

Pre-print of Toby Svoboda, “The Role of Reasoning in Pragmatic Morality,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 18:1 (2021): 1-17

The Role of Reasoning in Pragmatic Morality
Toby Svoboda

Abstract: Charles Sanders Peirce offers a number of arguments against the rational application of theory to morality, suggesting instead that morality should be grounded in instinct. Peirce maintains that we currently lack the scientific knowledge that would justify a rational structuring of morality. This being the case, philosophically generated moralities cannot be otherwise than dogmatic and dangerous. In this paper, I contend that Peirce’s critique of what I call “dogmatic-philosophical morality” should be taken very seriously, but I also claim that the purely instinctive morality Peirce endorses is liable to a danger of its own, namely fanaticism. Indeed, Peirce himself recognizes this danger. As an alternative, I sketch a form of “pragmatic morality” that attempts to sidestep the dogmatism of philosophical morality and the fanaticism of instinctive morality. This form of morality avoids philosophical dogmatism by treating extant instincts as the postulates and materials with which it works. It avoids instinctive fanaticism by allowing a role to reason. By exhibiting fallibilism, revisability, pluralism, and meliorism, this type of reasoning can avoid the dogmatism of the philosophical kind of morality Peirce critiques.

Charles Sanders Peirce offers a number of arguments against the rational application of theory to morality, suggesting instead that morality should be grounded in instinct. Peirce maintains that we currently lack the scientific knowledge that would justify a rational structuring of morality. This being the case, philosophically generated moralities cannot be otherwise than dogmatic and dangerous. In this paper, I contend that Peirce’s critique of what I call

“dogmatic-philosophical morality” should be taken very seriously, but I also claim that the purely instinctive morality Peirce endorses is liable to a danger of its own, namely fanaticism. Indeed, Peirce himself recognizes this danger. As an alternative, I sketch a form of “pragmatic morality” that attempts to sidestep the dogmatism of philosophical morality and the fanaticism of instinctive morality. This form of morality avoids philosophical dogmatism by treating extant instincts as the postulates and materials with which it works. It avoids instinctive fanaticism by allowing a role to reason. By exhibiting fallibilism, revisability, pluralism, and meliorism, this type of reasoning can avoid the dogmatism of the philosophical kind of morality Peirce critiques.

To be clear, the terms “philosophical dogmatism” and “instinctive fanaticism” are my own. Although Peirce does not use these terms, they nonetheless capture certain problems that he identifies with different approaches to ethics. Importantly, the point at issue here is not one of metaethics. For instance, although it is tempting to do so, philosophical dogmatism need not be associated with moral cognitivism, or the view that moral judgments are beliefs. As Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard have shown, non-cognitivists can utilize reasoning in their moral judgments.¹ This opens the possibility that one might be dogmatic in one’s normative commitments even if those commitment are best described as desires-like attitudes rather than beliefs. Instead, the point at issue is the *manner* in which we are to conduct ourselves. This is a practical question, not a metaethical one. My claim in this paper is that pragmatic morality avoids the problems of both dogmatism and fanaticism, offering a better way of conducting oneself in life.

Peirce distinguishes sharply between practices and morality. Practices is the theoretical science that studies the “conformity of action to an ideal,” whereas morality deals with “virtuous

¹ See Simon Blackburn, “Attitudes and Contents,” in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182-197; Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

conduct, right-living” and cannot “claim a place among the heuretic sciences” (1.573).² As Juan Pablo Serra points out, “This ideal is neither a socially inculcated one nor a historically or traditionally fixed one.”³ Rather, practics is the normative science that corresponds to action, whereas aesthetics and logic respectively correspond to feeling and thought.⁴ There are many questions about what constitutes a Peircean normative science. For instance, James Lizska makes the case that Peirce’s stance suggests a kind of normative naturalism, which holds that normative properties are part of nature.⁵ In this paper, I am unable to address these various questions. Instead, I focus on what distinguishes the normative science of practices from morality. Although Peirce does refer to morality as a science (ibid.), it is not one that makes original discoveries, i.e. it is not “heuretic.” In fact, it is unwise to mix practics and morality. The latter is “the folklore of right conduct,” the “traditional wisdom of ages of experience” that becomes ingrained in one’s conscience through up-bringing. It is dangerous to even reason about morality, “except in a purely speculative way.” “Hence, morality is essentially conservative” (1.50). This “purely speculative” manner of reasoning about morality is presumably the science of practices. For Peirce then, moral conduct and normative science are distinct, quite separate pursuits, neither of which influences the other. As Vincent Potter notes in reference to Peirce, “To say that knowledge of normative science would directly and in itself either help one to think more correctly or to live more decently or to create more artistically,

² All parenthetical references are to Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., edited Arthur Burks, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1931-58). Quotations not immediately followed by a reference belong to the paragraph cited in the subsequent reference.

