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On the Significance of Ideals: Charles S. Peirce and the Good Life

CIANO AYDIN



Abstract

The author of this paper starts by sketching a general framework for Peirce's ethical theory: first, he discusses very briefly Peirce's phenomenological categories; then, he outlines some implications of these categories for Peirce's concept of personal identity. In the rest of the paper he discusses successively within this framework Peirce's views on the status of ethics, ideals, concrete reasonableness, evolutionary love, and the relation between the individual and the cosmos. He then argues that these notions, taken together, culminate in a non-subjective ethical theory that indicates what is a good life. The central argument that he develops is that we, according to Peirce, can only become authentic persons through a process of giving a general form to our interactions with our social and natural environment, *i.e.*, a form that is constituted by virtue of the belief in and embodiment of common ideals, which are no less real than concrete, physical events.

Keywords: Ideals, Identity, Reason, Love, Community.

Introduction

In Andrei Tarkovsy's *Solaris* the psychologist Kris Kelvin is sent to a research space station above a newly discovered planet, Solaris, to report on the mental health of the crew. Upon arriving at the space station, Kelvin discovers that the people on board are haunted by what seem to be hallucinations of people associated with past events. Before long, he himself is visited by a very real, seemingly indestructible incarnation of his wife, who had committed suicide after he had abandoned her.

The quest for the reality of the mental life—of ideas, goals and hopes—is a theme that we find also in other movies by Tarkovsky: *Stalker* is about a journey of three men travelling through a post-apocalyptic wilderness called the Zone to find a room that can grant our deepest inner wishes. We discover in the end that like all the other people before them the visitors do not have the courage to venture into the room and face the reality of their inner selves.

In *The Sacrifice*, the last movie that Tarkovsky made, the question of believing in the reality of ideas and hopes becomes, literally, a question of life and death. World War III has begun, and mankind is only hours away from utter annihilation. Alexander, the hero of the story, makes a vow to God: if God will restore the world to its previous state, he will give up everything he holds dear, including his 6 year old son. Later that night Otto, the postman, visits Alexander and says to him that the only way to save the world is to immediately sleep with Maria, a servant girl. Alexander, after being tormented with doubt and unbelief for a long time, sleeps with Maria and discovers the next morning that everything has returned to its prior state.

What I find so intriguing in Tarkovsky's movies is not only his addressing of the loss of spirituality in our modern, technological world, which is a recurring theme in his work, but also *the way he portrays* our mental life. In the *Solaris* space station, for example, thoughts, desires and hopes are no less real than material objects. They are in a certain sense even more real: all attempts of Kelvin to get rid of his dead wife miserably fail; after he sends her into space with a rocket, she rematerializes the next day. It is not very difficult to get rid of a material object or a living person: one can destroy it or walk away from it. Getting rid of thoughts, however, which most of the time just pop up unannounced in our heads, seems to be much more difficult. Ideas, at least sometimes and at least to a certain degree, seem to be beyond our control. Maybe even the opposite is true: is it not by virtue of ideas and goals that we can have control over our lives?

What does all this have to do with Charles Sanders Peirce's philosophy? And what does it have to do with Peirce and the good life, which is the subject of this paper? I believe—everything. A prerequisite to understand Peirce's philosophy, and especially his ethics, is to understand the status that he ascribes to ideas and, as we will see, ideals, and the role that they, according to him, play or should play in the world and in our lives.

In the following sections I will start by sketching a general framework for Peirce's ethical theory: first, I will discuss very briefly Peirce's phenomenological categories, with the intent to shed light on the distinction that Peirce makes between the possible, the material and the ideal; then, I will outline some implications of his categories for his concept of personal identity. Using this framework, I will then discuss in succession: Peirce's

views on: the status of ethics, common ideals, concrete reasonableness, evolutionary love, and the relation between the individual and the cosmos. I will argue that these notions, taken together, culminate in an ethical theory that indicates what is a good life. Peirce offers us, as I will try to show, an ethical theory that has an objective grounding, without presupposing pre-given, transcendent, ahistorical norms and values.

1. *General Framework*

1.1. *Possibility, Interaction, and Regularity*

Ethics is for Peirce not an isolated discipline but fulfils a specific role within philosophy and the other sciences. Philosophy, which in Peirce's classification of the sciences is arranged—after mathematics—as the 'highest', most general discipline, tries to give a general description and evaluation of the phenomena that we encounter in our everyday life experience. The task of phenomenology, which is the 'highest' discipline within philosophy, "is to make out what are the elements of appearance that present themselves to us every hour and every minute whether we are pursuing earnest investigations, or are undergoing the strangest vicissitudes of experience, or are dreamily listening to the tales of Scheherazade."¹ Peirce discovers that in our encounters with the world we always and necessarily have to adopt or presuppose three phenomenological categories, which he simply calls the categories of *Firstness*, *Secondness*, and *Thirdness*. Whatever we describe or experience, whether it is a thing, a fact, an event, a fantasy, or a hallucination, contains or presupposes always, necessarily, these three categories.² Under the discipline of phenomenology, Peirce arranges a cluster of three disciplines, which he calls the normative sciences, namely esthetics, ethics, and logic. Because phenomenology defines the framework in which these three disciplines and the other 'lower' sciences can develop their analyses, explanations and judgments in a proper manner, we have to examine the phenomenological categories a little more extensively.

The following example can clarify the primordial character of Peirce's categories. I draw a white chalk line on a blackboard. What are the necessary conditions to recognize this white chalk line as a white chalk line? First of all, I have to assume two *qualities*: the "white" of the chalk line and the "black" of the blackboard. The element of *Firstness* is a kind of quality. These qualities as such, however, are insufficient to perceive the white chalk line. The white chalk line can only be recognized as a white chalk line by virtue of the *contrast* between the "white" and the "black."³ *Secondness* denotes a kind of contrast. Without their contrast, the "white" and the "black" are mere abstractions, mere possibilities. These two elements—possible quality and contrast—are still not sufficient to make, so to say, the white chalk line appear or manifest itself as a white chalk line: we also need to *compare* or relate the "white"

to the “black” in a certain respect, in this case under the aspect of, among others, “colour.” *Thirdness* denotes a kind of relation.

