

A Study of Dewey's Theory of Inquiry

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Abstract

Dewey's theory of inquiry as a problem-solving tool became popular in twentieth century. It is sometimes called instrumentalism. The problem of this paper is why it can be said that Dewey's theory is a way of acting and of testing truth by action and not just scientific inquiry specifically.¹ The answer will show that his theory of inquiry does not explore how a future-oriented working hypothesis is turned into tools and rules that make the practical transformation of a situation possible.² The descriptive method and the evaluative method are used to answer the research problem.³ It will contribute to knowledge that to solve a problem by referring to the operative nature of ideas and facts is not sufficient.⁴

Keywords: Instrumentalism, Inquiry, Pragmatic View

Introduction

John Dewey (1859-1952), one of the American pragmatists, is interested in every branch of philosophy but he is primarily a moral philosopher, an educator, and a political thinker. He was one of the thinkers who favoured realism. Being a realist, he held that the natural world is real and that this world of daily experience is the origin of all knowledge. Dewey's theory as a problem-solving tool became popular in the twentieth century. It is sometimes called instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is a term for his own philosophy, according to which all our intellectual constructions (concepts, laws, theories) have the status of tools for solving problems. His instrumentalism gives an account of how concepts function and how action is taken in accordance with these functions in integrating, predicting and controlling human interaction with the world of experience. What he means to say is that no concept can be divorced from the world of experience.

Dewey's experimental method does not accept traditional metaphysics which holds that ideas stand apart from the natural world of effort and change. He rejects the bifurcation of thoughts, feelings and action from the natural world. He maintains that the primary task of philosophy is to use one's reasoning to understand the possibilities of human experience, especially collective human experience. Both experience and reason are necessary for investigating knowledge and truth. So in solving human problems the experimental method plays an important role. Thinking is thus an instrument for knowing the truth and realizing human aims. Dewey says that knowledge is a practical response to a particular situation in experience which is always changing, ongoing and continuous. So knowledge is an instrument for adaptation to experience and this instrument should not be inflexible.

According to Dewey, knowledge or truth is the body of ideas that have worked successfully for society. As a pragmatist he firmly believes that the truth of an idea lies in its workability. He never hopes for absolute truth and maintains that truth may vary in accordance with its utility. Hence knowledge and truth are not ends in themselves but means or instruments for the betterment of society.

¹ Research Problem

² Tentative Solution

³ Research Methods

⁴ Contribution

Dewey's Epistemology

Dewey called for a reconstruction in philosophy by returning the realm of experience to the control by human intelligence without bringing in the notion of Absolute. According to Dewey, creatures must adapt to each other and to environmental conditions in order to survive. Therefore the emphasis on adaptation requires a change in philosophic emphasis “from system to method, from fixed result to the process of inquiry”.¹ Dewey believes that man is constantly confronted with problematic and conflicting situations. So he introduces his theory of inquiry to solve these problems and also change the environment. The problematic situation is an indeterminate situation in which somebody finds himself out of harmony with his environment. For Dewey, problem solving on the common sense level and problem solving on the technical expert level are essentially the same. His definition of inquiry in *Logic* is as follows:

Inquiry is the controlled or directed 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 situation into a unified whole.²

An indeterminate situation is problematic because its various elements are scattered and chaotic. So the first step is to find out their interconnections, and identify which conditions are necessary and which are necessary as well as sufficient. This will clearly show where the problem lies. What Dewey means is that the object of inquiry is to transform an indeterminate situation into one that is sufficiently unified to enable meaningful assertions that are sound and lead to appropriate action.

Dewey's Process of Inquiry

He presents the five phases of reflective thought or inquiry in *Logic* as follows:

1. The Antecedent Conditions of Inquiry: The Indeterminate Situation.
2. Institution of the Problem.
3. The Determination of a Problem- Solution.
4. Reasoning.
5. The Operational Character of Facts-Meanings.³

The First Process of Inquiry

The process of inquiry begins with an indeterminate situation which brings about inquiry to resolve the problem. It is a situation that has ambiguous, confused and unsettled conditions. Somebody finds himself out of harmony with the environment and calls for a need to restore the balance or harmony. This need is what motivates the process of inquiry itself.

The Second Process of Inquiry

The second phase is the recognition of certain facts to determine what the problem is. This phase involves the isolation of the data or subject matter which defines the frameworks within the reconstruction of the initiating situation which must be addressed. In this step, the

¹ Richard Field (2007). *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. [http:// www. Iep. Utm. Edu/d/ dewey. htm](http://www.Iep.Utm.Edu/d/dewey.htm) (June 30, 2009)

² John Dewey. (1938). *Logic: The Theory of inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. P 108

³Reijo Miettinen (2006). *Pragmatism and Activity theory: Is Dewey's philosophy a philosophy of Cultural Retooling?* (Outlines No.2). P. 12

facts and the identification of the problem are mistaken, the problem does not become a settled or unified situation.