³ Juan Pablo Serra, “What Is and What Should Pragmatic Ethics Be?” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2:2 (2010), 4. See also Aaron Masecar, “The Fitness of an Ideal: A Peircean Ethics,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 10 (2013): 97-119.

⁴ Peirce’s views about the three normative sciences (aesthetics, practics, logic) are quite interesting. Peirce makes aesthetics the first normative science, followed by practics, then logic. However, aesthetics and logic are not directly relevant to this paper, hence I do not consider them closely. See Vincent Potter, *Charles S. Peirce on Norms and Ideals* (Worcester: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

⁵ James Lizska, “Peirce’s Idea of Ethics as a Normative Science. Charles S. Peirce Society Presidential Address. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 50:4 (2014): 459-479.

would be like saying that a knowledge of mechanics involved in a game of billiards would allow us to become a master player (cf. e.g. 2.3).”⁶

Although Peirce cautions that applying the results of practices to morality is extremely perilous, he is not opposed to it in principle: “I do not say that philosophical science should not ultimately influence religion and morality; I only say that it should be allowed to do so only with secular slowness and the most conservative caution” (1.620). Yet although Peirce does not in principle forbid the application of practices to morality, doing so is usually a fallacious and dangerous exercise. Peirce notes two peculiar characteristics of any professional thief: “first, an even more immense conceit in his own reasoning powers than is common, and second, a disposition to reason about the basis of morals.” Evidently, Peirce thinks the thief guilty of self-conceit, special pleading, and cynicism in misapplying a pseudo-practices to morality. “Hence, ethics, which is reasoning out an explanation of morality is... composed of the very substance of immorality” (1.666).⁷ Throughout this paper, I use the term “dogmatic-philosophical morality” to denote any system of morals generated by a dogmatic application of science to conduct.

In his lecture, “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life,” Peirce proclaims himself “an Aristotelian and a scientific man, condemning with the whole strength of conviction the Hellenic tendency to mingle Philosophy and Practice” (1.618). In this work, Peirce forcibly argues that morality should be left to instinct and that reasoning about morality can and often does lead to dangerous consequences. Before considering this lecture, however, the context of the work must be addressed. Part of his Cambridge Lectures of 1898, Peirce delivered this talk at Harvard at the invitation of William James, who had urged Peirce to lecture on matters of “vital importance”

⁶ Potter, 26.

⁷ Here “ethics” is functionally synonymous with “practices” as it appears elsewhere.

rather than on less interesting topics, such as “formal logic.” James went so far as to write Peirce the following: “Now be a good boy and think a more popular plan out.”⁸ Understandably, Peirce seems to have taken exception to this, hence the ironical use of “matters of vital importance” throughout much of the lecture. How should this context affect one’s reading of the lecture? Cheryl Misak claims that the Cambridge Lectures “are not the best place for discerning Peirce’s considered view about science and vital matters,” because Peirce’s anger at James causes him to overstate his case.⁹ To some extent, this assessment seems appropriate. For one thing, Peirce’s “considered view” (after 1903, at least) includes the normative science of ethics as part of philosophy, something he disavows in “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life.” However, this lecture is not devoid of interesting, plausible arguments and claims of its own. Moreover, Peirce does not seem to substantially change the view expressed in this lecture that I explore most closely, namely that morality should be grounded in instinct rather than in reason. In fact, this claim is consistent with much that Peirce writes elsewhere, for example:

Invariably follow the dictates of Instinct in preference to those of Reason when such conduct will answer your purpose: that is the prescription of Reason herself. Do not harbor any expectation that the study of logic can improve your judgment in matters of business, family, or other departments of ordinary life. Clear as it seems to me that certain *dicta* of my conscience are unreasonable, and though I know it may very well be wrong, yet I trust to its authority emphatically rather than to any rationalistic morality. This is the only rational course (2.177).

⁸ See Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, ed. Nathan Houser, et al (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998), 505n15. Hereafter cited as *EP*: 2.

⁹ Cheryl Misak, “C. S. Peirce on Vital Matters,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163.

Peirce adds to this, “The best plan, then, on the whole, is to base our conduct as much as possible on instinct, but when we do reason to reason with severely scientific logic” (2.178). Hence, although Peirce’s *rhetoric* in “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life” may be ironically or even sarcastically tinged on account of James’ patronizing remarks, and although he later makes room in philosophy for ethics as a *theoretical* science, Peirce nonetheless seems committed to the closely related positions that morality should be grounded in instinct and that reason should not meddle in morality, because these claims are not isolated to this lecture alone. In fact, as Richard Atkins argues, the lecture can be read as a critique of James’ assumption that philosophy should concern itself with “matters of vital importance,” and this gives us all the more reason to take its arguments seriously.¹⁰

In “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life,” Peirce outlines five traits exhibited by philosophy, which distinguish it both from practice and from the special sciences: (1) unlike mathematics, it searches for real truth, (2) it takes its premises from experience, (3) it investigates the reality of potential beings, not just existing beings, (4) its premises are not specially observed facts but rather the universal phenomena that “saturate” all experience, and (5) its metaphysical conclusions show how things must be.^{11, 12} Peirce divides philosophy into metaphysics and logic. Metaphysics studies “being in general, its laws and types.” Logic studies “thought in general, its general laws and kinds.”¹³ Though he would later change his mind to a

¹⁰ Richard Kenneth Atkins, *Peirce and the Conduct of Life: Sentiment and Instinct in Ethics and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹¹ While an interesting study could be made of Peirce’s characterization of philosophy in its own right, my purpose is to examine how Peirce differentiates it from practice or morality.