Now I will try to characterize Peirce’s categories within a slightly broader context and touch upon a couple of aspects that are relevant for his notion of ethics. Peirce defines *Firstness* as “the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.”⁴ *Firstness* is probably the most difficult category to grasp, and it is very easy to misinterpret the definition that I just have quoted. The absolutely unrelated and irreducible singularity of *Firsts* does not imply that there are concrete entities that are absolutely independent. We saw in the example of the chalk line that *Firstness* expresses the realm of the possible. The absolutely unrelated singularity of *Firsts* refers to the *impossibility* of so ordering the world that we can conceive of a limit to it. Put differently: *Firstness* refers to the realm of unactualized possibilities that always “transcend” the domain of our world of actual objects and facts. *Firstness* refers to absolute novelty.

Secondness, Peirce says, denotes the experience of interaction, resistance or confrontation. It refers to “something which is there, and which I cannot think away, but am forced to acknowledge as an object or second beside myself.”⁵ But we have to be careful here: notice that we do not first have individual things, which then react to each other. The example of the chalk line shows that something individual emerges by virtue of its contrast or interaction with something else—which is, I believe, a revolutionary view.

Saying that things have an individual reality by virtue of interactions is not enough to understand how those different interactions can be acknowledged as aspects of a unified whole. The category of *Thirdness* can be clarified further if we draw not only a chalk line, but, for example, a square. Although the different individual lines that constitute a square have a distinct character by virtue of *Secondness*, *Secondness* is not sufficient to evoke the concept of a square in our mind. All the different lines have to be analyzed and synthesized in such a way that a continuous and unified whole, a square, is recognized. To relate the different chalk lines to one another a certain *orientation* or general *idea* is required. Ideas ascribe meaning to an object by relating its different parts to one another in a certain respect.

Ideas are for Peirce not mere words. In his critique of what he calls nominalists, he states “that our thinking only apprehends and does not create thought, and that that thought may and does as much govern outward things as it does our thinking.”⁶ Ideas can have an objective reality. And the reality of ideas manifests itself in their predictive power. Ascribing the fact that, for example, stones have fallen to the ground without verifiable exception for ages to a strange coincidence, and therefore claiming that those experiences of uniformity provide not the slightest guarantee that the next stone that shall be let go will fall, is,

according to Peirce, an absurd hypothesis. The only reasonable hypothesis is acknowledging that these kinds of uniformities are generated by some kind of orientation or predisposition, that they are governed by some kind of active general principle or idea.⁷

1.2. *Personal Identity*

Possibility, interaction and regularity are not only the general constitutive elements of material objects, but also of our personal identity—which does not imply that these categories are equally dominant in, for example, stones, spiders and human beings.⁸ The category of *Firstness* indicates that the human subject is not an invariable substance, but is fundamentally characterized by indeterminateness. By virtue of this indeterminateness we are not necessitated by pre-given structures or instincts to the degree that animals are; this fact is requisite for the adjustment and re-adjustment of our conduct.

Peirce's category of *Secondness* implies that the subject has only an individual identity by virtue of its natural and social interactions: we do not have a self before interacting, but we can only manifest our selves by virtue of our interactions. One could say that a person is nothing more than his or her interactions. This seems to result in a contrasting view: on the one hand, we are characterized by absolute indeterminateness by virtue of *Firstness*; on the other hand, we seem to be totally necessitated by virtue of *Secondness*. We are, according to Peirce, indeed both undetermined and necessitated.

But there is more: it is not a coincidence that Peirce defines his third category as “the Idea of that which is such as it is as being a Third, or Medium, between a Second and its First.”⁹ *Thirdness* mediates between absolute indeterminateness and sheer necessity. By bringing these aspects together it imparts, on the one hand, form and regularity to the indeterminate multiplicity of interactions that we are constituted by, and, on the other hand, it soaks off the rigid constraints that the world imparts on us. What we call our identity is a never completely fixed multiplicity of interactions that is governed and regulated by certain habits, laws, or ideas. It is by virtue of the possibility of giving our various, scattered interactions a durable form, which we can adjust continuously, that we possess a certain degree of freedom.

Let us look a little closer at Peirce's characterization of personal identity, because it will shed light on why Peirce becomes interested in ethics in the first place. In an article named *What Pragmatism Is* (1905) Peirce defines, in the tradition of Plato,¹⁰ the thinking of a person as an inner dialogue.¹¹ He writes:

a person is not absolutely an individual. His thoughts are what he is “saying to himself,” that is, is saying to that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time. When one reasons, it is that criti-

cal self that one is trying to persuade; and all thought whatsoever is a sign. . . . The second thing to remember is that the man's circle of society (however widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood), is a sort of loosely compacted person, in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism.¹²

We can, first of all, learn from this passage that a person does not coincide with his actual individuality, with his *Secondness*. A person is, at the same time, a symbolic being; he or she is to a high degree *Thirdness*. Because a person does not completely coincide with his or her actual self, he or she is able to anticipate a future critical self that he or she wants to convince—maybe we could call this future critical self the person's conscience. This means that because a subject can transcend his actual state, he possesses a certain degree of self-control. By virtue of *Thirdness* a person has the ability to govern and regulate his interactions with the world by forming and modifying his conduct.

Secondly, Peirce emphasizes in this passage that a man's social circle is a kind of person that is in a certain sense of a higher order. This indicates that the habits or laws that an individual has to incorporate in order to regulate the multiplicity of his interactions cannot be determined by sheer individual preferences, but should be discovered in a communal quest for, what Peirce sometimes calls, the *summum bonum*.

