The Concept of "Situation" in John Dewey's Logic of Inquiry

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Abstract

Central to John Dewey's logic, epistemology, and philosophy of science is his theory of inquiry; central to how Dewey understands inquiry is his concept of a "situation." This concept has proved a source of several interpretive puzzles and disagreements concerning the nature, boundaries, and individuation of situations, as well as how their transformation by inquiry works. In this paper, I provide a new reading of Dewey's concept of "situation" that attempts to resolve the outstanding interpretive puzzles. Situations are centered on and individuated according to our practices and activities; they are bounded by whatever is relevant to said practices and activities. A useful analogy can be drawn here with the concept of "environment" or "niche" in Gibson's ecological psychology. An improved understanding of Dewey's concept of the situation allows us to better understand the nature of Dewey's contextualism: inquiry is situated in the context of a practice and directed at alleviating tensions within that practice. The success of inquiry is determined by the actual (objective) resolution of the tensions, but the scope of that success is bound by the situation and dependent on the characteristic aims and interests of a practice.

1 Introduction: Logic, Inquiry, and Situations

A central contribution of John Dewey's philosophy is his theory of inquiry, and a key concept in Dewey's theory of inquiry is that of the "*situation*."

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Dewey's theory of inquiry is *situational*, which includes but goes beyond the usual use of "contextual," and this has important consequences for thinking about the nature, aims, and products of inquiry. Before we can grasp the specifics of Dewey's situationism, we need to have a clear grip on how Dewey defines a "situation" and what role situations play in the definition of inquiry.

It turns out, however, that despite its centrality, this concept of "situation" has proven quite difficult for interpreters to grasp, and has been a source of objections, confusions, and debates that cause further puzzles about the nature of inquiry on Dewey's account. Dewey's "situation" concept has been variously understood to be "no less than the whole universe" (Russell 1939), "episodes... of disequilibrium" (Burke 1994), or the " 'surface' of an experience" (Burke 2000). Dewey scholars have disputed whether inquiry is "a changing succession or stream of situations" (Browning 2002) or "a transformation of *one* situation" (Burke 2009). More often, Dewey's sympathizers describe "situations" in unhelpfully vague terms, such as "a state or episode of a system consisting of an organism in its environment" (Levi 2010), without providing further explication.

This is rather unfortunate, as *inquiry* proves a central topic in many of Dewey's contributions, from epistemology and philosophy of science to ethics and political philosophy. Indeed, in almost every aspect of Dewey's philosophy, his account of inquiry plays a role. So it is important to further clarify Dewey's "situation" concept and its role in his theory of inquiry, if we are to have any hope of fully understanding Dewey's philosophy.

Dewey's theory of inquiry itself, where discussions of the nature and role of "situations" is most explicit, falls under the heading of his so-called "logical" writings, most especially his 1938 *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (LW 12). One must acknowledge that, to the contemporary reader, Dewey's *Logic* does not look much like logic as we know it. Readers as various as Bertrand Russell (1939), C.I. Lewis (1930), and Rudolf Carnap (1962 [1950]) saw "logic" as a misnomer for Dewey's project, given their understanding of logic (see Hickman 2022). However, if we widen our historical perspective, Dewey's *Logic* is very much a part of the theoretical tradition that includes Aristotle's *Organon*, Avicenna's *Remarks and Admonitions*, Bacon's *Novum Organum*, Hegel's *Science of Logic*, Lotze's *Logic*, Mill's *System of Logic*, and even Stebbing's *Modern Introduction to Logic*. The impression that Dewey's *Logic* is not really a kind of logic is an anachronism, based in a relatively recent shift in focus that only began in the nineteenth century and has never been complete, though I will not have space to say more about that question.

According to Dewey's particular naturalistic conception of logic, "all logical forms (with their characteristic properties) arise within the operation of inquiry and are concerned with control of inquiry" (LW 12: 11). Hence, Dewey's logical writings are primarily focused on articulating the operations of inquiry and those forms that arise in and lead to successful inquiry. For this reason, these writings also cover much that would today go under the headings of epistemology, methodology, and philosophy of science. Dewey's relationship with "epistemology" is vexed. If we conceive of the field of epistemology broadly as concerned with the nature of knowledge, belief-formation, reasoning, etc., then the *Logic* is as much a contribution to epistemology as to logical theory. But Dewey found that everywhere he looked, "epistemology" was concerned not with how our practices lead to knowledge, or how knowledge works, but with general issues of skepticism and the conditions of possibility of any knowledge at all. He thus railed against the fruitless "epistemology industry."

