

Joseph Brent's *Peirce*: The Question of Ethics

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[Jump to the "Arts and Sciences of Value" schematic]

As became clear in the wake of Joseph Brent's presentation to this Society a year ago, the question of the relevance of biography to philosophy is a point of some controversy.⁰ On the one hand, the logic books warn us that it is an error either to condemn or praise a system of ideas on the basis of its author's life. In that direction lie the *ad hominem*, *ad populum*, and empty arguments from authority. We do well to beware of the genetic fallacy. On the other hand, we believe that philosophical ideas do have consequences for life, and we are right to look to their originators' lives for some indication of the consequences a system of ideas may have. Philosophers cannot stubbornly ignore Heidegger's association with the Nazis, or Jefferson's slaveholding. In such cases, biographical fact properly forces us to ask what a person was really thinking when he or she expressed some idea, or remained silent on a point we feel should obviously have been addressed. The context of signs that can be relevant for interpreting a philosopher's work does not consist only of written texts, as Peirce scholars should perhaps know better than anyone else.

Many of us thought we knew Peirce, having spent years getting inside his head via his philosophical writings. With the appearance of Brent's *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*, we find ourselves asking some deeply disturbing questions about the man and his philosophy. The most troubling of these is the question of ethics. In the last chapter of his book, Brent asserts that it was primarily Peirce's "moral blindness" that kept him from the position of leadership in American academic philosophy, and world leadership in logic, that he would otherwise have attained (Brent 336). The evidence is compelling: Peirce all too often presented a shabby and even scandalous appearance to the world, with the result that he was regularly excluded from the circles where he and his ideas might have flourished. Brent, the biographer, attempts to explain why. His answer is that Peirce clothed himself in the flawed fabric of his own philosophical system. In what follows, I argue that Peirce's later writings not only are free of the particular defects which Brent thinks he finds, but that they in fact point toward an interesting non-foundational theory of moral realism. After sorting out

Brent's various criticisms of Peirce's ethics, I present a tentative reconstruction of Peirce's philosophy of value that suggests it has considerable relevance for current discussions of post-Enlightenment ethics.

Brent identifies two philosophical sources of Peirce's personal moral blindness. The first is his early identification of the scientific community as the paradigm of human community. This community venerates *truth* as the supreme value. Moreover, since only the infinite community of inquirers can comprehend ultimate truth, the individual has no virtue, no part of this goodness, apart from the community of scientific inquirers (Brent 336-37). Peirce's mistake was to overlook the real significance of other values (notably those of esthetics and ethics -- the Admirable and the Right), the importance of non-scientific communities, and the role that individual feelings, actions, and ideas play in all communities. In contrast with his philosophical insights into the nature of truth and communal reason, Peirce's early life shows a marked disregard for the consequences of his actions and for the fate and feelings of individuals, including his own.

The second philosophical source of moral blindness that Brent identifies is Peirce's conception of the place of evil in the unfolding of the universe. In brief, creative love requires evil as its object. It is through the dialectical overcoming of evil that goodness can do its creative work; it is through the gradual resolution of its irrational elements that the universe evolves toward greater reasonableness. This view seems to trivialize evil by turning our regard toward the longer view, in which a greater good will supposedly emerge. As Brent puts it: "the moral classification of any action will be ambiguous, since every action is perceived as furthering the evolution of the good" (Brent 338). If that weren't bad enough, Brent suggests something worse: in this view, "doing evil (as well as fighting it and doing good) is justified and necessary" (Brent 338). Brent says that all of this provided Peirce "a thoroughly ambiguous standard of morality that allowed him whatever rationale he chose to give for the life of black mischief he led" in his middle years (Brent 339). At the personal level, then, Brent concludes: "Clearly, Peirce's life and thought were two aspects of the same sign, Peirce himself. Each aspect deeply influenced the other, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the man and his work" (Brent 339).