Peirce not only claims that we can govern and regulate our interactions with the world, but he also presupposes that one can make a distinction between good ways and bad ways to give ourselves a certain form. The fact that (self-)criticism is possible already implies for Peirce this distinction. He presupposes that we can make a distinction between good reasoning and bad reasoning, and between good conduct and bad conduct. In short, he presupposes that there is a norm or criterion that indicates what is a good life. This view forces him to reconsider the basis of his philosophy. But before exploring Peirce's view on the good life in more detail, I have to say something about his attitude towards ethics in general.

2. Ethics

Until about 1890 Peirce hardly ventures opinions on ethical issues. But after having discovered that logic requires a normative grounding, Peirce makes various attempts, scattered in a range of articles and unpublished notes, to define ethics and to show the (important) role it plays within his larger philosophical system. We should, however, take into account that this turning-point does not change Peirce's view on an important distinction that he makes and upholds throughout his work, namely that between practical morality and ethical theory.

According to Peirce, "topics of vital importance," the region of moral questions, dilemmas and crises that we encounter in our practical lives,

do not belong to science, *i.e.*, to the sphere of rational, deliberate thought. It is, Peirce says, of no use to inquire how to act morally in those kinds of situations, because everybody already knows what one should do: one should behave how one has been brought up to behave.¹³ Moreover, it even can be dangerous to entrust such decisions to our extremely fallible and indigent individual reason. Individual reason is, according to Peirce, highly overrated, and “The very fact that everybody so ridiculously overrates his own reasoning is sufficient to show how superficial this faculty is.”¹⁴ Peirce sometimes gives the following example to illustrate his position: although the reasons for condemning incest are open to doubt, the very thought of it elicits in almost everybody aversion and horror. In such matters we trust our feeling, or as Peirce often calls it, our instinct or sentiment. The sentiment that is expressed by moral rules, however, is not an *individual* feeling, but in a certain sense exactly the opposite; for Peirce a moral code is an “instinctive or sentimental induction summarizing the experience of all our race.”¹⁵ Sentimentalism, therefore, implies conservatism. That does not mean that this experience is *absolutely* infallible. But it does mean that it is practically infallible for the individual. We see that in this context Peirce does not give any weight whatsoever to individual beliefs.

Within the region of science Peirce holds a completely different position: he states that nothing stands more in the way of a comprehension of the universe and of the mind than morality’s “this is eternally right and that is eternally wrong.”¹⁶ Science is for Peirce essentially a genuine desire to learn, *i.e.*, to learn from our own mistakes and from mistakes that others make. It needs, therefore, all the time of the world, which also means that all scientific results are provisional. In science there is nothing that is immune to critique.¹⁷ In practical affairs, however, instant decisions have to be made. Postponing decisions and reflecting on different possibilities in practical matters is most of the time not only dangerous, but also impossible. Making instant decisions, however, is synonymous with “not-scientific.” Hence, practical ethics cannot be a branch of science.

This standpoint corresponds well with Peirce’s view that utility cannot be the criterion for evaluating scientific theory. His most important argument for this thesis is that utility necessarily narrows the perspective on the problem that is being studied.¹⁸ Making instant moral decisions requires narrowing your perspective to a great extent. Before about 1890 Peirce believes that ultimately ethics not only has to be practically applicable, but that it also derives its right to exist from this condition. That explains his unwillingness to include ethics within the domain of philosophy and science.

After having revised his view on ethics, Peirce situates the criterion for what is good ultimately not in individual reasoning but in social sentiment. Individual reasoning is much more susceptible to mistakes

than social instinct, because it is often influenced by various particular, contingent circumstances that narrow its scope. Social sentiment, on the other hand, is the result of a long process of interaction between and correction and modification of different perspectives.¹⁹

Peirce provides also another reason for attaching so much value to sentiment: there must be, according to him, a basic affinity between the human mind (in the broadest sense of the word) and the world, otherwise we would not be able to explain how it is possible that we can make right predictions. Peirce writes: “retroduction goes upon the hope that there is sufficient affinity between the reasoner’s mind and nature’s to render guessing not altogether hopeless, provided each guess is checked by comparison with observation.”²⁰ To underline the basic character of this natural instinct Peirce sometimes says that this instinct is not the result of critical thinking, for it is the condition for every form of knowledge.²¹ That is why Peirce can say: “It is the instincts, the sentiments, that make the substance of the soul. Cognition is only its surface, its locus of contact with what is external to it.”²² That Peirce speaks of “hope” emphasizes the fallibilistic character of every proposition, including the view that there must be a basic affinity between our thinking and the world.

Although Peirce grants instinct a more basic status, (social) instinct and (individual) reasoning should not be completely detached from each other, which is also implied in the quotations above. Instincts are not completely fixed but can be developed and cultivated further by observation, social interaction, and correction. These processes will in the long run not only influence the (further) development of instincts but will also establish the criteria for good reasoning. What Peirce warns us of is the danger of a too hasty repudiation of sentimental attitudes in favour of a deviant individual judgment, which might appear more rational in a particular situation. Because instincts are the result of beliefs that were incorporated after having proved themselves for ages, they deserve to be taken very seriously. Ethical theories (both utilitarian and deontological) that are too one-sidedly rational do not take into account sufficiently that the worth of rational judgments that are established on the basis of rational calculations always depends on what is conceived as and has persevered as admirable in a certain culture. This also explains, as we will see later on, why for Peirce the task of ethics is not to establish directly whether a decision is morally right or wrong but rather to investigate under what conditions an adequate (sentimental) disposition can be developed, which could increase the chance of making morally right decisions.

3. Ideals of Conduct

Reasonable conduct presupposes certain norms. These norms, however, are, as we saw above, not situated in individual reasoning but can only be discovered through a long process of social interaction. From Peirce’s

phenomenology we can learn that by virtue of true ideas we are able to predict how our environment will react to us. Because thinking is not an isolated, theoretical entity but fulfils a certain function in our interaction with the world, there is a direct relation between (correct) thinking and (reasonable) action. Peirce writes: "Thinking is a kind of action, and reasoning is a kind of deliberate action; and to call an argument illogical, or a proposition false, is a special kind of moral judgment."²³ By virtue of ideas we are able to interact with our environment in a certain way. Correct thinking is a form of dealing successfully with the resistances that we encounter in the world. Within this context, a proposition can in principle be understood as an expression of a belief and a belief can be understood as an intellectual habit. And because a habit is a willingness to act, a proposition can be understood as a formulation of a willingness to act. As a consequence, a proposition that does not express a willingness to act whatsoever is a meaningless proposition.²⁴ In addition, a willingness to act anticipates on a certain expectation, on a goal that wants to be realized. The meaning of a proposition refers, therefore, in the end to a goal to which someone is attracted.