¹² This portion of the lecture is not included in the *Collected Papers*. See *EP*: 2, 35.

¹³ *EP*: 2, 36.

significant degree,¹⁴ at this point Peirce excludes ethics from philosophy for two reasons. First, although it is “the science of the end and aim of life,” ethics deals only with “a special department of experience,” namely the “psychical.” For this reason, it does not display trait (4) of philosophy, because it does not deal with universal phenomena.¹⁵ Second, ethics seem to be an art, or at least one of the “theories of the arts.” Hence, it is a “concrete” theoretical science, whereas philosophy is “the most abstract of all the real sciences.”¹⁶

If one accepts this characterization of philosophy, then one can agree with Peirce that philosophy is in an “infantile condition” (1.620).¹⁷ In order to be properly philosophical, any knowledge claim would need to satisfy the following necessary conditions, corresponding to traits (1), (2), (4), and (5) above: it must (1) concern real truth, (2) follow from premises drawn from experiences that are (4) universal phenomena, and (5) hold with metaphysical necessity. I do not include trait (3) as a *necessary* condition for any claim to be properly philosophical, because Peirce says that philosophy investigates potential beings *in addition* to existing ones, which means that a particular claim need not deal with potential beings in order to be philosophical. To claim knowledge about metaphysically necessary, universal phenomena is a serious business. To suggest a system of morals based on claims about metaphysically necessary, universal phenomena is an even more serious business. Such an application of philosophy to practice, if not strongly justified, would be premature at best, catastrophic at worst. The result of such an inappropriate application of philosophy to practice is what I am calling

¹⁴ Peirce revised his position by 1903, after which he viewed philosophy as comprised of phenomenology, normative science, and metaphysics, normative science itself being comprised by aesthetics, ethics, and logic. See *EP*: 2, 506n28.

¹⁵ Peirce’s claim does not seem entirely clear. What does he mean by saying that ethics is exclusively “psychical?” Does he mean that ethics studies only the lives and proper ends of beings with psychical properties, thereby ignoring non-psychical sectors of reality and hence failing to treat universal phenomena?

¹⁶ *EP*: 2, 36.

¹⁷ *EP*: 2, 29.

“dogmatic-philosophical morality,” i.e. a system of conduct that is formulated according to unjustified philosophical claims. Not only does the Peirce of 1898 exclude ethics from philosophy on the grounds that it does not concern universal phenomena, but he also suggests that philosophically formulated moralities are likely to have very dangerous practical consequences. Although the Peirce of 1903 and later makes room for ethics in philosophy, he seems to maintain his stance that applying philosophy to morality is a very hazardous undertaking.

In keeping with his own advice, Peirce does not attempt to closely delineate the source and extent of morality. The “best opinion” is that morality “has its root in the nature of the human soul, whether as a decree of reason, or what constitutes man's happiness, or in some other department of human nature” (2.156). Peirce here leaves the exact nature of morality, its relation to reason, and its relation to happiness as open questions. The view that morality is rooted in human nature is only an opinion, a more or less plausible conjecture. It is interesting that Peirce here considers morality as grounded in the “human soul,” whereas elsewhere he treats morality as a matter of up-bringing: “[a] man is brought up to think he ought to behave in certain ways,” (1.50). Of course, there need be no conflict between the morality of up-bringing and the morality rooted in the soul, since one might be brought up to conform to the morality suggested (perhaps implicitly) by the latter. Peirce seems to treat morality as encompassing both aspects. “There is probably no special instinct—using this word in a sense in which it shall embrace traditional as well as inherited habits—for rationality, such as there is for morality” (2.160). This passage is important for two reasons. First, Peirce suggests that there is an instinct for morality. Second, this instinct encompasses both “traditional” and “inherited” habits. The import of “traditional” and “inherited” is not immediately clear. However, as noted above, Peirce

characterizes morality as the “*traditional* wisdom of ages of experience” (1.50). This would suggest that the traditional habits of moral instinct mentioned in 2.160 are the habits rooted in the “ages of experience” of one’s community mentioned in 1.50. Hence, traditional habits seem to be those whose origin is the custom of one’s community. “Inherited” habits, on the other hand, seem to be those that are *acquired* irrespective of the custom of one’s community. Because it is difficult to differentiate an inherited habit from one “due to infantile training and tradition,” Peirce uses the word “instinct” to cover both types of habit (2.170). In short, moral instinct includes both habits ingrained by the custom of one’s community and habits acquired by other means. Accordingly, they to some extent must admit of variability, change, improvement, and degeneration.

