ideal and actual where ideal is conceived in terms of the convergent and the commulative effect of the continued scientific inquiry in its widest application. In the process of the fulfilment of his mission dictated by the scientific conception of philosophy he admits of having met a challenge only from one source. Language and meaning
of art, he finds, could not be treated as an outcome of scientific intelligence. In order to accommodate esthetic meanings, he even relaxes his conception of knowledge and writes that, "Knowledge is a word of various meanings. Science may signify tested and authentic instance of knowledge. But knowledge has also meaning more liberal and more humane. It signifies events understood, events so discriminately penetrated by thought that mind is literally at home in them. It means comprehension or inclusive reasonable agreement."  

The realization on Dewey's part, that scientific method fails to do justice to the richness of meaning possessed by human experience, emerges with greater clarity as his conception of scientific philosophy and his natural metaphysics are distinguished. While analyzing the method of science, Dewey correctly finds that experimental science utilized the natural isomorphism of language, thought and action, and which, he believed, must necessarily be utilized by any genuinely empirical methodology. But he commits a mistake in identifying entire scientific technique.

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with this utilization of the natural isomorphism of language, thought and action. With this mistaken notion of the scientific method, scientific philosophy means to Dewey what scientific method could accomplish when extended to solve totality of human problems. Later on he finds that empirical-cum-scientific meanings exclude esthetic meanings which according to his general position do enjoy an empirical status. Dewey's empirical naturalism is a hypothetical attempt to formulate the meanings of existence in more inclusive and more intense manner; incidently it registers the incapacity of scientific method to do justice to totality of empirical meanings. The shift from scientific philosophy to metaphysics is his shift from a single systematic scientific conception of the empirical universe to a double image of existence. Since science stresses the general structure which underlies the natural objects of the universe and art emphasises their individuality and concreteness, Dewey's metaphysics states that the natural objects are marked by both discreteness and continuity. This double image of existence is not adhered very strictly either, for he comes to see the legitimacy of various traits in nature for some specific problems. To be on the
safe side, Dewey then states that his metaphysics includes what sciences or art have to say but it also includes those meanings which the methodologies in these particular areas leave out due to their selective nature. Dewey's metaphysical statements register generic traits of natural objects.

With respect to the nature and scope of metaphysics Dewey's position may profitably be compared with that of Aristotle or with comparatively a recent naturalist F.J.E. Woodbridge. Metaphysics, according to Aristotle, is a science, the highest science that governs all other sciences. Particular sciences treat objects of the universe in some specified respects, e.g. mechanics quantifies the physical parameters of natural objects and dynamics treat them specifically with respect to motion, but metaphysics treats what is, as it is. F.J.E. Woodbridge, too, holds that metaphysics is a science and is concerned with reality in its most general sense. Dewey, however, holds that

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metaphysical statements are empirical-cum-hypothetical generalizations about the generic traits of existence (as very clearly elaborated in the introduction). From his account it is clear that metaphysics shares with science its empirical and hypothetical nature but its status as science is obscure.

The obscurity of metaphysical statements in Dewey's thought is enhanced because it does not fulfil his own methodological criterion either. According to his own thought it is fundamentally essential for any kind of systematic symbolic representation to be an outcome of systematic inquiry. Methodological import of experience, as worked out in his thought constitutes a claim that any kind of symbols are made empirically meaningful only by letting them interact with other natural existences. If this interaction is arranged consciously and deliberately it constitutes the process of inquiry itself. In case of science, scientific methodology; in case of values, moral deliberation; and in case of art the process of art creation are the specific and deliberate kind of existential activities which get these symbolic representations in touch with non-verbal existences. The meanings of symbolic representation are precisely these methodological
and procedural connections and not the ontological objects.

Dewey names a scientific statement as warranted assertion, only because he is of the opinion that whatever empirical meanings it contains refer wholly to the operations identifiable within the processes of scientific inquiry. Since a justification of such a claim required a clear analysis of scientific method, Dewey has worked very hard to do so and has been able to speak of scientific methodology comparatively more significantly than many philosophers of science and even scientists themselves. His merit in this respect is fully evident in his operational interpretation of meaning as elaborated in chapter one. Unfortunately Dewey fails to specify the appropriate role of his operationalism, i.e. his theory of scientific concept, within his systematic thought. He happens to confuse the scientific and the naturalistic import for the interpretation of symbolization in general. His recommendation that an empirical methodology must utilize the natural isomorphism of language thought and action is an implication of his naturalism; his naturalistic view of language and his behavioral theory of meaning are, in fact, an elaboration of this
naturalistic claim. The only general implication of his operationalism is instrumentalism or epistemological perspectivism. The whole argument in his Logic: The Theory of Inquiry aims to demonstrate that different logical forms arise within the operations of scientific inquiry. To put it differently, one might say that the decisions about the logical conditions to be satisfied by the future scientific inquiries are arrived at within the progressive process of inquiry itself. The nature of these logical conditions is directly connected with the existential conditions constituting the problematic situation. Since the determining conditions of the problematic situations in case of scientific inquiry, moral choosing and art creation are different these warrant methodologies which are logically different. Yet unmindful of the implications of his own logic, Dewey declares that the sole aim of philosophic criticism is to clarify, liberate and extend the method of scientific inquiry (which he found had proved its worth by rendering certain contents of human experience more coherent, more secure and more significant) to other parts of experience, where it has not so far been tried.