The normative sciences, which are arranged under phenomenology in Peirce's classification of the sciences, teach us that we not only continuously develop hypotheses that can explain the resistances that we encounter but that we also persistently presuppose goals and ideals by virtue of which we evaluate those hypotheses. The awareness that to a certain extent we are always directed toward the discovery of ideals that could generate the best possible disposition is the beginning of *deliberately* reflecting on the question of which ideals could enable us to do the right thing in a certain situation.

Now we can understand the above quoted passage as well as the task of the different normative sciences more adequately. The normative sciences study the norms that should be respected in critical thinking and action. Logic studies and formulates the rules that should be followed in reasoning. Rules, however, must refer to a goal that justifies why those rules should be followed.²⁵ Ethics studies the goals upon which thinking and action should be directed. Richard Bernstein claims justly that Peirce gives here his "own version of the primacy of practical reason."²⁶

The intrinsic relation between thinking, action and purposiveness also explains why human action is always to a certain extent meaningful action. Human action is never purely physical, but has always also a mental, a symbolic component. Human action is always more or less directed at fulfilling certain goals or ideals. The end of man, therefore, cannot be action as such, because action always already presupposes a more or less conscious end. Peirce applies this argument most strongly in his passionate defense of his realist pragmatism, as opposed to what he calls nominalist pragmatism. By their claim that action is the end of man, nominalist pragmatists reduce human beings to their actual,

physical states, to their *Secondness*, thereby denying the reality of ideas. For Peirce the goal of persons is not action, but the quest for ideas and ideals that regulate and justify their conduct.

That we *seek* for the right ideals implies that we never can be entirely certain of what is good. Peirce's category of *Firstness* indicates that it is always possible that we come across new situations that seem unfathomable. This means that we are not able to formulate *a priori*, invariable norms and ideals, which can be applied to every possible situation. The normative sciences cannot establish what is right and wrong beforehand. Peirce writes: "The fundamental problem of ethics is not What is right, but, What am I prepared deliberately to accept as the statement of what I want to do, what am I to aim at, what am I after? To what is the force of my will to be directed?"²⁷ The task of ethics is to discover the general goals that can generate certain habits by virtue of their attractive power, habits that could increase the chance of making morally right decisions. Moreover, Peirce defines ethics as the theory of the *control* of conduct, and of action in general, so as to conform to an ideal.²⁸ In the rest of this section I will further elaborate the relation between habit formation, ideals and self-control, which are the essential notions of Peirce's ethics. In the next section Peirce's view on esthetics will be discussed.

As we have seen in the above discussion of the relation between reason and sentiment, we have, according to Peirce, a basic capacity to guess and predict. By virtue of this capacity we are able to develop (ever better) ideas with a predictive power, to anticipate our future conduct, and to possess a certain level of self-control. That is why, Peirce says, "A rational person . . . not merely has habits, but also can exert a measure of self-control over his future actions."²⁹ Self-control is, according to Peirce, a complex process, which roughly involves the following elements:

first, in comparing one's past deeds with standards, second, in rational deliberation concerning how one will act in the future, in itself a highly complicated operation, third, in the formation of a resolve, fourth, in the creation, on the basis of the resolve, of a strong determination or modification of habit.³⁰

We can learn from this passage that self-control is a process of self-criticism. Self-criticism means in this respect, first of all, that an actor reviews each of his (important) actions, comparing them with certain standards or ideals that he values highly and wishes to realize. Peirce writes: "His ideal is the kind of conduct which attracts him upon review."³¹ Next, the actor judges how she will act in the future and whether she wants her future conduct to be in accord with the ideal in which she thoroughly believes. Her decision to devote herself to the realization of that ideal will influence her disposition so as to modify

what she is naturally inclined to do and will in the long run result in the modification or formation of a (new) habit.

Peirce emphasizes that an ideal of conduct should not be confounded with a motive to action. Every action has a motive. An ideal, however, refers to *deliberate* conduct. Although a habit may modify future action, it is not a moving cause of action. A habit is a kind of mental formula that predicts how one will act and wish to act under certain conditions. The distinction that Peirce makes between a motive of action and an ideal of conduct corresponds to the Aristotelian distinction between efficient cause and final cause. The great importance that he attaches to the development of a reasonable disposition brings Peirce even closer to Aristotle's virtue ethics.

There is a kind of reciprocal reinforcement between ideals and the formation of habits: the more we devote ourselves to a certain ideal, the more we will be able to form and cultivate certain habits; and the more we form and cultivate a certain habit, the more we will be sensitive to the attractive power of the ideal that we wish to incorporate. In reality the incorporation of ideals is identical to the formation of habits; we can only disconnect the two processes from each other *in abstracto*.

This account of the process of self-control requires another addendum. Because reasoning can be understood as a certain form of interacting with the world, 'self'-criticism cannot be a sheer individual process.³² Peirce's notion of *Secondness* and his claim that thinking is a form of internal dialogue presuppose a community with certain norms and ideals. Reasoning is, as we saw earlier, an attempt to persuade a critical self, "that other self that is just coming into life in the flow of time."³³ Because that critical self is principally situated in the future, the community of critical minds cannot be an existing, finite community, but must be a community "without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge."³⁴

To sum up: 1) the ideals that we anticipate through critical reasoning can only be discovered by virtue of a real and virtual interaction with our social and natural world; 2) these ideals can never be completely realized but remain in principle always subject to criticism; 3) real criticism, however, must again presuppose certain ideals that cannot be completely dependent on subjective preferences, since those ideals must prove themselves in their interaction with our social and natural environment. We see here that radical fallibilism does not have to lead to 'anything goes' relativism.