There is no question that Peirce is highly suspicious of philosophical meddling in morals. Nonetheless, he also notes that “morality, doctrinaire conservatist that it is, destroys its own vitality by resisting change, and positively insisting, This is eternally right: That is eternally wrong.” Peirce adds, “Like any other field, more than any other, it [morality] needs improvement, advance. Moral ideas must be a rising tide, or with the ebb foulness will be cast up.” He concludes, “The practical side of ethics is its most obviously important side; and in practical matters, the first maxim is that everything may be exaggerated. [...] The moral spirit may very easily be carried to excess: all the more so, that the essence of that spirit is to insist upon its own absolute autocracy” (2.198). While it is dangerous to apply prematurely the results of practices to morality, moral fanaticism presents its own serious hazards. But if the work of practices is not sufficiently advanced to offer much help to morality, and if humans have nothing except moral instinct to ground and guide their conduct, how can such moral fanaticism be avoided? In the remainder of this paper, I sketch a possible solution to this problem that takes

seriously Peirce's criticisms of philosophical morality. Relinquishing claims to certainty and universality, one can negotiate both the dogmatism of dogmatic-philosophical morality and the fanaticism of unhindered moral conviction. Invoking pragmatic traits like fallibilism, pluralism, and revisability, one can deploy reason to think intelligently about the traditional and inherited habits that comprise one's moral instincts. I attempt to show that reasoning about morality need not be dogmatic but can suggest richer modes of living than either dogmatic-philosophical morality or purely instinctive morality.¹⁸

As mentioned above, I use the term "dogmatic-philosophical morality" to denote any dogmatic application of philosophy, including practices, to conduct. I shall use the term "pragmatic morality" to denote the non-dogmatic reasoning about morals I now wish to sketch. In such a pragmatic morality, reason would work *with* instincts. Peirce seems amenable to this view. In the 1898 lecture, "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life," Peirce says that in "vital crisis" reason appeals to instinct (1.630). In theoretical science, appeals to instinct are inappropriate, except insofar as they suggest procedures that might be tried and tested. In "human affairs," conversely, reason itself suggests the "supremacy of sentiment,"¹⁹ just as it refuses anything other than a suggestive role for sentiment in theoretical matters (1.634). Interestingly, Peirce notes that instinct is amenable to "development and growth" no less than reasoning, though the former should be a slow and careful development when the instinct is "vital." Moreover, this development of instinct "chiefly takes place through the instrumentality of cognition." In this manner, the "eternal forms" known through the sciences gradually come to influence the lives of

¹⁸ I do not mean to suggest that Peirce would be opposed to such an approach. On the contrary, several passages suggest he might approve of it. Nonetheless, Peirce does not offer much in the way of achieving a pragmatic morality, hence my attempt to sketch some of the traits such a morality would display.

¹⁹ Throughout my reading of "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life," I take "instinct" and "sentiment" to be functionally synonymous.

human beings, and this “not because they involve truths of merely vital importance, but because they are ideal and eternal verities” (1.648).²⁰

There are at least two plausible interpretations of this passage in 1.648, neither of which need completely exclude the other. On the one hand, Peirce may be reinforcing the claim I discuss above, namely that practices should be applied to morality only after the former has made significantly more progress than it currently has, after which it still must be applied with acute caution. On the other hand, Peirce may be suggesting that cognition or reason²¹ can play a helpful role vis-à-vis morality—perhaps by softening the fanaticism of pure moral instinctiveness and by bringing various instincts into greater harmony—even before practices has made significant progress. Indeed, some readers have taken Peirce to be committed to moral cognitivism, which holds that moral judgments are mental states that are true or false, namely beliefs.²² Whichever of these two interpretations of 1.648 one adopts, it must account for the following four claims made in the passage: (1) vital instinct admits of growth and development, (2) the development of vital instinct is slow, (3) cognition or reason is the primary instrument that effects the growth and development of vital instinct, (4) the truths of science will eventually influence morality²³ because of their eternal verity and not for any other reason. I consider each of these two interpretations in turn.

²⁰ This is perhaps the most overt shot Peirce takes at James in this lecture.

²¹ Peirce says “cognition” in this passage, but I see no textual evidence that he means by it anything significantly different from what he means by “reason” elsewhere in the same lecture. On the contrary, immediately prior to his claim that the development of instinct or sentiment “takes place through the instrumentality of cognition,” Peirce says that the development of instinct or sentiment “takes place upon lines which are altogether parallel to those of reasoning,” suggesting that his use of “cognition” and “reason” or “reasoning” are indeed synonymous.