Science plays a special role in Dewey's theory of inquiry. While scientific inquiry is not the only legitimate type of inquiry, it is where the exemplary cases of inquiry are to be found. Indeed, the history of science is excellent material for logical theory: first, because the methods or logical standards particular to mathematical and physical science are of recent origin; and second, because the history of science provides a record of forms of inquiry tried, tested, and, when they have failed, modified. As Dewey puts it: "The developing course of science thus presents us with an immanent criticism of methods previously tried" (LW 12: 13). Because the (logical) forms of inquiry have developed and changed significantly from classical to contemporary to modern science, logical theory must work to keep up.

Dewey already uses "situation" as a technical term at least as early as *Studies in Logical Theory* (1902, MW 2), but it is in the 1938 *Logic* where Dewey makes most thorough and detailed used of that term. Whereas earlier accounts of logic and inquiry in Dewey's work sometimes focus on "perplexities" and "reflective thinking," the *Logic* eschews such intrapersonal-psychological terms in favor of "situation" and "inquiry" understood in objective, interpersonal-behavioral terms, consistent with the non-subjectivist, organism-environment (or transactionalist) redefinition of "experience" found in *Experience and Nature* (1925, LW1). To see the centrality of "situations," we need only consider Dewey's definition of inquiry:

> *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.* (LW 12: 108)

Inquiry is not merely situated, its very definition is that of a process of transformation of situations. The definition is, on its own, rather opaque, but just as Peirce defines inquiry as the process of transforming doubt into belief, Dewey defines inquiry as the process of transforming an indeterminate situation into a determinate one. How we are to understand "indeterminate" and "determinate" or "unified whole" in relation to situations is one of the interpretative difficulties to be addressed.

In what follows, I provide a new reading of Dewey's concept of "situation" and of his situational theory of inquiry. This reading attempts to resolve a number of outstanding interpretive puzzles that are canvassed in §2. In §3, I give my interpretation of situations: Situations are centered on and individuated according to our practices and activities; they are bounded by whatever is relevant to said practices and activities. This criterion of relevance is both interest-relative (determined by the characteristic aims of the practices or activities that define the situation) and objective (determined by what, in fact, bears on the aims and interests of those practices and activities). A useful analogy can be drawn here with the concept of "environment" or "niche" in Gibson's ecological psychology. Situations have qualitative characters that are immediately felt by the actors within them, but those qualities do not provide any form of epistemic foundations. §4 focuses on the situational nature of inquiry: inquiry is situated in the context of a practice and directed at alleviating tensions within that practice. The success of inquiry is determined by the actual (objective) resolution of the tensions, but the scope of that success is bound by the situation and dependent on the characteristic aims and interests of a practice. This is one possible meaning of the somewhat obscure label of "objective relativism" sometimes applied to Dewey's philosophy, though I prefer to call it simply "situationism." This situationism has important consequences for epistemology and philosophy of science.

2 The Puzzles about Situations

There are a variety of interpretive puzzles concerning Dewey's "situation" concept and its role in his theory of inquiry. A historically important concern is the scope or what bounds a situation, though even more fundamentally, there is the question of what comprises the situation at all. As Dewey often treats our access to situations as something that is both *immediate* and a matter of *feeling*, there is a question about what the *epistemic* status or role of situations is. This is closely related to how we are to understand the definition of inquiry in terms of transformation of situations. I will treat each of these types of puzzle in turn.

2.1 The Boundaries of a Situation

Bertrand Russell, in his contribution the *Library of Living Philosophers* volume on Dewey entitled "Dewey's New *Logic*," provides one of the first, or at least the most memorable and influential early interpretations of Dewey's concept of a situation. Russell equates Deweyan situations with a kind of Hegelian universal holism, in which the smallest unit of inquiry is the entire universe. As Russell says, "I do not see how... a 'situation' can embrace less than the whole universe... it would seem to follow that all inquiry, strictly speaking, is an attempt to analyze the universe" (Russell 1939, 139–40). He recognizes that this is apparently not Dewey's intent; Dewey insists that situations are "*contextual* wholes," not universal ones. Nevertheless, Russell argues that Dewey has no resources to block this absurd conclusion, and that we must thus, "give more place to logically separable particulars than [Dewey] seems willing to concede" (*ibid.*).