And Peirce makes another decisive step: not only does critical conduct necessarily presuppose certain ideals but those ideals must presuppose in the end an ultimate ideal, which Peirce calls that which is "admirable without any reason for being admirable beyond its inherent character."³⁵ Ethics, Peirce says, shows how deliberate conduct is governed by certain goals and ideals and how these ideals modify our conduct. It, however,

cannot tell us what is the state of things that is most admirable as such. Ethics is, according to Peirce, dependent on another discipline, which he calls “esthetics”. That is the topic of our next section.

4. *Concrete Reasonableness*

Peirce acknowledges that we can devote ourselves to various ideals but also states that those ideals must eventually point in the same direction. He even claims that “Life can have but one end.”³⁶ There must be an ultimate ideal that functions as the reference point of all thinking and action, of all forms of life. But what is that ultimate ideal, what is the admirable *per se*? Peirce’s answer is: reason. In order to better understand this very traditional sounding claim, we must understand Peirce’s conception of reason and its relationship to evolution.

Contrary to the view of many modern philosophers, Peirce does not consider reason (which is equivalent to *Thirdness*) to be a personal or subjective, or even a specific human faculty. Although human beings to some extent embody reason as something manifesting itself in the mind, reason is for Peirce at the heart of nature or evolution itself. He writes:

The creation of the universe, which did not take place during a certain busy week, in the year 4004 B.C., but is going on today and never will be done, is this very development of Reason. I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood.³⁷

From this evolutionary point of view, Peirce states that the only entity that in its essence always is directed at endlessly improving its results is reason itself, although it can never reach complete perfection. Peirce compares reason with human character:

It is like the character of a man which consists in the ideas that he will conceive and in the efforts that he will make, and which only develops as the occasions actually arise. Yet in all his life long no son of Adam has ever fully manifested what there was in him. So, then, the development of Reason requires as a part of it the occurrence of more individual events than ever can occur.³⁸

Because human reason and conduct are part of a broader process, the development of an ever better disposition contributes to the ultimate ideal of making the world more reasonable. In Peirce’s words: “Under this conception, the ideal of conduct will be to execute our little function in the operation of the creation by giving a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is ‘up to us’ to do so.”³⁹ In order to understand Peirce’s view on the ultimate ideal within this context, we have to take his conception of thinking as a form of action seriously.

The experience of an object coincides, as we saw in the above discussion of Peirce's phenomenological categories, with the interactions (*Secondness*) that it prompts. An object, however, can only be given a certain meaning by virtue of linking its individual parts to one another in a certain respect (*Thirdness*). But clearly, this function of *Thirdness* coincides with the function of ends: any orientation towards an end relates different parts to each other, thus generating a unity, which is a necessary condition for the occurrence of meaning. Because it is always possible that we are confronted with new, unpredictable events (*Firstness*), which destabilize our conception of a certain object, the quest for the perfect orientation will never come to an end.

That quest for the perfect orientation consists concretely in the development of ever better habits. There is, as we saw earlier, a reciprocal relation between the pursuit and embodiment of ideals, on the one hand, and the formation of habits, on the other hand. We give our world meaning by virtue of the orientation towards certain goals. Those goals, however, can only generate meaning inasmuch as they are and can be embodied in our concrete conduct. Embodied goals—habits—can, then, stimulate the further pursuit of ever more adequate ideas and, consequently, the development of reason. Put yet slightly differently: the goals and ideals that we pursue, which govern, regulate and give meaning to our lives, do not have an external status outside our interactions with the world, but they are developed and realized within our interactions, though they can never be completely exhausted in particular incorporations, and therefore transcend every particular realization.

This complex conception may be clarified by the following example: the goal of this paper is to explain Peirce's concept of the good life. When I started writing this text, I had a vague idea of what I was after, that is: of the goal of my inquiry. Nevertheless, this goal was and still is the governing principle of my efforts with regard to this paper. So far, I have studied various aspects of Peirce's writings, making various distinctions, and establishing relationships between various aspects of his thought. In doing this, I am always in the process of trying to persuade my virtual, future and more critical self that my arguments are valid.

Although I have not reached the end of this paper yet, the goal I am pursuing has become clearer little by little. This goal, this idea that I am pursuing, is not something external, but it develops as various aspects of Peirce's thought are being related to one another *within* the very text I am in the process of writing. Although I think I may have succeeded in rendering Peirce's notion of the good life a little more reasonable, the end of this text has not been reached. I believe that in the remaining time that I have, I can develop this idea further, and make it even more reasonable. But even after the remaining pages of the text will have been written, I know that the idea pursued will not be exhausted. Undoubtedly, the reader will confront me with issues that have not sufficiently

been clarified or still remain in the dark. It is in this sense that the goal that I am pursuing is inexhaustible, and, therefore, transcendent(al).

This example also illustrates the social character of reasoning. The “future, critical self” that one is trying to persuade is, as we saw earlier, not another individual person, but a personified community, *i.e.*, a virtual interlocutor who can question my ideas continuously from different points of view. By the same token, this also means that rendering the world more reasonable is not an individual, but *always* a social enterprise, because the social is always already present in the individual.⁴⁰ Reason is essentially something general.⁴¹ Consequently, the quest for the right ideas, goals or habits that are to be embodied in our concrete lives cannot be something individual either, for it too is a social, and, as we will see further on, even a cosmological venture.

