



Introduction

Charles Sanders Peirce is not well known for his practical philosophy. Scholars widely appreciate his groundbreaking work in mathematics, logic, and semiotics, abstruse though it sometimes is. But of the pragmatists, William James is typically regarded as the one who has the most to tell us about the conduct of our lives. Peirce's air is too rarified.

The aim of this book is to correct this misapprehension. Not only did Peirce have a practical philosophy – an account of how we should conduct our lives – it is remarkably different from William James's. In fact, Peirce develops his own views in response to positions that James espouses in *The Will to Believe*. Peirce's theories are both plausible and relevant to contemporary debates in ethics, the philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of action.

Peirce believes that philosophy, including ethics and the philosophy of religion, should be strictly scientific. As such, its inquiries must be conducted rigorously and its present conclusions regarded as provisional. Yet if our best ethical and religious theories are provisional and investigation into them is ongoing, how ought we to conduct our lives in the meantime? In the opinion of William James, we ought not to let our ethical and religious theories "lie hid each under its bushel" but should allow them to directly inform our conduct. By allowing our theories to vie for champions in the public sphere, James believes that we will be able to discern which theory is true. The true theory will be the one that survives by gaining champions.

James first articulates this position in *The Will to Believe*, which he dedicates to his old and good friend Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce, however, finds James's view appalling. In his lecture "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life," Peirce takes a staunch stance, arguing that given the "infantile condition" of philosophy as compared with other sciences such as physics and chemistry, we ought not to conduct our lives according to our philosophical theories but on the basis of our sentiments and instincts. On his view, we *should* allow our theories to lie hid under their bushels.

Peirce's position is remarkably different from what might be assumed. Suppose, for instance, that a man's mother suffers from a debilitating disease, that one can extend her life through medical intervention, but that extending her life will utilize resources that can be utilized in ways that will bring about more happiness and less misery in the world than if they are utilized for her. Now suppose, moreover, that that man endorses act utilitarianism. If James is correct, it follows that the man ought not to extend his mother's life. If Peirce is correct, it follows that the man's philosophical commitments ought not to bear much on his deliberations. He would not be blameworthy for failing to conform his conduct to his philosophical commitments.

That is a thinly veiled example, but it highlights the central difference between the views of James and Peirce. Yet it might also sound like a strange position for a philosopher – the founder of pragmatism, no less – to adopt. In fact, no other piece in Peirce's corpus has produced such divergent opinions among Peirce scholars as "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" has. On one side, Cheryl Misak has claimed that because Peirce's comments in the lecture are doubtful and because Peirce was ashamed at having to rely on the goodness of William James, "these remarks simply cannot be taken seriously" (2004, 164). Similarly, Christopher Hookway has maintained that some of Peirce's comments in the lecture are out of line with the rest of his writings and are rather a "temporary lapse from philosophical good sense" (2000, 23).

In stark contrast to the assessments of Misak and Hookway, Mark Migotti has asserted that Peirce's lecture is "as carefully crafted and searching a piece of philosophy as any in his corpus. So far from being anomalous, the lecture seems to me to provide strong evidence for the claim that Peirce's *oeuvre* bears throughout the stamp of 'a completely determinate philosophical sensibility'" (2004, 302). Migotti (2005) has shown in particular that one of Peirce's more doubtful claims in the lecture – that belief has no place in science – is much more palatable if we read it in the context of other claims that Peirce makes.

In my judgment, Migotti is correct that Peirce's lecture is as carefully crafted and as searching as any of Peirce's other works. Yet much more must be done to show that the ideas Peirce develops in "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" continue to inform his later work. Whereas other scholars have focused on Peirce's epistemological commitments in that lecture, this book examines what Peirce has to tell us about the conduct

of our lives and connects what Peirce says there to his later philosophical work.

The book is divided into six chapters. In Chapter 1, I argue that “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life” has vexed Peirce scholars because Peirce intentionally wrote the lecture to be paradoxical. He did so because it is an oblique criticism of positions James espouses in *The Will to Believe*. Since James had arranged the lectures for Peirce and was the only person with clout trying to help him, Peirce felt the need to express his criticisms obliquely. Yet he also felt compelled to express the criticisms at all because James had dedicated *The Will to Believe* to him, and so Peirce wanted to distance his own philosophical theories from those of James.