Interestingly, though, Brent follows this with an account of how Peirce came to see the light, and to spend his last years trying to redeem both himself and his work. The pivotal point came early in 1897, when Peirce wrote to William James of his sufferings and of their effect on his philosophy. Peirce wrote of the experience:

[It] has led me to rate higher than ever the individual deed as the only real meaning there is [in] the Concept, and yet at the same time to see more sharply than ever that it is not the mere arbitrary force in the deed but the life it gives to the idea that is valuable. (Brent 341, see the letter in Ketner and Putnam 8-11)

With this, Peirce achieves the insight that banishes the first source of moral blindness from his philosophy. The individual is morally significant after all, not *separate* from the community, but as the only effective agent of development *within* the community. Signs (e.g., of rightness or truth) can exist independently of any *particular* embodiment, but no sign can exist apart from *all* actual embodiments. The community then needs the individual, just as the individual needs the community. As Brent says, "Peirce the pragmatist at length clearly understood what Peirce the pragmatist had not: the method was not enough. He would have to embody, as well as he could, the highest good in his own life, moment by moment" (Brent 341).

Shortly after this time, Peirce undertook to reconstruct his system of thought. Most importantly, the normative sciences of esthetics, practics, and logic appear at the center of the whole system. Peirce's architectonic reflects a progression: each science builds on the conclusions of its predecessors. First comes mathematics (and mathematical logic), the purely hypothetical investigation of what conclusions follow from arbitrarily adopted postulates. Next comes phenomenology, the nearly passive observation of experience. Phenomenology leads into esthetics, the science of ideals, whose aim is to formulate a concept of what state of things is admirable in itself, the *summum bonum*. This is the first of the normative sciences. The second is practics, the inquiry into the nature of right and wrong action. The last is logic, or semeiotic, which investigates the principles of the representation of truth. By 1905, when Peirce had largely completed his philosophical reconstruction, he had thus quite literally made the normative sciences of esthetics and practics the grounding for all active philosophical engagement with the world.

Whatever redemption Peirce may have found, though, Brent maintains that the system remains deeply flawed. Peirce and his philosophy both overcame their earlier tunnel-vision regarding the importance of individuals for the community, of values other than truth, and of communities other than the narrowly scientific. The lingering problem must then concern the second source of the earlier moral blindness: the trivialization of evil and the ambiguity of standards for judging right and wrong.

Indeed, this seems to be precisely Brent's concern: "pragmatism, even reformed as pragmaticism, provides no way to distinguish between the virtue of one consequence and another, except in terms of ever more distant and indistinct consequences, that is, in terms of habit or continuity" (Brent 342). Brent's clincher is stated as follows:

There is nothing in this view to prevent us from being constant liars, consistent adulterers, or persistent cads, if only we persist long enough. If we murder (an action which we currently call a moral evil) in such a way that the idea of it were to become realized in the long run in a general way -- in habit or law -- it

would become good because it had joined the harmony of the way things have come to be in the long run. This unwanted outcome demonstrates the failure of synechism, the principle of continuity, as the foundation of ethics. For Peirce, synechism was the harmonious principle of the universe brought into being by evolutionary love, his gentle moral agent. It fails. . . because it cannot provide a way to distinguish good from evil. If the principle governing ethics is harmonious continuity (or generalized habit), whatever is, is best in the long run. (Brent 343)

A reconstruction of Peirce's admittedly sketchy post-1902 thought on esthetics and ethics suggests that both of Brent's main charges here are misguided. First, while a Peircean ethics indeed does not present guidelines for distinguishing good from evil, this is not a failure of the system. The normative sciences provide something more important: a framework for inquiry into fundamental questions of value. From within such a framework the proper place of guidelines for conduct can begin to be assessed, and the questions of what we ought to admire, of the real nature of good and evil, and the meaning of right and wrong action can be investigated. Second, I argue that it is simply not the case that, within a Peircean framework, "*whatever is, is best in the long run.*" To show all of this will require a tentative reconstruction of Peirce's theory. What emerges from this effort is a non-foundational version of moral realism, the conceptual complement to Peirce's non-foundational realism in other areas.