Russell identifies Dewey's "insistence upon continuity" as the cause of what he regards as an absurd position, making it impossible, presumably for Dewey to specify his contextualism. Burke (1994) argues clearly and persuasively that Russell did not understand Dewey's concept of situations (and related ideas such as continuity), such that he badly misunderstood Dewey's logical theory as a whole. Burke's treatment cannot be improved upon here. Suffice it to say that Russell appears unwilling or unable to seriously consider a middle ground between universal holism and logical atomism, and that he missed the sophisticated contextualism that Dewey was aiming at. Indeed, Dewey himself sees "unlimited universalization," i.e., the attempt to "bring

all things whatsoever into a single coherent and all inclusive whole" as a kind of fallacy (*Context and Thought* 1931, LW 6: 8)

Yet Russell's objection does leave us with a puzzle not fully resolved by Burke's critique: it remains somewhat unclear what the boundaries of a situation are, what counts as part of the situation, and what does not. The wholeness of situations is in part determined, for Dewey, by their "pervasive quality" or "pervasive qualitative character," which Dewey does not explicate very clearly. How to draw the borders of a situation is a crucial interpretive puzzle.

2.2 What Comprises the Situation?

Concern about the boundaries of the situation is premature, however, before we ask what the constituents of a situation are, what makes up a situation. This, too, turns out to be a difficult interpretive question.

F. Thomas Burke has worked over the years to answer this question, developing several different accounts. Partly responding to Russell's oppositional interpretation of Dewey as universal holist, Burke (1994) defines "situation" based on the kind of situations that occasion inquiry: "Situations, occurring in the ongoing activities of some organism/environment system, are instances of episodes (or 'fields') of disequilibrium, instability, imbalance, disintegrations, disturbance, dysfunction, breakdown, etc." (22-23). This is a fair (if incomplete) account of what Dewey terms "indeterminate situations," but it clearly will not do as an account of situations in general. Most obviously, the very definition of inquiry depends on the possibility of a *determinate* situation, as the goal-state of inquiry in which the original indeterminacy is removed; this would strictly be nonsense on Burke's (1994) definition. Second, the concept of situation does other work in Dewey's philosophy beyond its role in inquiry. Dewey defines and uses the term "situation" in an early chapter of the *Logic*, before introducing the concept of "indeterminate situation," in a larger discussion of the nature of language and meaning. Dewey describes meaning and language use as situationally dependent, and it is clear that he does not intend to limit the meaningfulness of language to conditions of "disequilibrium, instability, imbalance... etc." Situations also play a role in Dewey's philosophy of education (see, e.g., *Democracy and Education* MW 9: 35-38).

Perhaps in recognition of the problem, Burke (2000) provides an alternative, but definition of "situation." There, he identifies Dewey's situations with the

"qualitative wholeness of individual experiences" (97), which are realities that are at the same time appearances. In the same article, Burke identifies situations with surface appearances (109). What's more, on this view, he sees the situation as playing a peculiar epistemological role similar to Descartes' *cogito*, a further puzzle we will explore in the next section.

Dewey often describes a situation as the "background" of an experience or of thought or inquiry: "a qualitative and qualifying situation is present as the background and the control of *every* experience" (LW 12: 76). A *background* in many ways seems to be the *opposite* of the *surface* of an experience. What's more, paintings, photographs, and criminal suspects have backgrounds, but it is less clear what it means to say that an experience or inquiry has or a situation is a background.

2.3 The Epistemic Status of Situations

According to Burke (2000), the primary role of situations, for Dewey, is to bridge the appearance/reality gap and thus to further the Cartesian project of "securing solid ground in epistemology" (96-97), i.e., of providing a secure foundation for inquiry. Since a situation is the surface appearance of a situation, "A situation is exactly as it appears to be" (Burke 2000, 109)—a direct reference to Dewey's "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism" (1905, MW 3: 158). On this interpretation, the situation plays the role of the epistemological given, then, for Dewey.