Although the relation between ideals, habit formation and concrete reasonableness is now a little clearer, the difference between various ideals and the ultimate ideal seems to be diluted. In order to understand this distinction better, we have to reflect on Peirce’s notion of self-control again. For Peirce makes a distinction between different levels of self-control:

When a man trains himself, thus controlling control, he must have some moral rule in view, however special and irrational it may be. But next he may undertake to improve this rule; that is, to exercise a control over his control of control. To do this he must have in view something higher than an irrational rule. He must have some sort of moral principle. This, in turn, may be controlled by reference to an esthetic ideal of what is fine.⁴²

The habits that we have embodied are subject to criticism but that criticism can, as we saw earlier, only be authentic if it presupposes certain ideals that are pursued. Those ideals are also subject to criticism but again that is only possible in the light of yet a higher ideal that we want to realize; and so on. Ultimately we have to appeal to an ideal that is in itself admirable, an ideal that justifies all other particular ideals and relates them to one another in a harmonious way. This explains the esthetical character of the ultimate ideal. Peirce writes:

I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality; and whatever does this is, in so far, esthetically good, no matter what the particular quality of the total may be.⁴³

Only if our emotional life is cultivated in a certain way, will we be sensitive to the attractive power of good ideals. We find here again the reciprocal reinforcement between the orientation towards an ideal, on

the one hand, and habit formation, on the other hand, but now on the level of *feelings*. Peirce emphasizes in this context the importance of the development of a “habit of feeling”: “the ideal must be a habit of feeling which has grown up under the influence of a course of self-criticisms and of heterocriticisms; and the theory of the deliberate formation of such habits of feeling is what ought to be meant by esthetics.”⁴⁴ It is by virtue of the development of “habits of feeling” that we are able to become ever better ‘in tune’ with the world, prompting it to give up its secrets and to acquire ever more meaning. This way we “execute our little function in the operation of the creation,” which coincides with the “very development of Reason.”

Human experience can contribute to the very development of the universe. That is why Peirce can say: “it is by the indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control that the *vir* is begotten, and by action, through thought, [a person] grows an esthetic ideal, not for the behoof of his own poor noddle merely, but as the share which God permits him to have in the work of creation.”⁴⁵ We see here a confirmation of Peirce’s deep conviction that there must be an affinity between the human intellect and the world, which is a necessary condition for the possibility of acquiring knowledge in the broadest meaning of the word. This basic affinity is important not only at the relative beginning of the quest for knowledge but it is the leading principle of our experience of the world. The development of adequate habits would not be possible if this basic affinity did not exist. The formation respectively of “habits of thought” and “habits of action” leads to the further development of this basic feeling or instinct, that is to the development of “habits of feeling”, which prompt further developments; and so *ad infinitum*.⁴⁶ In the next sections I will elaborate this notion of “evolutionary feeling” further and show in what sense it represents a non-subjective moral disposition.

5. *Evolutionary Love*

The development of a sense for the ethical-esthetical ideal entails the formation of a practical and emotional disposition that enables the orientation towards goals that can relate meaningless, useless, and inefficient aspects of the world to one another in such a way that they become meaningful, useful and efficient. This view requires, however, a further refinement; the regulation of the multitude of parts by a simple quality, form or idea must not be achieved at the expense of the multitude. Peirce warns that self-control and self-regulation should not be excessive. In one of his manuscripts, he writes: “See that self-government is exercised; but be careful not to do violence to any part of the anatomy.”⁴⁷

This addition may seem contradictory but it is not necessarily so: regulation does not necessarily exclude dynamism and multiplicity. On the contrary, although excessive regulation can go at the expense of

variability and multiplicity, diversity can only be preserved and intensified *by* submitting it to a form or idea. The development of concrete reasonableness involves the differentiation of the undifferentiated, the evolution toward what Peirce sometimes calls “‘organized heterogeneity’, or . . . ‘rationalized variety.’”⁴⁸ Our moral task is to contribute to this evolution.

Peirce understands this cosmic evolution as an expression of the principle of “evolutionary love” or “creative love,” which signifies the principle of relating things to one another without destroying their independence. In doing so, he refers to the belief that “God is love” as set out in the gospel of St. John, whom Peirce calls the “ontological evangelist.”⁴⁹ In his article entitled *Evolutionary Love* Peirce writes:

The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse *projecting creations into independency* and *drawing them into harmony*. This seems complicated when stated so; but it is fully summed up in the simple formula we call the Golden Rule. . . . It is not by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them *as I would the flowers in my garden*. . . . Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely. [emphasis added]⁵⁰

On the one hand, we must pursue and embrace as much multiplicity as possible; but on the other hand, we have to relate the different parts to one another so as to establish a harmonious unity. For Peirce, this is what genuine love does. Harmonious unity, however, cannot be generated by exercising brute force (*Secondness*), but only by conjuring, by evoking, arousing, infecting (*Thirdness*). That is why Peirce sometimes says that, though ideals do not have force, they do indeed have power. They stimulate the thing evoked to realize its potential to its maximum. Peirce somewhere compares this passive reinforcement with the way in which the sun prods a flower to realize its potential.⁵¹ Hard facts, brute interactions are transfigured into meaningful life by imparting to them a form by virtue of a certain ideal.

Consequently, synthesizing a multitude without destroying it is only possible by virtue of the orientation towards the incorporation of goals and ideals that favour the inclusion of as many parts of the (social) organism as possible. The realization of a good life consists in the continuous incorporation of and devotion to ever more inclusive ideals. For, even though ideals may sometimes do harm to certain aspects of life or even exclude other important ideals, as Peirce has acknowledged, it is our moral task to pursue the ultimate ideal, which can be defined in the words of Vincent Potter as the ideal that “can be consistently pursued in any and all circumstances.”⁵² The failure to pursue an ultimate ideal amounts to settling for ideals that do

violence to certain aspects of life and fail to prompt their development. Peirce writes in this line: “The only moral evil is not to have an ultimate aim.”⁵³

Although Potter’s definition of the ultimate ideal can be found in Peirce’s texts,⁵⁴ it requires an accurate interpretation. The account that is given above suggests that the ultimate ideal is a hypothesis, *among* other possible hypotheses, which, after being criticized and modified extensively, has persevered and is capable of elucidating sufficient aspects of a certain situation in order to enable an adequate decision. This view, however, can be misleading. We should take into account that the ultimate ideal does not immediately refer to particular situations but affects the constitution of self-control as such. The ultimate ideal appeals to a maximally developed disposition, which enables us to *feel* towards which ideals we have to orient ourselves and which particular habits we have to develop in order to discover ever better ideals. Consequently, this ultimate ideal shapes the course of our life. That is why Peirce can say: “the good is the attractive,—not to everybody, but to the sufficiently matured agent; and the evil is the repulsive to the same.”⁵⁵