²² For further discussion, see Aaron Massecar, “Peirce, Moral Cognitivism, and the Development of Character,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 50:1 (2014): 139-161.

²³ Peirce says only that scientific truth will “influence our lives,” but the context makes it clear that he means that scientific truth will gradually come to inform the practical activity of human beings in vital matters, what he elsewhere calls “morality.”

The first interpretation of 1.648, which reads it as forbidding application of reasoning to vital instincts until science (especially practices) has made sufficient progress, accounts for Peirce's four claims in the following way. The numbers in parentheses correspond to claims (1)-(4) directly above. While (1) vital instincts are indeed amenable to development, and while (3) reasoning is the instrument that effects this development, (4) such reasoning should influence morality only in virtue of scientific truths not yet known, hence (2) the slow and gradual development of vital instincts. On this interpretation, reasoning about vital instinct is appropriate only when science is sufficiently advanced to justify such reasoning. Absent this advanced state of science, one should never seek to alter morality by reasoning about it. Even when science is sufficiently advanced, reasoning should alter the vital instincts that comprise morality in only a slow and gradual manner.

The second interpretation, which reads the passage as endorsing a kind of reasoning about instincts that does not require that reasoning to be based in a highly-progressed science, accounts for claims (1)-(4) in a different manner. Since (1) vital instincts admit of growth and development independently of (4) the currently unknown truths of science that would justify a *deep-reaching* overhaul of those vital instincts, (3) a provisional and cautious sort of reasoning can be used as an instrument to achieve (2) a slow and gradual development of the vital instincts that comprise morality. On this interpretation, only the "eternal verities" of science can justify a *significant* and *deep-reaching* alteration of the morality suggested by vital instinct. Nonetheless, lacking knowledge of such verities, one can meanwhile reason cautiously about vital instincts, and this reasoning can suggest slow, gradual ways of changing those instincts for the improvement of morality. Such change should not be deep-reaching, as only scientific knowledge not currently had could justify such significant alteration to morality. However,

unlike the first interpretation, this one grants a role to reason vis-à-vis vital instinct, despite the fact that science has not progressed enough to justify more than a provisional reasoning. I call the result of this cautious working of reason upon vital instincts “pragmatic morality.”

As a matter of exegesis, I grant that the first interpretation better coheres with those passages in which Peirce maintains a deep division between the sciences (which include philosophy) and morality (e.g., 1.50, 1.666). The first interpretation also provides a view of the relation between science and morality that offers an antidote to moral fanaticism, albeit a long-delayed one. As discussed above, Peirce claims that morality “needs improvement, advance,” lest it degenerate into a trenchant dogmatism of its own (2.198). In keeping with the first interpretation of 1.648, Peirce might argue that the “eternal verities” of science eventually soften and reform the conservative dogmatism of morality. Once science has made sufficient progress in some area, the theoretical knowledge it yields might be applied to morality so as to improve it, not least by curbing the zeal with which it clings to certain instincts. While this does seem to be Peirce’s position, his view has the weakness that there is nothing to be done about any aspect of moral fanaticism *prior* to science’s making sufficient progress in some relevant area. He maintains that science should influence morality “only with secular slowness and the most conservative caution” (1.620). Following the first interpretation of 1.648, this would require that one obey one’s vital instincts in all matters of morality upon which science is not advanced enough to pronounce. But since this instinctive morality “destroys its own vitality by resisting change,” there seems to be no protection against moral fanaticism (2.198). One might counter that the risk of fanaticism in instinctive morality is less dangerous than dogmatic-philosophical morality. The latter often imposes new injunctions on practical activity, which, if followed, can lead to disastrous, unforeseen consequences. Moreover, there is no guarantee that any

dogmatic-philosophical morality is even practicable, since such a morality cannot be tested prior to its endorsement. Conversely, instinctive morality has survived the crucible of human history, so it must be practicable and minimally satisfactory. On these grounds, one might hold that instinctive morality, though prone to fanaticism, is nonetheless preferable to dogmatic-philosophical morality. I grant that this is true. Nonetheless, in the absence of properly applicable scientific knowledge, one wishes there were some third option between instinctive morality and dogmatic-philosophical morality.

The second interpretation of 1.648, though less plausibly attributable to Peirce, offers just such a middle ground between the fanaticism of instinctive morality and the dogmatism of philosophical morality. On this interpretation, one can reason about vital instincts in a cautious, responsible, and tentative manner without needing to know truths of science. This kind of reasoning about morality relinquishes the claim to certainty that dogmatic-philosophical morality always asserts, hence avoiding dogmatism and making the resulting pragmatic morality much less dangerous. It also avoids moral fanaticism by intelligently dealing with instincts and questioning the zeal with which certain instincts are espoused. I call this type of reasoning about moral instincts “pragmatic” because it displays a number of qualities associated with pragmatism, such as fallibilism and pluralism. This pragmatic reasoning can (1) consider the likely consequences of abiding by a particular instinct or set of instincts, (2) compare and weigh instincts that suggest conflicting paths of conduct, and (3) propose certain orderings of the relative importance of various instincts.²⁴ Whereas dogmatic-philosophical morality results from unjustified claims to certainty, and instinctive morality offers no defense against fanaticism,