Brent says that synechism fails "as the foundation of ethics" because "it cannot provide a way to distinguish good from evil." We certainly should expect a philosophical system to offer some guidance toward right action and living a good life. What Peirce's reconstructed system offers is at first glance rather disappointing in this respect. He says that there are two sides to the matter of ethics: the obviously important practical side, and a purely theoretical side. Characteristically, he devotes almost all his attention to the theoretical side. This consists of the normative sciences, esthetics and practics, which, he insists, have nothing directly to say about what ought to be done in specific situations, with the cultivation of good character, or with providing guidelines for evaluating moral action.

There is more here than meets the eye, however. In the 1906 passage where he names the second of the normative sciences "practics," to distinguish it from what is usually meant by "ethics," Peirce says that practics "should be the theory of the conformity of action to an ideal" (CP 1.574). In the Lowell Lectures of 1903, he proposes three self-criticisms by which a person's conduct can be measured against moral ideals. Brent highlights this scheme as the heart of Peirce's ethics, saying that "it seems a practical way to practice deliberate self-control," but that it fails to provide "justification for our ideals of conduct" (Brent 342). In the paragraph following the discussion of the three self-criticisms, which Brent does not mention, Peirce continues:

Finally, in addition to this personal meditation on the fitness of one's own ideals, which is of a practical nature, there are the purely theoretical studies of the student of ethics who seeks to ascertain, as a matter of curiosity, what the fitness of an ideal consists in, and to deduce from such definition of fitness what conduct ought to be. (CP 1.600)

The point here is that the practical matter of directing one's will toward the proper end presupposes a conception of what that end ought to be (CP 2.198). This question is dispassionately investigated in the normative sciences. Practics and esthetics do not judge actions or characters as good or bad, right or wrong, nor do they directly aim to supply guidelines for making such judgement. Practics is the inquiry into the nature of right and wrong, "*the study of what ends of action we are deliberately prepared to adopt*. That is right action which is in conformity to ends which we are deliberately prepared to adopt" (CP 5.130). In Peirce's view, the determination of what these ideals are is a separate matter from the skill, art, or science of acting upon them.

All determination of ideals is generally considered under the heading of "theoretical ethics," and the division of this study into esthetics and practics remained imprecise in Peirce's mind (CP 1.574). I propose the following way of distinguishing the two. Peirce notes that "the morally good appears as a particular species of the esthetically good" (CP 5.130). Esthetics is the theoretical inquiry into what is desirable in and of itself, the one end that encompasses all other ends, the *summum bonum*. Esthetics asks what is good; practics asks *what part of the good is the proper end of human action*.

The question of esthetics, Peirce says, is "What is the one quality that is, in its immediate presence, [kalos]?" (CP 2.199). What state of things is admirable in itself? Peirce tentatively answers: "an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a simple positive quality to their totality," *whatever* that quality may be (CP 5.132). When applied to the totality of all that *is*, the evolving universe, the *summum bonum* consists "in that process of evolution whereby the existent comes more and more to embody those generals which were just now said to be *destined*, which is what we strive to express in calling them *reasonable*" (CP 5.433; see also Potter 64-65). So the highest ideal tentatively described by Peirce's esthetics is the quality of feeling evoked by the process that evolves greater reasonableness and harmony out of the plurality of things in the universe. In Peirce's view, the highest ideal conceivable to us is not a state of absolute harmony and absence of strife -- not nirvana -- but rather *the feeling that accompanies increasing order and harmony*.

Practics aims to determine the ends toward which one's will ought to be directed. We cannot realistically direct our will toward *universal* increase of reasonableness; *ought* implies *can*. "Accordingly," Peirce writes, "the problem of ethics [practics] is to ascertain what end is possible" (CP 5.134).

I read this to mean "what end is possible for finite individuals to pursue." Our part of the *summum bonum* is expressed in Peirce's interpretation of the Golden Rule: "Sacrifice your own perfection to the perfectionment of your neighbor" (CP 6.288). Or, in the words Brent quotes from this same article on "Evolutionary Love," "progress comes from every individual merging his individuality in sympathy with his neighbors" (CP 6.294; Brent 342).