Dewey could have avoided this unwarranted
declaration even if he had attempted to make more precise a very simple distinction which he draws between the cognitive and the non-cognitive modes of experience. This distinction as it is suggested in his thought is not free from ambiguity. On the one hand he uses the terms cognitive and non-cognitive to distinguish scientific mode from the ethical and esthetic modes of experience; on the other he grants the use of the term cognitive to all those experiences which are mediated by reflection and language. It is maintained that only his latter use of the terms cognitive and non-cognitive is truly consistent within his thought. Totality of man's interactions with the physical world or with other men, whether by means of language tool or without it, is a source of empirical meanings. (Certainly with language meanings are significantly clarified and enriched.) Presence of language, in fact, constitutes the main factor in the development and enhancement of human culture. Yet even without language meanings are directly experienced, felt or had in an immediate and immanent sense. Objects of this direct phase of experience are not a matter of sensation, ideas and beliefs. Dewey writes, "Things in their immediacy are unknown and unknowable, not
because they are remote or behind some impenetrable veil of sensation or ideas, but because knowledge has no concern with them.... Immediate things may be pointed to by words, but not described or defined. Description when it occurs is but a part of a circuitous method of pointing or denoting; index to a starting point and road which if taken may lead to a direct and ineffable presence.⁵ These words by Dewey⁶ although point to the ineffability of immediacy of existence, human or non-human; yet these, too, more specifically refer to the incapacity of scientific language to do so. Dewey, of course, wishes to put-forward an idea similar to the one given by Henry Margenau, who says, "Spontaneous experience is richer than logic, to be sure, but it is also richer than language, which is a primitive form of logic."⁶

Undoubtedly as reflection by means of language tool intervenes, functions like identification, discrimination, generalization and classification as definite logical procedures are generated, which transform non-cognitive, immediate and immanent meanings into cognitive or mediated kinds of meanings. In this sense

⁵John Dewey, Experience and Nature, p. 73.
languages of science, values and art are all methodologically mediated constructions within human experience. They all enjoy indiscriminately a de jure status which is different from the de facto status of the objects of primary or direct experience. Since the status of any idea or a belief is determined entirely by the methodological considerations responsible for its coming into existence, it grows extremely essential that logical distinctions between science, values and art are searched and located within their methodological considerations. Moreover unless empirical logics of values and art are developed it is insignificant to speak a priori of the potentialities of language in these domains.

Due to the absence of a well developed methodology for the development of values Dewey commits the mistake of maintaining a methodological similarity of science and values. Obsessed by his mission to demonstrate a persistent link between knowledge and action, Dewey attends only to the psychological or the organic link between scientific experimentation, moral deliberation and art creation and fails entirely to appreciate the logical distinctions especially between science and values. To state Dewey's position more appropriately it may be said that although science does find a
significant place in enlightening the problematic situations leading to formulation of values or creation of art, yet value judgments or symbols of art cannot be directly derived from scientific generalizations at linguistic level.

The absence of logical or in Dewey's sense methodological distinctions between science values, art and metaphysics leads Manley Thompson to misinterpret his metaphysics (as referred to in the introduction) and Hans Reichenbach to misinterpret his ethics and esthetic (misinterpretation of esthetics is referred to in Chapter IV). Only if Dewey had realized the immense importance of methodological argument for the exposition of his ideas, he would have raised an issue about the possibility of a metaphysical method. To have an idea as to how a metaphysical method could look like, it is profitable to refer to Prof. Evertt Hall. Prof. Hall entertains the possibility of a strictly metaphysical method which he thinks is bound to be different from scientific method designed to fulfil its own specific demands of prediction and verification. Like Dewey, Prof. Hall holds that metaphysics is both empirical and hypothetical but he clarifies that metaphysical hypothesis can neither be translated into predictions nor a significant positive
verification of it is possible. He compares the two methods and says, "All this may sound pretty indefinite and subject to all sorts of subjective vagaries when compared with rigorous scientific verifications.... The very fact that a metaphysician must rely on a total insight, that he has no mechanical procedures, formulae that may be used without appreciation of their derivations or presuppositions, which can be handed over to clerks, gives him a sense of creative discovery which, though the source of many dangers is also the cause of enduring satisfaction... every scientist as soon as he steps out of his own special investigations and philosophizes relies on this procedure. For example Eddington's contention that the objects of scientific knowledge are, ultimately, pointer readings, or Bridgman's assertion that scientific concepts are reducible to operations — these are not established by any rigorous scientific procedure."