Chapter 2 explores Peirce’s claim that instead of trusting to reason and philosophical theories in the conduct of life, we should trust to our sentiments and instincts. In his 1898 lecture “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life” and the drafts for it, Peirce calls this position sentimental conservatism. Yet on the face of it, trusting to our conservative sentiments sounds like a recipe for social stagnation, continued prejudice, and oppression. Peirce, for instance, appears to trust to his conservative sentiments when he objects to female and universal male suffrage. Daniel Campos (2014) shows that Peirce was prejudiced against Hispanics and other ethnic groups and argues that his prejudices are inconsistent with his own philosophical views. Had Peirce allowed his philosophy to inform his conduct, he might have been on the better side of history. Cornelis de Waal (2012) has argued against Peirce’s sentimental conservatism on the grounds that our sentiments should sometimes be rejected on the basis of reasoning and that sometimes our sentiments compete, other times we have no sentiments, and yet other times our sentiments are too coarse grained. Even Peirce’s friend Lady Welby objects to Peirce’s view on the grounds that it will preserve that which “once promoted growth and development and now stunts, backens, withers it” (SS 21). I examine Peirce’s arguments for sentimental conservatism and show that in his later work Peirce shifts toward a greater emphasis on instinct and instinct-based sentiments and away from sentiments inculcated by tradition. As a consequence, Peirce’s more mature conception of sentimental conservatism can accommodate these worries.

The drafts for “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life” are rife with religious themes. One of those themes, consonant with his view that

philosophy should affect the conduct of life with “secular slowness,” is that if we should hear the call of our Savior, we ought not to waste time “adjusting a philosophy difficulty” but should respond without hesitation and with full commitment. This, however, seems inconsistent with what Peirce states in a letter to William James, namely, that we ought with haste and vigor to collect evidence about the trustworthiness of a man with whom we go into business. Ought we not similarly to collect evidence about the trustworthiness of a putative call from our Savior? In Chapter 3, I argue that Peirce’s essay from 1908, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” addresses this problem. I contend that the essay is best read not as an argument for the reality of God but as an argument for the rational acceptability of a living belief in God. That is, it is rationally acceptable for some people to allow their conduct to be informed – even transformed – by putative calls from their Savior.

At one point in the drafts for “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life,” Peirce claims that the “supremest commandment” of sentiment is that we should generalize and become welded into a universal continuum and that in doing so we prepare ourselves for “a joyful Nirvana.” These claims, though, are obscure and in need of elucidation. I draw on Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* to elucidate Peirce’s views on the aim of theoretical inquiry. I then extend this idea to Peirce’s theory of sentiment and religion. God, on Peirce’s view, is loving the world into greater and greater loveliness. That God is doing this is not a properly scientific or philosophical doctrine but a faith commitment. Moreover, the task of welding us into the universal continuum is not accomplished primarily through the development of human reason and the discovery of new theories but through the evolutionary development of our sentiments and instincts.

Chapter 5 explores Peirce’s account of self-controlled action and his responses to various challenges to moral responsibility. The mechanical hypothesis, God’s foreknowledge, and psychological hedonism all pose challenges to moral responsibility. In his letters to James about *The Will to Believe* and in his drafts for “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life,” we see Peirce touching on each of these issues. He rejects the mechanical hypothesis: It was a provisional belief taken up into the cart of science but should now be kicked off. He contends that by placing God outside of time, we can preserve God’s foreknowledge and human freedom. Most importantly, in 1903, he develops a unique critique of psychological

hedonism based on a detailed descriptive analysis of self-controlled action. That analysis also shows how Peirce's account of self-controlled action can preserve moral responsibility.

Chapter 6, the final chapter, extends Peirce's ideas to contemporary debates in practical ethics. I argue that Peirce would reject highly theoretical approaches to practical ethics. The task of practical ethicists should not be to take an antecedent ethical theory – such as deontological or utilitarian ethics – and show how the theory is relevant to some contemporary, particular problem. Rather, Peirce himself endorses casuistic approaches to ethics. I argue that on the Peircean view, the casuistry of Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin and the principlism of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress are complementary with respect to both methodology and moral justification. Moreover, Peirce's views on sentiment and instinct can place each on firmer footing.

Before closing this introduction, I should make one last comment. I believe that we have much to learn from Peirce about the conduct of life from a philosophical perspective. I do not believe, though, that we have much to learn from him by emulation. Peirce was a notorious crank and, as James puts it at one point, a most “peppery personage.” He had difficulty controlling his temper. He had fallings out with friends over lies and unkept promises. His financial decisions were, to put it mildly, unwise. This book, though, is not about Peirce's own life. It is about his views on the conduct of life. It is a book about his practical philosophy, which is to be distinguished from his science of ethics as well as theoretical political philosophy. The latter two are to be rigorous sciences proceeding on the basis of arguments and evidence. The former is what he advises us to do while we wait for those sciences to conclude their businesses, conclusions he believes are far off in the future.