²⁴ Of course, one could list many other tasks of which pragmatic reasoning about instincts is capable, but these three are especially relevant to my task of sketching a pragmatic morality that avoids the problems of both dogmatic-philosophical and purely instinctive moralities.

pragmatic morality results from taking pre-existing vital instincts as material to be thought through, intelligently ordered, and adhered to cautiously.²⁵ It is clear that this second interpretation of 1.648 conflict with the first one. The first interpretation is more consistent with the rest of Peirce's claims in "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life," but I wish to examine the pragmatic morality suggested by the second one. I argue that, although he does not endorse it, Peirce could approve a pragmatic morality, because it avoids the problems of dogmatic-philosophical morality and offers correctives for some of the dangers of purely instinctive morality.

Peirce's chief objection to the mingling of philosophy and the other sciences with morality seems to be that the dogmatism of the former produces unacceptable *practical* effects for morality. Indeed, Peirce says that reason itself recommends that one trust to vital instinct in moral matters, eliminating itself from being put to moral use (1.634). Peirce criticizes the "early Greek philosopher, such as we read about in Diogenes Laertius," whose "conduct should be in marked contrast with the dictates of ordinary common sense" (1.616).²⁶ On this view, the Greek philosophers prematurely used theories about the cosmos and human beings to justify moralities in deep contrast with those suggested by vital instinct. On this point, Richard Shusterman notes that philosophy as theory and philosophy as an art of living were complementary for Greek philosophers.^{27, 28} He notes that it would be difficult to separate "Epicurean natural theory" about atoms and the void from the Epicurean "art of living," or Stoic ethics from its "philosophical

²⁵ To be viable, the pragmatic kind of morality must answer a number of challenges, such as the two following. Can communities and/or individuals function with fallibilist attitudes toward their moralities, or do they need certitude? Absent scientific knowledge, on what basis does one reason about instincts? I offer some responses to these questions below.

²⁶ *EP*: 2, 27.

²⁷ Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 4.

²⁸ In good pragmatic fashion, Shusterman treats philosophical theory as a kind of practice, one concerning "the formulation or criticism of general, systematic views about the world." The philosophical "art of living," conversely, is the practice whereby one lives well. See Shusterman, 2.

theory... that viewed the whole natural world as a perfect, living organic unity...’’^{29,30} The Epicurean insistence that one should fear neither the gods nor death seems based on the atomistic worldview, whose mechanisms leave no room for divine interference and which make death merely the complete dissolution of the human being. Hence, the gods cannot afflict human beings, and there is no state of suffering after death. Convinced of these truths on the basis of metaphysical theory (science), one can confidently pursue an art of living (morality) that intelligently cultivates pleasure. Similarly, the Stoic insistence that one should accept the whole of nature and live in accordance with it seems based on the worldview that nature is a perfect, providential whole. The art of living whereby one accepts nature and accords with it is justified by the theory that ensures nature is something worthy of being accepted and accorded with.

Peirce is suspicious of this very relationship between theory and arts of living, between science and moralities. If there were very good reason to believe that either the Epicurean or Stoic theory was true, then it might be appropriate to adopt its corresponding art of living. But since Peirce does not think there is sufficiently good reason to hold either theory true, the pursuit of either art of living cannot be otherwise than dangerous and ridiculous, producing “one of the most amusing curiosities of the whole human menagerie,” the philosopher who feels compelled to conduct himself in direct opposition to common sense (1.616). This leads to a dogmatic-philosophical morality. Reason is employed to construct flimsy doctrines about the universe and human beings, upon which a dogmatic morality is constructed. Alternatively, I suggest that reason should abstain from making unjustified claims about the cosmos and morality, but that reason can still play a role in moral matters. Such pragmatic reasoning need

²⁹ Shusterman, 4.

³⁰ Shusterman uses terms like “art of living,” “life practice,” and (as here) “ethics” to denote what Peirce means by “morality.”

not be dogmatic, because it need not assume universal truths about the cosmos and human beings. Pierre Hadot suggests the following: "The same spiritual exercises can, in fact, be justified by extremely diverse philosophical discourses. These latter are nothing but clumsy attempts, coming after the fact, to describe and justify inner experiences whose existential density is not, in the last analysis, susceptible of any attempt at theorization or systematization."^{31, 32} Hadot reverses the order of influence. According to Peirce's account, the ancient philosopher first claims to know universal truths about the cosmos and human beings, after which she constructs a morality justified by these supposed truths. For Hadot, it seems one adopts a morality (a set of "spiritual exercises") first, after which one seeks universal truths about the cosmos and human beings ("philosophical discourses") to justify or otherwise validate this morality. I leave aside the historical question whether Hadot's view adequately describes what Greek philosophers actually did or what they understood themselves to be doing. Instead, I take Hadot's claim as a clue that can help sketch a pragmatic morality that avoids the dogmatism of philosophical morality and the fanaticism of purely instinctive morality.