The Third Process of Inquiry

The third phase is to suggest a possible relevant solution by the determination of factual conditions which are obtained from experience by observation. It must be a fruitful hypothesis which will be able to forecast some further consequences under certain further conditions. It is essential that the hypothesis is based on the actual facts of the situation. Otherwise attempting to solve the problematic situation is fruitless.

The Fourth Process of Inquiry

Reasoning, the fourth phase, consists of the deductive development of the hypothesis. It is composed of developing the meaning-contents of ideas in their relation to other ideas.

The Fifth Process of Inquiry

The last phase has to do with testing of the hypothesis by action. Dewey explains the relationship of reasoning and experimental actions as follows:

The pre-cognitive unsettled situation can be settled only by modification of its constituents. Experimental operations change existing conditions. Reasoning, as such, can provide means for effecting the change of conditions but by itself cannot affect it. Only execution of existential operations directed by an idea in which ratiocination terminates can bring about the reordering of environing conditions required to produce a settled and unified situation.¹

In Dewey's process of inquiry, the ideal experiment of natural science is visible. The working hypothesis directs the observation or constitutions of the situation, which leads to facts that contribute to a specified working hypothesis. Following the model of the method of experiment of natural science, Dewey regards observation and data on the one hand, and inference and suggestion (idea) on the other, as key elements in reflective thinking. Although he underlines the operative nature of both ideas and facts, it remains unclear how a working hypothesis is transformed into the "existential operations" needed for the reconstruction of the situation. Dewey's theory of inquiry does not explore how a future-oriented working hypothesis is turned into tools and rules that make the practical transformation of a situation possible. It can be said that to solving this problem by referring to the operative nature of ideas and facts are not sufficient. Dewey makes an effort to keep out the emotional and subjective elements of interest, and desire. He directs attention on the problematic situation and the process of inquiry to resolve it, but not the mental state of the individual who conducts the inquiry. This was he tried to avoid the subjectivism and individualism.

Conclusion

Dewey assumed that concepts and theories are useless if they have no relation with practical life and the problems connected with it. People do not discover truth by sitting alone in a room and thinking about it. They seek belief, not doubt, and that search takes place when people do scientific research or even by just going about their daily business, engaging objects and other people. In Dewey's philosophy, truth or knowledge is socially based. He accepted the role of the individual as part of the social milieu, but did not accept the over-individualism of the times.

¹ John Dewey. (1938). Op. Cit., P. 121

As an instrumentalist, Dewey maintained that knowledge is a practical instrument for solving human problems. This instrument must be able to adapt itself to the ever-changing process of experience. Truth or knowledge cannot be static but must be pliable. This shows that in Dewey's pragmatic view, truth is sought for the individual, but the process of social and moral implication of life and society are not overlooked. Thus it may be said that Dewey's pragmatic approach to truth is individualistic but not subjective. The weakness of his view lies in the implication that human life and experience are one long process of problem-solving and adapting to change environmental conditions and that knowledge is merely a practical instrument for problem-solving.

The pragmatic training for producing a person of vision and discipline is also found in Theravāda Buddhist thought. The Buddhist theory of inquiry has certain similarities with that of pragmatism. Knowledge and truth in Buddhism is not merely theoretical but also practical. Certain pragmatic and individualistic trends can be seen in the Buddhist theory of truth.

In the Buddhist view, truth is sought for individual liberation, but in the process, the social and moral implications of life and society are not overlooked. Buddhism preaches individual effort and self-reliance whether to obtain liberation or to achieve happiness and prosperity in this world, but it takes into account the need for mutual help and support, or in other words, the balance of self-interest and the interest of others, to achieve the above goals.

Here the goals of Dewey's theory of knowledge is different from the Buddhist theory of truth. Dewey used intelligence or knowledge as a tool for settling everyday problems and difficulties and for adaptation to the environment. In Buddhist perspective, the goal of knowledge is not only to settle and develop one's social and moral life but also to achieve a peaceful inner life.

Dewey was greatly impressed with the success achieved by scientific inquiry, in which he believed that he had acquired the most reliable knowledge and achieved considerable mastery of nature. He thus tried to find out more about the methods of science in his books *Logic: Theory of inquiry* and *The Quest for Certainty*. But, he was mainly interested in the nature of inquiry in general and not just scientific inquiry specifically. Dewey firmly opposed theories of knowledge which considered knowledge as independence of problem-solving. Inquiry is prompted by doubt and its aim is to obtain a resolution of such doubts. This is one of the reasons why Dewey saw the acquisition of knowledge as a social activity. He states that intelligent men and women through intelligent deliberation and debate can reach agreement to direct social change. So, for Dewey, inquiry is a special way of acting and of testing truth by action.

Acknowledgements

I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Dr Tin Htwe, Rector of Hinthada University and Dr Mar Lar, Pro-rector of Hinthada University, for their kind permission to carry out of this research. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr Thin Thin Lei, Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for her encouragement, guidance and criticism to me to do research work. Finally, I am very grateful to Dr Aung Ye Myint, Professor of the Department of Philosophy, Hinthada University, for his kindness and invaluable suggestion of this work.

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