This seems to run afoul both of many of Dewey's explicit statements about knowledge and what many Dewey scholars have taken to be his core commitments. Dewey is explicit that there is not and cannot be any immediate knowledge, and so it seems that situations could not be epistemological givens. Dewey is as thoroughgoing a fallibilist as one could be, it seems, and it certainly seems possible to be mistaken in judging whether one's situation has a certain character or not.

These problems for Burke's account simply raise a further puzzle. Burke is not wrong to describe the pervasive quality of a situation as something that is immediate; Dewey repeatedly mentions our immediate grasp of the "pervasive qualitative character" that unifies the situation and makes it a whole. How is that to be squared with Dewey's fallibilist epistemology? What *is* the epistemic status or role of situations?

2.4 How Does Inquiry Transform Situations?

Other confusions about the nature of situations arise in the context of Dewey's situational definition of inquiry, as transformation from indeterminate situation to determinate and unified situation. This definition raises a host of interpretive problems.

Some have wondered whether it is inappropriate to characterize *inquiry* (as opposed to *successful* inquiry) as "controlled or directed" and as actually terminating in a determinate situation (Browning 2002, 168; Burke 2009, 160). What's more, it may seem confused to define the goal of inquiry as a situation that is a "unified whole," since all situations (even indeterminate and problematic situations) are unified wholes in virtue of their pervasive qualitative characters (Browning 2002, 169; Burke 2009, 166). The relation of inquiry, situations, control, determinacy, and qualitative unity thus very much stands in need of clarification.

Finally, Browning (2002, 161, 170–72) and Burke (2009, 161–66) disagree whether Dewey thinks of inquiry as a succession of numerically distinct situations or as a transformation of a single situation from one state (indeterminacy) to another (determinacy or unity). Which is it? Or is there really an issue here? Is it a merely verbal dispute between them?

3 What is a Situation?

In this section, I will attempt to provide a new reading of the nature of a situation; in the following section (§4), I will further clarify Dewey's situational theory of inquiry.

3.1 Situations Have Breadth and Depth

One of the most useful texts for unpacking Dewey's theory of situations comes from a lesser-known source, a reply to a letter from Albert G.A. Balz that was published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1949 and attached as an appendix to *Knowing and the Known* (1949, LW 16). Dewey writes,

> "Situation" stands for something inclusive of a large number of diverse elements existing across wide areas of space and long periods of time, but which, nevertheless, have their own unity. This discussion which we are here and now carrying on is precisely

> part of a situation. Your letter to me and what I am writing in response are evidently parts of that to which I have given the name "situation"; while these items are conspicuous features of the situation they are far from being the only or even the chief ones. In each case there is prolonged prior study: into this study have entered teachers, books, articles, and all the contacts which have shaped the views that now find themselves in disagreement with each other. (LW 16:281-2)

It is telling that Dewey adds this as an appendix to a work that he and Arthur Bentley thought would clear up problems of terminology and conceptualization in philosophy in service of "mutual intelligibility" (LW 16: 3), and that the first major idea he tries to clarify for Balz is "situation."

What Dewey makes clear in this passage is that situations have breadth and depth. They include elements distant in space and time. Dewey here clearly speaks of ordinary things as elements of situations, not just the surfaces of things, as Burke (2000) suggests. Things like teachers and books have depths beyond their surface, and those depths make a difference. Dewey says elsewhere that, "Experience... reaches down int nature; it has depth" (*Experience and Nature*, 1929, LW 1: 13). Seemingly the same applies to situations. Despite the fact that Dewey describes situations using terms like "background," "field," and "contextual whole," the exchange with Balz clarifies that situations are not metaphysically peculiar. They are comprised largely of ordinary, everyday things and events like people, books, letters, discussions, study, etc. They are not, however, *mere* sets of objects and events (LW 12: 72); over and above that they have their own unity as a complex. It is to this feature of situations I now turn.

3.2 Situations are Bounded by Practical Relevance

Dewey comes closest to a definition of a situation in the *Logic* when he describes it as "an environing experienced world" (LW 12:72), but this description must be unpacked. A situation is "environing" in the sense that if forms the context, background, or environment (in a Gibsonian sense to be explored below) for a *practice* or *activity*. It is "experienced" because, for Dewey, experience just is a feature of activities wherein certain organisms interact with their environments. A situation is a "world" because it forms a whole or has a certain kind of unity, not in the sense of The World (the

universal holism Russell saw), but in the metaphorical sense we use when we talk about "the world of baseball" or "the corporate world" or "the post-9/11 world."