Hadot's position avoids philosophical dogmatism by minimizing the role of philosophical discourse, but it immediately faces two serious objections. If philosophical discourse (Shusterman's theory, Peirce's science) does not inform one's choice in adopting a set of spiritual exercises (Shusterman's art of living, Peirce's morality), then (1) how does one acquire a set of such exercises, and (2) what keeps this acquisition from being arbitrary? Peirce agrees that philosophical discourse or science *should not* determine one's morality, suggesting that instead vital instinct should serve this function. This constitutes a response to objection (1)—one

³¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 212.

³² Hadot's "spiritual exercises" and "philosophical discourses" are respectively equivalent to Peirce's "morality" and "science," as well as Shusterman's "art of living" and "theory."

acquires one's morality (a set of spiritual exercises) from one's vital instincts. Yet it appears that Peirce's instinctive morality may not adequately answer objection (2), because one's morality is constituted by the vital instincts one only *happens* to have. Hence, instinctive morality is arbitrarily acquired in that it results from contingent instincts rather than from voluntary or rational procedures. A defender of Peirce might make the following two rejoinders. First, although arbitrary in the sense that the individual does not volitionally or rationally validate it, instinctive morality is the "traditional wisdom of ages of experience" grounded in one's community and its history, which means it must be at least minimally serviceable (1.50). Second, granted that instinctive morality is arbitrary in the above sense, it remains the best kind of morality one can currently hope for, because science (in particular, practices) is not sufficiently progressed to let one impose rational or volitional procedures on morality in a justified and responsible manner. One might cede both these rejoinders and be resigned to the fact that there is no better option than instinctive morality, which is at least minimally satisfactory. But it would no doubt be better if the individual could reason about moral matters while being neither philosophically dogmatic nor arbitrarily committed to the morality one happens to find as one's own. Shusterman offers a clue in this direction: "For even if we doubt that every art of living entails a full-blown philosophical theory and every theory expresses a way of life, we surely should build our art of living on our knowledge and vision of the world, and reciprocally seek the knowledge that serves our art of living."³³ A morality need not be justified by a "full-blown philosophical theory" in order to be informed by the rationality of individuals in a community. Moreover, individuals may reason about their morality in a manner that might require the emendation or even complete abandonment of that morality. Hence, there can be a kind of

³³ Shusterman, 4.

morality that avoids both philosophical dogmatism and instinctive intractability. I now sketch some of the features of this pragmatic morality.

First and most importantly, this pragmatic reasoning and the pragmatic morality resulting from it are both fallibilist. Rather than seeking universal moral truths that are justified by other universal truths about the world and human beings, pragmatic reasoners consider the relative plausibility of various moral claims. Hence, pragmatic morality deals in probability rather than certainty. Taking Peirce's vital instincts as so many postulates about morality, the pragmatic reasoner considers matters³⁴ such as the following: (1) the mutual coherence of any set of vital instincts, (2) the likely consequences of adhering to various combinations of vital instincts, (3) information surrendered by past and present experiments of acting on various of those instincts,³⁵ (4) possible alternatives to current instincts, (5) the likely consequences of those alternatives, and (6) whether the risk of altering a morality is worth taking. In all these functions, the reasoner can remain sincerely fallibilist, shirking inappropriate certitude and deferring to vital instinct when her pragmatic reason seems unable to proceed responsibly. This deployment of reason is not scientific or theoretical in sense of seeking certainty, but is rather closer to *phronesis*. The pragmatic morality that results from this phronetic, pragmatic reason avoids the dogmatism of philosophical morality by declining to invest undue certitude in any moral claim. Pragmatic morality avoids the fanaticism of purely instinctive morality by reasoning about instincts and

³⁴ Again, this list need not exhaust all the functions of pragmatic reasoning about morality. I only those that are immediately salient for dealing with Peirce's criticisms. One of the strengths of pragmatic reasoning about morality is that it itself admits of development, growth, correction, improvement, etc., so trying to list all its functions *a priori* would be a misguided endeavor.

³⁵ While the pragmatic reasoner would not endorse radical experiments in morality that might be quite dangerous, it is undeniable that such experiments (intentionally undertaken or not) are made by some people, ranging from heavy drug use and unusual sexual activity to monastic practices of fasting and meditation. Even if a pragmatic morality would not endorse such experiments, the pragmatic reasoner should still study them and learn what she can. This increased knowledge cannot hurt pragmatic morality, and it may improve it, either by reinforcing certain vital instincts or by suggesting that those instincts might be safely modified after all.

thereby curbing the zeal with which they assert themselves. The resulting morality is well-grounded in time-tested instincts, but it also admits of improvement.