Another aspect of Brent's objection to the ethics implied in this philosophy is that it all seems so theoretical. That it is, but this may be all to the good. Peirce is clear: "the [practical] science of morality, virtuous conduct, right-living, can hardly claim a place among the heurctic sciences" (CP 1.573; see also CP 1.600, 5.125). Esthetics and practicals do not appeal to practical morality at all in their inquiry. On the other hand, the skill/art/science of morality may, but need not, draw upon the normative sciences for formulation of ideals. Many people lead good lives without studying the theory of normative ethics, just as many people reason soundly without studying the theory of logic.¹

As Peirce says, and as Brent would no doubt concur, "Opinions differ as to the wholesomeness of this [theoretical] study" (CP 1.600). Why on earth should we *separate* the theory of ends from the practice of morality? Peirce offers a positive reason. Morality, he notes, is conservative. "The difficulty is that morality chokes its own stream. Like any other field, more than any other, it needs improvement, advance. . . . But morality, doctrinaire conservative that it is, destroys its own vitality by resisting change, and positively insisting, This is eternally right: That is eternally Wrong" (CP 2.198). The normative sciences are separated from practical morality for the same reasons that the "pure sciences" are separated from engineering: practicing engineers have neither the time nor inclination to engage in the kind of speculation that makes for the most fundamental advances (see CP 5.125). Likewise, persons adept at the skill/art/science of living conventionally moral lives are not apt to arrive at the sorts of novel insight about ideals that will advance ethical theory and eventually trickle down to everyday morality.²

In a nutshell, then, we can schematize the various branches of a Peircean philosophy of value as follows:

Theoretical Inquiry	Practical Skills/Arts/Sciences
<p data-bbox="342 289 621 321"><i>Theoretical Esthetics</i></p> <ul data-bbox="383 338 695 541" style="list-style-type: none"> ● Theory of ideals. ● What state of things is admirable in itself? ● Definition of the Good; the <i>summum bonum</i>. <p data-bbox="342 562 451 594"><i>Practices</i></p> <ul data-bbox="383 611 678 884" style="list-style-type: none"> ● Theory of possible human ideals. ● Toward what end should one's will be directed? ● Definition of Moral Goodness and Right Action. 	<p data-bbox="737 289 971 321"><i>Applied Esthetics</i></p> <ul data-bbox="777 338 1224 541" style="list-style-type: none"> ● Art of producing the admirable. ● Criticism: educating habits of feeling so that they conform to the <i>summum bonum</i>. (CP 1.574) ● Esthetic virtue: Sense of Goodness. <p data-bbox="737 562 854 594"><i>Morality</i></p> <ul data-bbox="777 611 1224 884" style="list-style-type: none"> ● Art of doing right. ● Guidelines to determining what is right (e.g., theory of rights and duties). (CP 1.577) ● Criticism: conformity of actions to ideals--reasonable & deliberate conduct. ● Moral virtue: Practical Wisdom.

In response to Brent's first criticism, we can say that a Peircean ethical theory indeed does not provide a foundation for casuistry, a specific way of determining what is right.³ In fact, the normative sciences have the effect of loosening up any supposed "foundations" for ethics by exposing them to the scrutiny of dispassionate criticism. This, I suggest, is a merit of Peirce's philosophy. Who can honestly claim to have a fully coherent and workable moral system? We as individuals and as societies continually contradict our professed moral ideals. Peircean ethics recognizes the possibility that we have not yet made sufficient sense of what these ideals really mean -- that they, not just we, are still contradictory creatures. At least part of the work to be done in ethics belongs to the normative sciences: getting more clear on what our ideals ought to be, and what they really mean.