Centering situations on practices and activities helps to answer Russell's question about the extent of situations: what determines the horizon of a situation is not a matter of distance in time or space, nor of mere causal connection. Rather, it is *relevance* of some thing or event to some practice or activity that determines whether it is a part of a certain situation. Does it make a *significant* difference to that practice or activity? While the mass of some distant exoplanet is causally connected to my activity of typing on the computer (by way of Universal Gravitation), it is certainly not relevant to that activity in any significant way (unless I am writing on astrophysics, perhaps).

Dewey's talk of situations being wholes with "pervasive qualitative character" makes more sense in this connection with practices and activities. Some activity, say a basketball game, occurs on the background of a situation that includes players, ball, court, training regimes, rules of the sport, and many other things. That activity has an overall quality: perhaps it is a close game, tense, balanced, outcome uncertain. According to Dewey, this overall quality is an objective feature of the situation. It is also a quality that participants and observers, if they are aware enough of the situation and the activity, can perceive.

3.3 Situations as Environmental Niches

A situation is an "environment" not in the sense of a spatiotemporal surround, but rather in an ecological sense, closely connected with the psychology of JJ Gibson. According to Gibson (1979), "The environment consists of the *surroundings* of animals" (7). An environment is constituted by what the organism perceives and responds to, what is "ambient" for it, what plays a part in its activities and interactions. In this way, Gibson distinguishes an "animal environment" from "the physical world."

For the human animal, mediating their interactions through language and technology, the constituents of their ecological niche may be quite spatiotemporally far flung, but they do not, as Russell worries, include the entire universe. The Gibsonian environment is a bearer of information, and perception consists not of passively receiving and then mentally processing

that information but of actively navigating the array of information that the environment presents.

3.4 Situations are Felt but Not Fully Known

Gibson sometimes speaks as if the relevant information is simple *out there* in the environment in a way that is directly perceived by the organism. This fits nicely with Burke's (2000) suggestion that the situation plays the role of a kind of epistemological given, where perception and reality are identical. Dewey would agree with Gibson that the animal is in *direct* contact with the environment, not mediated by a cognitive-representational "veil of perception." Why Dewey would deny is that this direct contact amounts to a kind of *epistemological* given.

Dewey does treat the situation as *given* in one sense: "That which is 'given' in the strict sense of the word 'given,' is the total field or situation" (LW 12: 127). At the same time, the situation is not in itself data or information for inquiry:

> The given in the sense of the singular, whether object or quality, is the special aspect, phase or constituent of the existentially present situation that is selected to locate and identify its problematic features with reference to the inquiry then and there to be executed. In the strict sense, it is *taken* rather than given. This fact decides the logical status of *data*. (ibid.)

Dewey repeatedly insists that facts or data are *taken*, not *given* or "*pre*-sented" (LW 12: 118). What he means is that, in order to be available for inquiry, features of the situation must be discriminated and represented in a particular way. There is an element of choice, as well as fallible judgment, rather than something immediately given in the way the classical empiricist would have it.

The situation, by contrast, cannot *in itself* be represented at all: "The situation as such is not and cannot be stated or made explicit" ("Qualitative Thought" 1930, LW 5: 243). If it cannot be *stated*, it cannot play a foundational epistemic role. The situation is, in a specific sense, the *subject-matter* of an inquiry; another way to put it is that inquiry is the attempt to *make sense* of a situation. But the situation itself does not appear amongst the intellectual materials, existential or ideational, that inquiry deals with. That is,

the situation "does not enter into the direct material of reflection" ("Context and Thought" 1931, LW 6: 11). On Dewey's view, it is only possible to make specific claims about a situation in the context of a broader situation that includes the former within itself (LW 5: 247).

It is clear, as Burke (2000) insists, that with respect to the pervasive quality of a situation, "things... are what they are experienced as" (MW 3: 158). A situation that is experienced as doubtful *is* doubtful; one experienced as settled *is* settled. But Dewey is clear in "Postulate" that the statement that things are what they are experienced as is not the same as saying that things are *known* to be what they are experienced as, nor that they *are* exclusively what they are known to be. The immediate experience of the situation does not have necessarily have cognitive content, but is more of an affective state. (Hence Dewey likes to say that the pervasive qualitative character of a situation is "felt" rather than "perceived.") When one *takes* a situation to be a certain way, i.e., when one cognitively identifies a situation as of a certain type, then there is a possibility of error—as occurs when one is overtaken by a "mania of doubting" (LW 12: 109). That the situation feels (and so, is) doubtful does not mean that we *know* that there is a genuinely problematic situation at hand.