This leads to the second important trait of pragmatic morality, its revisability, which follows from its fallibilism. Given that views about morality are not treated as certain but only as more or less probable, the pragmatic reasoner is always open to revising any position, perhaps drastically. This revision may consist in granting more influence to vital instinct, or it may consist in adopting newer moral habits at the suggestion of pragmatic reason. Either way, the pragmatic reasoner remains committed to honestly evaluating what information is available and proceeding accordingly. The proper procedure may require her to put reason away and abide by instinct, but it might also require her to revise her morality by altering those instincts. It is unlikely that the pragmatically rational course will call for a deep-reaching overhaul of one's morality, but one must be prepared for such revision should pragmatic reason suggest it. If one denies that one's morality is revisable, then one risks either the fanaticism of instincts or the dogmatism of philosophical morality, provided that one is not scientifically or theoretically justified in that philosophical morality.

Third, pragmatic morality admits of pluralism, and this again in virtue of its fallibilism. Since no moral position is held with certainty, the pragmatic reasoner can view a multiplicity of moralities as appropriate. This does not commit the pragmatic reasoner to moral relativism, because she need not hold that inconsistent moral claims are all true. Instead, she may claim (1) that human inquirers currently lack the scientific or theoretical knowledge that would permit a final adjudication of inconsistent moral claims, and (2) that in our current condition plausible cases can be made for inconsistent moral claims. In any pragmatic morality, each moral position is maintained as more or less probable vis-à-vis other positions, but such a position is inherently

revisable. This being the case, the pragmatic reasoner does not feel justified in refusing every other, inconsistent morality.

Fourth, pragmatic morality is centrally committed to meliorism, or the position that human effort can improve human life. This is not to deny that the purely instinctive morality recommended by Peirce might also be committed to meliorism. However, purely instinctive morality seems liable to stagnation and intractability. If one is morally committed only to what vital instinct suggests, then it is hard to see how a morality could ever progress, unless sufficient progress should be made in science. This morality's intractability would seem to hamper the effectiveness of its melioration of human life, since it can only pursue the improvement thereof within the framework that its instincts happen to offer. On the other hand, being fallibilist and revisable, pragmatic morality admits of self-improvement and intelligent direction. Although it takes vital instincts as its starting points, pragmatic morality's revisability lets it be developed in a manner instinctive morality does not allow. The pragmatic reasoner can tweak vital instincts to bring them into greater coherence, produce more favorable consequences, abandon those that have been found harmful, and suggest new ones that beneficially supplement the rest. Being thereby more flexible than instinctive morality, pragmatic morality can also better adapt itself to changing conditions and new situations. For all these reasons, the meliorism of pragmatic morality seems much more effective and far-reaching than any meliorism that might be found in instinctive morality, at least until the science of practices is insufficiently advanced to responsibly influence morality. Until such time, it seems the best hope for the melioration of human life lies in pragmatic morality.

The purpose of this paper has been to offer a preliminary sketch of a pragmatic morality that takes seriously Peirce's criticisms of both the dogmatism of philosophical morality and the

fanaticism of instinctive morality. Peirce seems to favor instinctive morality, despite the penchant for fanaticism Peirce himself recognizes in it. This is a respectable position, given that Peirce does not believe that science is advanced enough to permit a rational overhaul of morality. However, I have attempted to draw a rough outline of a pragmatic morality that sidesteps both dogmatism and fanaticism. By exhibiting the traits of fallibilism, revisability, pluralism, and meliorism, this pragmatic morality permits reasoning about morals in a responsible, non-dogmatic fashion. Moreover, by allowing a role for vital instincts as the material or postulates of morality, pragmatic morality does not endorse potentially dangerous, deep-reaching renovations of morals. If successful, this outline has suggested a kind of morality in which vital instinct and reason form a complementary relationship.

References

- Richard Kenneth Atins, *Peirce and the Conduct of Life: Sentiment and Instinct in Ethics and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- Simon Blackburn, "Attitudes and Contents," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182-197.
- Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden: Blackwell, 1995).
- James Liszka, "Peirce's Idea of Ethics as a Normative Science. Charles S. Peirce Society Presidential Address. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 50:4 (2014): 459-479.
- Aaron Masecar, "The Fitness of an Ideal: A Peircean Ethics," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 10 (2013): 97-119.
- , "Peirce, Moral Cognitivism, and the Development of Character," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 50:1 (2014): 139-161.

Cheryl Misak, "C. S. Peirce on Vital Matters," in the *Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 150-74.

Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols., ed. Arthur Burks, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58).

---, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 2, ed. Nathan Houser, et al (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998).

Vincent Potter, *Charles S. Peirce on Norms and Ideals* (Worcester: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

Juan Pablo Serra, "What Is and What Should Pragmatic Ethics Be?" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, 2:2 (2010): 1-15.

Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).