The Fitness of an Ideal: A Peircean Ethics

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The paper makes a place for a Peircean Ethics. It briefly outlines the theory/practice problem, and then moves on to the difficult development of Ethics as a normative science. It is no surprise that Peirce wrote about Ethics as a Normative Science at the same time as the ideals of conduct in 1903. The result of this work is a theory of the growth of concrete reasonableness that provides us with the tools to critically engage the ideals that guide our behaviour. This description relies on an explanation of the slow percolation of forms, or more particularly, of generals. This is the heart of synechism.

Synechism is founded on the notion that the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness.

– C. S. Peirce (CP 5.4, 1902)

In 1898, Charles Sanders Peirce stood before his audience and said, “Now, the two masters, theory and practice, you cannot serve” (EP 2:34) and condemned with the whole strength of conviction the tendency to mingle philosophy and practice. It comes as no surprise, then, that in 1898 Ethics is not considered a Normative Science.

But just a few years later Peirce changed his mind. In the “Minute Logic” of 1902, we find Peirce calling Ethics one of the Normative Sciences that “are the very most purely theoretical of purely theoretical sciences” (CP 1.281, 1902). I think what allowed Peirce to include Ethics as a normative science was the realization that ideals of conduct function like the laws of nature: both guide habitual behaviour. Ethics is the study of the conformity of our action towards the ideals proposed by Esthetics. The ideals proposed by Esthetics are the sedimentation of an entire culture’s practices that have provided the culture with a stable belief set. Once those ends are brought under the scope of rational, critical deliberation, then they can become subject to the scientific method. This is what allows Ethics to become a Normative Science. Peirce’s fear, however, is that a wholesale rejection of our belief set would lead to a type of Cartesian doubt that is not only unwarranted and unjustified, but also very likely to lead us into error because of a lack of the stable foundation that our cultural practices have
afforded us. Instead of this wholesale rejection, in 1903, Peirce outlines a pro-
cess of critical self-control that brings our practices in line with rational deliber-
ation, which ultimately contributes to the growth of concrete reasonableness.

The purpose of this paper is to explain why Peirce held that there is a
division between theory and practice and to show how the two must inform one
another through “a slow percolation” of forms. (RLT, 122) I will do this by first
setting up the theory/practice problem for Peirce and showing why that is a
problem for pragmatism in general. Second, I will trace the development of
Ethics through the evolution of the Normative Sciences. Third, I will show that
the development of the Normative Sciences must come out of practice. The
results of the normative sciences should be taken up again in practice in order
for them to contribute to the growth of concrete reasonableness. The concluding
section will bring together two essays from The Normative Thought of Charles
S. Peirce (2012), namely, Rosa Maria Mayorga’s Peirce’s Moral “Realicism”
and Ignacio Redondo’s The Normativity of Communication: Norms and Ideals
in Peirce’s Speculative Rhetoric. By combining these two papers, we can better
understand that the slow percolation of forms that Peirce talks about in the
Reasoning and the Logic of Things lectures involves activity in accordance with
the forms of relations of objects. This move relies on both his normative
sciences and metaphysical inquiry.

1. Theory and Practice

The position that I would like to put forward has been hinted at in the secondary
literature but has not been spelled out in complete detail. What I would like to
see is an approach that respects the roles that instinct and habit play in ethical
deliberation by developing deliberate, intelligent habits that contribute to the
growth of concrete reasonableness. To get there, it will first be necessary to
dispel some of the myths about Peirce holding a division between theory and
practice. This will be done by showing what Peirce had to say about Ethics as a
Normative Science. It is here and in his comments about the ideals of conduct
that one can plainly see the interwovenness of theory and practice.

At the outset, it should be noted that there is a fairly straightforward
solution to this problem that could have been employed here, and it is a move
that many commentators, such as Vincent Colapietro, have made before. The
solution would be to say that theory, or more particularly, theorizing, is actually
a form of practice. Thus, the strict division between theory and practice is not
possible to hold simply because theory is a subset of practice. The position that I
am arguing for here matches up nicely with this approach that sees theory as a
form of practice insofar as both approaches are undermining the dualism in
some accounts of Peirce. These approaches differ insofar as I am concerned with
providing an account that focuses on the role of instinct and habit as inter-
mediaries between theory and practice.