What may be misleading in this respect is Dewey's repeated claims that the situation "controls" the inquiry. One may be tempted to think of "control" as the foundational role, in the way that sense-impressions might "control" knowledge for the classical empiricist. But I think this is misleading. In order to see why, we must get into the role of situations in Dewey's theory of inquiry.

4 The Situational Theory of Inquiry

Dewey's situational definition of inquiry bears repeating: "*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*" (*Logic,* LW 12: 108). This is a radical conception of inquiry. Inquiry is not a process of thought that takes place in the mind of an inquirer. It is a process of transforming an objective situation from one sort into another.

An indeterminate situation is one in which the relevant practice or activity has become disordered or even ground to a halt by some disturbance in its

constituent components and context. Dewey emphasizes again and again in the *Logic* that successfully concluded inquiry requires *actually* transforming a situation in such a way that the indeterminate quality of the situation is actually removed, the disturbance or block of the situation's constituent practice or activity swept away, and the practice or activity itself probably transformed in the process. The precise workings of inquiry, on Dewey's account, are complex and beyond the scope of this paper.[1]

4.1 Situational Transformation as Aim and Criterion

First, there is the question of whether we should speak of inquiry as "controlled or directed" and as "transformation of an indeterminate situation" into a determinate one. Browning (2002) objects that this definition is rather one of properly controlled, successful inquiry rather than inquiry per se, which might fail to tranform the situation into a determinate one, or lack proper control and direction, or be truncated prior to completion. However, I think the objection is simple enough to respond to. Dewey's definition of inquiry is *normative*, building in the aim of inquiry and conditions of success into the definition, as constitutive of the activity. Properly speaking, engaging in inquiry requires one to attempt to exercise proper control and to aim to achieve actual transformation toward a settled, determinate situation. To fail to control and direct one's inquiry would be to inquire deficiently, at the very least; at worse, it would not be inquiry at all, but more-or-less aimless groping. Similarly, to inquire is to *aim* to transform an indeterminate situation into a determinate one. To end inquiry without reaching a determinate situation would either involve making an error in judgment, in the case of a concluded inquiry that fails to reach such a determinate state; or it would be to give up or be interrupted, for inquiry to cease and dissolve rather than to come to a proper conclusion.

4.2 Unity, Determinacy, and Indeterminacy

Burke (2009, 166) rightly points out that Dewey simply (but unfortunately) uses "unified whole" in two separate senses, which Burke describes as "qualitative uniqueness" and "stable interactive integration." The first refers to the qualitative unity of any situation whatsoever, the latter to a particular

[1] See Brown (2012).

quality of situations in which practices and activities proceed smoothly. The "qualitative uniqueness" of a situation is the pervasive qualitative character that makes any situation what it is, in virtue of the general character of the practices and activities that define the situation. "Stable interactive integration" is Burke's apt characterization of the sense of unity particular to Dewey's "determinate situation."

4.3 The Situation Controls Inquiry

So, in what sense do situations *control* inquiry, if not by providing firm epistemological foundations for it? As Dewey says in "Qualitative Thought": "the situation controls the terms of thought, for they are *its* distinctions, and applicability to it is the ultimate test of their validity" (LW 5: 247). In my view, there are at least two ways in which this control operates. First, because it is the situation itself that is the subject-matter of inquiry; it is the problematic situation that is being inquired into in the first place. It sets the context in which inquiry proceeds and which it tries to make sense of. It is not objects in isolation or a question in the abstract that the inquirer is trying to make sense of; that way lies incoherence and confusion, or intellectual make-work, for Dewey. Ultimately, one sets out to inquire from a practice or activity that is interrupted, disrupted, confused, not functioning properly; transforming that practice or activity into one that is smooth and stable is the goal and test. Whether the inquiry is successful is determined by whether the character of the situation actually changes.