With this, we turn to Brent's second point of criticism. He says that within the framework of Peirce's synechism, "*whatever* is, is best in the long run" as long as it becomes part of the harmony of habitual action. Peircean ethics is non-dogmatic and without an absolute foundation. To some, this will sound like simple relativism, situation ethics, or some other flabby bugbear of ethical thought. Even worse is Brent's assertion that this system actually allows us to *justify* doing evil (Brent 338). We need to deal with this latter charge first. Recall that in Peirce's synechism, the evolution of goodness proceeds by the dialectical overcoming of evil. Evil thus is in some sense *necessary* in the universe. To say that evil is necessary, however, does not imply that a deliberately evil act can be "justified" in the sense of being *excusable*. It does suggest that evil is always to some extent *inevitable*. To say that evil is necessary then need only mean that its occurrence is comprehensible at a metaphysical level, not that we ought deliberately to do

evil things.⁴

Nonetheless, there is still the problematic non-foundational aspect of Peircean ethics. There certainly is an inherent *vagueness* to Peircean ethics, and there is plenty of ambiguity in the moral standards that it presents. This does not imply, however, that anything goes, including habitual lying, adultery, or murder! It seems silly to have to make this point (and *that* it seems silly is crucial, as we will see), but actions like these that *individually* conflict with the *summum bonum* could hardly have much prospect of ever conforming to it if they become *generalized*. An isolated lie, kidnapping, or murder is bad enough, but history suggests that state-sponsored propaganda, "disappearance" programs, purges and genocide are all the more intolerable.

Peirce is adamant that there is *one* highest ideal, one state of feeling that is best, and that what is *right* is what conforms to it and promotes it. What conflicts with it is wrong. If conflicting actions become generalized and habitual, we see all the more clearly that they are wrong. For all their present ambiguity, genuine ideals are really good, and actions that promote them conform to objective moral laws. Such laws, like all others, are subject to development and evolution over time.⁵ They are not however so malleable as to bend to the whim of an *individual* liar, adulterer, cad, or murderer. If the moral laws prohibiting such actions *now* are valid, they will not even bend to accommodate the "perversity" of an entire society.⁶ Peircean ethical theory is non-foundational in that it has no absolute givens; it is also realist in that its laws are objectively valid. The normative sciences encourage a constructive criticism of prevailing ethical theories that the conventionally moral person would never undertake. By privileging nothing (the non-foundational aspect), a Peircean ethics clears the way to developing a better understanding of moral laws (the realist aspect).

The last major point I want to address concerns the basis of our present knowledge of ideals, of good and evil, of right and wrong. Two paragraphs back, I noted that it seemed silly to find myself pointing out to civilized thinkers that murder is a really bad thing to do. But civilized thinkers *do* ask the "merely theoretical" questions that I find looming behind both of Brent's main criticisms. How do we know murder is bad? On the other hand, how do we know that actions conforming to the Golden Rule are good? Brent observes that Peirce's injunction for every individual to merge his or her individuality in sympathy with their neighbors' is "a kind of evolutionary sentimentalism that is without ethical basis" (Brent 342). I have suggested that moral guidelines are not without *esthetic* basis, but this just moves us back a step. We still face a basic question concerning the justification of our present beliefs about matters of value. We might put the question this way: "How do we finite participants in an incomplete inquiry *know* that this state of things is good and that one evil, that this action is right and that one wrong?"⁷ The Peircean answer is that we *guess* it to be so, and so far experience has not discredited our guess.⁸

Our apparent ability to guess the riddles of the law-governed universe is mysterious, whether we are guessing about continental drift, the composition of stars, or the propriety of our ethical ideals. We could in any particular case be gravely mistaken -- we are fallible creatures, and must remember that our ethical theories, no less than our scientific ones, may be way off base. All the more reason to seek better formulations of what is good and how to attain it, and to privilege nothing in our theoretical inquiries. The corollary to this is that both the attempt to do right and to know scientific truth rest on grand hypotheses that make reason and right action possible in the first place. The grand hypotheses are these: that there is a Reality to be expressed in true representations, and that there is ethical and esthetic Goodness to be expressed in right actions and admirable states of being. If we are to think and act and feel with a sense of objective meaning, we cannot help but first accept these hypotheses.⁹ We must assume that we can, in Brent's paraphrase of Peirce, "'catch a fragment' of the thought of the Living Mind. . . by means of our fallible but trustworthy instinct for guessing at the real meanings of signs. . ." (Brent 345). These projects cannot justify their own validity. Beyond the horizon of ethics and morality lies the disturbing possibility that the radical skeptic is right, that in the end our ideals are illusory and it is simply not possible to act morally. We can never know one way or the other, however, just as we can never know with absolute certainty whether there is any reality to be comprehended in true representations.