Although the ultimate ideal is the final ground of moral judgment, it does not represent an *a priori* principle that is beyond every form of critique but it has, as it were, a *post*-critical status: it refers to a phase that could be reached after an endless process of “self-criticisms and of heterocriticisms.” That the ultimate ideal can be “consistently pursued in any and all circumstances” means that it does not encounter any resistance within an endless community of critical minds. It means that it has generated a perfect emotional disposition that enables us to be perfectly in harmony with our surroundings. While the achievement of such an ultimate phase is based on ‘nothing more’ than hope, it is a presupposition of crucial importance: on the one hand, real criticism is only possible in the light of such an ultimate ideal and, on the other hand, that ultimate ideal prevents absolutist claims that bring further criticism and improvement to a halt. The ultimate ideal can be conceived as a regulative principle.⁵⁶

6. *The Individual and the Cosmos*

It is now clear that Peirce’s ethics does not involve the development of a subjective, personal feeling but rather of an orientation about which in the long run everybody would agree. This explains Peirce’s often almost hostile attitude towards individualism. In a manuscript written in 1906 he writes:

Now you and I—what are we? Mere cells of the social organism. Our deepest sentiment pronounces the verdict of our own insignificance. Psychological analysis shows that there is nothing which distinguishes

my personal identity except my faults and my limitations—or if you please, my blind will, which it is my highest endeavour to annihilate.⁵⁷

If one reads this passage accurately, one discovers that Peirce's aim is not the destruction of the individual but rather the situation of the individual (the cell of the organism) within a broader whole (the social organism). According to Peirce, we should not concern ourselves too much with questions about what we as individual moral actors should do or should not do. We should rather consider our thinking and acting as part of a broader development with a common history and common future. What is important is not what I think but what eventually should be thought. From that perspective, the very first command is that we ought to acknowledge that there is a higher business than our own. For Peirce, this higher, common business is not something to be performed after one is finished with all one's individual tasks. For one's personal duty is part of a more general duty. Only such generalization of "duty" can complete one's personality by "melting it into the neighboring parts of the universal cosmos."⁵⁸

So conceived, generalization is inherent to the pursuit of common ideals. Only by embodying ideals that in the long run everybody would agree on, can we make the world more reasonable. As Peirce sees it, true reasoning, far from being synonymous to cold, logical thinking, amounts to being welded into the universal continuum. To generalize is to embody common ideals in the deepest emotional layers of our life.⁵⁹

There is some similarity between Peirce's notion of generalizing and Kant's categorical imperative inasmuch as both notions involve the idea of overcoming an individual-subjective standpoint.⁶⁰ But there are also great differences between the two philosophers. For Kant, the categorical imperative appeals to and coincides with the rational part of the human being, which is completely detached from its empirical nature. In addition, the *a priori* status of Kant's categorical imperative is completely autonomous and therefore completely beyond our control. For Peirce, however, the ultimate aim that ought to govern our conduct does not coincide with our actual rational nature, but it is something to be attained in the *future* by an unlimited community.⁶¹ For him the necessary condition for moral conduct is not *knowledge* of what our duty is, but the adoption of a self-reflexive and self-controlled *attitude*. By the "indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control"⁶² we can make our very *empirical* world more reasonable.⁶³ The basis of Peirce's ethics cannot lie in knowing what the good is, for the function of ethics consists precisely in the search for what the good *could* be, a search which is possible by virtue of self-control. We can never know with certainty that the goal we pursue will ultimately turn out to be a good goal. The only requirement is that the goal we pursue *can* be continuously pursued as an ultimate aim.

Here again, Peirce's ethical perspective both resembles and differs from that of Kant. Peirce agrees with Kant that we can never be completely certain that our conduct is good. But he has a completely different reason for this claim. Kant connects this claim to the fact that it is always possible that our conduct is not exclusively motivated by the categorical imperative, but may very well be the result of our natural, i.e. empirical, inclination. For Peirce the reason for never being completely certain that our conduct is good is not due to an alleged discrepancy between reason and nature, but to the fact that the good is not something that is already present; the good for Peirce is, as we have seen, something that is the object of a common quest and has to be developed through a process of embodiment. Moreover, although there are certain similarities between Kant's Kingdom of Ends and Peirce's ethical ideals, their divergent notions of rationality create an unbridgeable gap between them. All this suggests that a monograph on the relation between Kant's and Peirce's ethics is much needed.

Peirce's concept of generalizing and its implications for his view on the individual and individuality may go against our modern taste. But one must take into account that from Peirce's point of view we are not born as unique, independent, and self-sufficient individuals in some kind of liberalist meaning of the word. We are what we are by virtue of our interactions. And we can only become persons through a process of giving a general form to our interactions. In other words, we can become persons only by virtue of the formation of social habits, that is by virtue of the belief in and embodiment of common ideals, which are no less real than concrete, physical events.

Having said this, I don't want to circumvent Peirce's anti-individualism. Even though Peirce emphasizes that the process of generalization or habit formation, the incorporation of ideals, can only be realized in the concrete conduct of individual entities, his concept of concrete reasonableness implies that the particular lives of people are in a certain sense "mere" means in the completion of a cosmic, evolutionary development. Peirce can be considered an anti- or post-humanist philosopher in the sense that he does not take the human being to be the final product of evolution. Indeed, what differentiates a human being from lower animals is his ability to contribute to something higher, to something more developed. For Peirce, becoming a self is possible only if we seek beyond our actual, individual lives and become part of a cosmic process that transcends us: only by overcoming our disconnected and fragmented, human individuality, can we become genuine persons. Perhaps this view makes Peirce a humanist in a different and even a better sense.