There's another sense in which the situation controls and directs inquiry, I think. One is in a constant affective (felt) relationship to the qualitative characteristics of the situation; even though these qualities may not be made part of the explicit materials of reflection, they operate in the background to guide and shape it. It is the felt sense of indeterminacy (doubt, confusion, disturbance) that leads one to inquire in the first place, and the felt sense that, so to speak, it is all coming together that reinforces ones judgment that a solution has been found. Dewey treats this form of control in explicitly aesthetic terms:

> A work of art provides an apter illustration. In it, as we have already noted, the quality of the whole permeates, affects, and controls every detail. ... The underlying unity of qualitativeness regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction

> and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms. This quality enables us to keep thinking about one problem without our having constantly to stop to ask ourselves what it is after all that we are thinking about. We are aware of it not by itself but as the background, the thread, and the directive clue in what we do expressly think of. For the latter things are its distinctions and relations. ("Qualitative Thought" LW 5: 247-48)

The point applies as much to science and mathematical reasoning as to the construction of art (LW 5: 252). In my view, there's nothing foundational about the role of the situation, here. The guidance is intuitive and not justificatory; the justification happens within the explicit materials of inquiry. In a sense, the point is simply one of the primacy of practice: the actual situation, and not one's conception of it, is the criterion of success.

4.4 How Many Situations?

Should we say, with Browning (2002, 161, 170–72), that inquiry is a succession of different situations (starting with the indeterminate, ending with the determinate), or with Burke (2009, 161–66), that it is the transformation of the same situation (whose character changes from indeterminate to determinate)? This requires us to know what the identity conditions of a situation are, and as I have already indicated, this depends on the practice or activity that defines the situation. What are the identity conditions of a practice or activity? When does a practice change so much that it ceases to be a modification of the same practice and becomes a new one.

It is not clear to me that there is any determinate answer we could give here. The notion of "practice" here is an concept for describing human social life; such concepts are notoriously interpretive in nature. One could give stipulative conditions, if it served some theoretical or empirical purpose to do so. But it is also not entirely clear what, if anything, hangs on this dispute between Burke and Browning, and so on what grounds one would endorse a stipulative account that would settle the dispute. There may just be no fact of the matter whether it is a changing situation or a change *of* situation that characterizes inquiry.

4.5 Situations, Contexts, and Objective Relativism

The situational account of inquiry amounts to a thoroughgoing form of contextualism. According to Dewey, the goal of inquiry is to transform a *particular* indeterminate situation. This closely circumscribes the potential applicability of the results of scientific inquiry to situations continuous to the one that generated those results. Hence, for Dewey, "Final Judgment is Individual" (LW 12: 125). Wide applicability is an achievement to be sought, not an automatic result of inquiry.

Dewey makes the point clearly that success in past inquiries is never a guarantee of future adequacy as part of his diagnosis of the flawed idea of "immediate knowledge":

> While the direct use of objects, factual and conceptual, which have been determined in the course of resolving prior problematic situations is of indispensable practical value in the conduct of further inquiries, such objects are not exempt in new inquiries from need for reexamination and reconstitution. The fact that they have fulfilled the demands imposed upon them in previous inquiries is not a logical proof that, in the form in which they have emerged, they are organs and instrumentalities which will satisfy the demands of a new problematic situation. (LW 12: 143)

Scientific inquiry aims at wider validity through the generality of its inquiries, but this is always aspirational, never guaranteed.

5 Conclusion

Dewey's concept of "situation" and his situational theory of inquiry, if accepted, have significant consequences for epistemology and philosophy of science.

The situation provides an answer to an important question posed by science-based policy and the problem of "evidence for use" (Cartwright 2006), namely, the problem of relevance. The situation involves everything that is relevant to a practice or activity; what is relevant to the inquiry is that part of the situation that causes the indeterminacy or is an instrument to its removal. Some putative evidence is relevant to *this* situation if it can be used to develop the inquiry towards resolution. No evidence imported from

outside into a new situation can be guaranteed to be relevant and valid ahead of inquiry, no matter the circumstances of its original production.

The thoroughgoing contextualism of Dewey's theory of inquiry, and the criterion of relevance implied by it, means that there is no general, automatic way that results generated in a scientific context can be put to use in a very different situation, such as policymaking. What is required for science-based policy is not evidence-based policy, but *inquiry*-based policy.

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