Finally, if after 1902 neither Peirce nor his system exhibited the flaws of "moral blindness" Brent identifies, how then is the biographer to explain Peirce's tragic fate? The answer, I think, is fairly simple. By 1900, Peirce was in his sixties, and had already made his unfortunate personal impression on the world. The insights that he introduced into his life and philosophy after that time were not enough to turn things around for him, and he may never have become adept at the practical side of ethics. Brent's work also indicates that he never became a very good judge of character, failing for too long to see that men such as Simon Newcomb were wolves in sheep's clothing (Brent 239). Peirce's moral insight was too little, and came too late for him. Nonetheless, the outline of an ethical theory is present in his later philosophy, and it is a theory that clearly gives place to the development of fundamental moral categories over time, in light of novel developments in the world.

NOTES

0. This paper was given at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy annual meeting at Rice University on 5 March 1994, in response to Brent's own presentation at the 1993 annual meeting.

The present paper is a first approach to a more complete "reconstruction of the normative sciences." Much supporting argument and explication has

been left out in the interest of brevity. The following notes indicate directions of further development within the paper.

1. Cf. Peirce's *logica utens/logica docens* distinction. I am proposing that a similar distinction exists for him in ethics. The normative sciences do not constitute wisdom. Practical morality may arrive at wisdom without benefit of the normative sciences, by relying on instinctive uncritical apprehension of the right ideals. We are right to rely on instinctive conventional morality in most cases, and ought to be cautious in acting on the recommendations of a novel moral theory that goes against conventional morality (CP 1.661-62).

It appears that systematic knowledge of ideals from the normative sciences would considerably strengthen the "instinctual" practice of morality. We might wish to reserve the term "wisdom" for those sages who *both* embody good judgement, right living, and reason *and* understand the theoretical basis of their ideals and way of life.

2. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. had to explain his willingness to violate the law to just such persons, whom he addresses as "My Dear Fellow Clergymen," in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."

The esthetic and ethical ideals are not only purely theoretical formulations within the normative sciences, they are moreover quite *vague* in Peirce's technical sense. Their precise meaning remains open, to be determined in the course of ongoing inquiry. To say merely that the *summum bonum* is a feeling of emerging harmony among disparate elements; to say only that the highest ethical commandment involves merging one's individuality with that of one's neighbors, so as to realize this perfection, leaves too much open for us. But this openness is prudent. Who are my neighbors? In what does their perfection consist? Is there *one* all-encompassing right way to take into consideration all the various interests in a situation, or are there different ways that are appropriate in different cases? These are only a few of the questions that remain to be answered. If we rely on conventional morality for the answers, we remain stuck with conventional problems. If we open the field to speculation, we may come across new insights that help make sense of emergent problematic moral situations. Environmental ethics (e.g., Leopold's "Land Ethic") and medical ethics, I suggest, are representative fields in which traditional moral categories have been reinterpreted to deal with such emergent problems.

3. For his part, though, Peirce speaks in glowing terms of the Kantian conception of universal rights and duties (CP 1.577).

4. The presentation of this point requires further elaboration in terms of Peirce's metaphysics and cosmology.

5. Some understanding of the evolutionary nature of Peircean "laws" is presupposed here. The notion should be explained, however, in order to clarify the respects in which the nature of Peircean moral laws parallels that of physical laws, and those in which they differ.

6. What Peirce said of the objectivity of scientific truths and their relation to the beliefs of finite communities applies equally well to ethical beliefs: "Our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion; it might even conceivably cause an arbitrary proposition to be universally accepted as long as the human race should last. Yet even that would not change the nature of the belief, which alone could be the result of investigation carried sufficiently far. . ." (CP 5.408).

7. And in logic, "that this argument form is valid and that one fallacious?"

8. Some further explanation of the form of hypothetic inference, abduction, as "guessing" would clarify this point.

9. See SS 73 on the notion of Reality as a hypothesis. I am suggesting that Goodness, similarly, is a necessary hypothesis in Peircean value theory.

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