According to both Prof. Hall and Dewey metaphysics utilizes scientific knowledge but goes beyond it. Dewey would even hold with Prof. Hall that metaphysical method

depends on wide insight in fact wider than the one examplified by Eddington's or Bridgman's in the above quotation, but Dewey would reject that metaphysical hypothesis is subjective and that it represents either an expression or satisfaction of psychological need. Metaphysics, according to Dewey, is not a vague enterprise either. Although his metaphysical categories like the empirical or natural point to the most comprehensive logic which includes the logics of specific domains, yet his metaphysics accomplishes this aim by attending not to their common characteristics, but by taking any one natural existence as a paradigm instance. In this respect S.N. Hampshire holds a view similar to Dewey. Hampshire writes, "Human beings necessarily have a limited outlook as finite things in nature, and their thought and knowledge are formed by their immediate environment and cannot reflect the whole natural world, except when their thought is directed towards those most essential features of the natural order which are examplified in every part of it." Dewey certainly admits that a theoritician of the universe, in his speculations about the nature of reality, is limited as a human observer existing in time. Yet he can speak

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of the generic traits of all existence because these traits are shared by each object, these are rather more explicitly exhibited by the more evolved objects of the universe, e.g. human experience and its products like science, values and art.

Bernard Suits⁹ is able to trace a methodological argument in Dewey's own exposition of metaphysics. He rather explicitly maintains that the most convincing justification of Dewey's naturalism is available in his methodological argument. Bernard Suits argues that Dewey's naturalism provides a theory of the universe not because his metaphysical insight brings him in touch with the reality of the universe, but due to the fact that it makes problem solving its focus. Arguing in favor of Dewey's position against Santayana's charge that his naturalism is "half-hearted and short-winded", Bernard Suits claims that out of the two kinds of arguments implicit in Dewey's metaphysical thought and which could be called an informational argument and methodological argument, it is the latter which saves Dewey against Santayana's charge.

Methodologically speaking experience refers, in its

broadest sense, to a perpetual and pervasive problematic context, whatever is claimed to be known about the one who experiences and about what is experienced is only indirectly inferred from the nature of problems which arise and the manner in which they are met. Suits writes that, "One engaged in inquiry cannot, on Dewey's view, arrive at any conclusions he wishes.... The sculptor cannot make anything at all out of his marble, not a novel, not a symphony. Similarly, scientific conclusions are not capricious. Here, too, the subject matter is a material which imposes its own limitations as well as its own avenues of inquiry. The area of moral and political action also has its characteristic material: circumstances which impose limitations at the same time that they provide means for the achievement of ends."10

If Moi Cohen has charged Dewey of anthropocentrism and Russell joins Santayana in a subjective interpretation of his philosophy, they happen to suffer misunderstanding, it is held by Suits, only because they fail to appreciate Dewey's contextual thinking. Moreover Dewey's own tendency to systematize all

10Ibid., p. 178.
empirical meanings as scientific meanings creates difficulty in grasping a broader import of his empirical naturalism. He finds it for himself: that his nature is irreducible to a single scientific perspective. There are as many perspectives in nature as there are kinds of problems. Clarified with respect to its methodology Dewey's metaphysics does not simply correct particular distortions in his own thought but provides, in very general terms, a criterion of criticism of empirical meanings. Multiple types of discourse, if possessing empirical significance, do find their respective perspectives in nature. Arthur E. Murphy writes, "Mr. Dewey's attempt to provide a basis for philosophical criticism by reference to the pervasive features of existence which are found alike in human experience and striving and in the world of events with which that striving is inevitably bound up and to do this without recourse to metaphysical simplification of the sort he condemns as non-empirical is an uncommonly hopeful and promising one."  

Dewey's naturalism clarifies that his theory

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of science is not his theory of knowledge in general. If Dewey finds that an entire separation of scientific, artistic, religious, educational and moral is unnatural, he is justified, but he is wrong in a scientific reduction of these various kinds of empirical meanings. Philosophic criticism or logic, in fact, in actual practice grows effective only when sufficiently developed methodologies in various domains of empirical knowledge are already existing. With respect to the contemporary state, his metaphysics, can be taken more of a program for the development of various methodologies rather than as an instrument of criticism.