University of Twente
o.aydin@utwente.nl

NOTES

1. *The Essential Peirce*, N. Hauser & Ch. Kloesel; The Peirce Edition Project (eds.), Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992, 1998, II, p. 147 (henceforth EP followed by “[volume], p. [page]”).

2. See for an extensive discussion of Peirce’s three categories C. Aydin, “Naar een proces-pragmatische grondslag voor het identiteitsbegrip: Peirce over potentialiteit, interactie en regulariteit,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 69(1)/2007, p. 35–78; see also C. Aydin, “Beyond Essentialism and Relativism: Nietzsche and Peirce on Reality,” *Cognitio* 7(1)/2006, p. 25–47.

3. See *Collected Papers of C.S. Peirce*, Ch. Hartshorne & P. Weiss; A. Burks (eds.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–1935, 1958, 6.203 (henceforth CP followed by the conventional “[volume].[page]”-notation).

4. CP 8.328; cf. EP II, p. 160.

5. CP 1.358; cf. 1.24, 4.3, 1.358, 1.24, and 1.323.

6. CP 1.27.

7. See CP 5.97, 5.98, 5.100, and 5.101.

8. Patricia A. Muoio is one of the few authors who has elaborated Peirce’s notion of the self on the basis of his categories (“Peirce on the Person,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 20(2)/1984, p. 169–181). Although I agree with Muoio that this approach is very fruitful and can correct views that accuse Peirce of having an inadequate notion of the individual (see for example R. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 198), I believe that a more detailed study of the relation between especially self, habits, self-control, and goals is needed. For an excellent discussion of the Peircean self within the context of semiotics I refer to Vincent Colapietro *Peirce’s Approach of the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1989. See also F. Andacht and M. Michel, “A Semiotic Reflection on Self-interpretation and Identity,” *Theory and Psychology*, 15(1)/2005, p. 51–75.

9. CP 5.66.

10. See Plato. *Theaetetus*, 189e–190a en *Sophist*, 263e.

11. There are intriguing relations between Peirce’s view on the self and the notion of the so-called “dialogical self” that has received growing interest in the last decades, especially from scholars who work on the border of social psychology, sociology, and philosophy. See for an illuminating overview Norbert Wiley, “Pragmatism and the Dialogical Self,” *International Journal for Dialogical Science*, 1/2006, p. 5–21.

12. CP 5.421.

13. See CP 1.666.

14. EP II, p. 31.

15. EP II, p. 32.

16. CP 2.198.

17. See CP 1.661–667.

18. See C.S. Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, K.L. Ketner (ed.), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1998, p. 110; CP 1.50–62. See also Nicola Erny, *Konkrete Vernünftigkeit. Zur Konzeption einer pragmatischen Ethik bei Charles S. Peirce*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005, p. 91–109.

19. See for an excellent discussion of Peirce's view on the social character of science C. de Waal, "Science Beyond the Self: Remarks on Charles S. Peirce's Social Epistemology," *Cognitio* 7(1)/2006, p. 149–163.

20. CP 1.21; cf. CP 6.417 and 6.477.

21. See CP 5.173 and Manuscript 692 (Peirce Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University; categorized according R.S. Robins *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*; henceforth MS followed by manuscript number).

22. CP 1.628.

23. CP 8.191.

24. Cf. G. Debrock, "Peirce, a Philosopher for the 21st Century. Introduction," *Transactions of the Ch. S. Peirce Society*, 28/1992, p. 11f.

25. See CP 2.198; cf. Vincent G. POTTER, *Charles S. Peirce. On Norms and Ideals*, 1997, p. 34.

26. R. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, London: Duckworth 1972, p. 193.

27. CP 2.198.

28. See EP II, p. 377.

29. CP 5.418; cf. Ch. Hookway, *Truth, Rationality, and Self-Control: Themes from Peirce*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, p. 14.

30. CP 8.320.

31. EP II, p. 377.

32. See also R. Bernstein, 'Action, Conduct, and Self-Control,' in R. Bernstein (ed.), *Perspectives on Peirce*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1965/1980, p. 82; R. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, p. 190.

33. CP 5.421.

34. CP 5.311.

35. CP 1.612; cf. 1.191.

36. CP 2.198.

37. CP 1.615.

38. CP 1.615.

39. CP 1.615.

40. In his critique of Cartesianism, Peirce stresses that one of the most difficult things is getting rid of the modern view that thinking is an individual activity. We must, in Peirce's words, "say that we are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us." (*Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce* II, Peirce Edition Project (ed.), Bloomington 1982–2000, p. 227 n. 4).

41. I do not presuppose here that for Peirce "general" is synonymous for "social", but only that there is an intrinsic relation between valid generalization and what a community of investigators would decide on in the long run.

42. CP 5.533.

43. EP II, p. 201.

44. CP 1.573f.

45. CP 5.402n3.

46. See CP 1.648.

47. M 675, 15–16; cf. V. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, p. 111f.

48. CP 6.101; cf. 6.191.

49. CP 6.287.

50. CP 6.288f.

51. See CP 2.274 and 5.520.

52. Vincent G. Potter, *Charles S. Peirce. On Norms and Ideals*, 1997, p. 49.
53. CP 5.133.
54. See for example CP 5.134.
55. CP 5.552.
56. CP 1.405, 1.173, 1.121, 6.610 and 4.61 confirm this account.
57. CP 1.673.
58. CP 1.673; cf. CP 1.631 and 1.639.
59. See CP 1.673.
60. Cf. Vincent Colapietro, "Toward a Pragmatic Conception of Practical Identity," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 42(2)/2006, p. 182.
61. See also Nicola Erny, *Konkrete Vernünftigkeit*, p. 134.
62. CP 5.402 n. 3.
63. See for a convincing interpretation of the "flesh and blood" embodiment of habits with respect to the formation of our practical, historical identity, elaborated within a critique of Kant's purely formal identification of the self with an utterly abstract law, Vincent Colapietro's "Toward a Pragmatic Conception of Practical Identity," p. 173–205.