

# Towards the silvery peak: some keys to the evolution of Peirce's Ethics

*Rumo ao cimo prateado: alguns indícios para a evolução da Ética de Peirce*

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**Abstract:** Although it may seem a simple and obvious notion, Peirce's conception of ethics has a complexity and richness which grew over the course of his entire intellectual life. The aim of this paper is to discuss three doctrines which have been key to the development of Peirce's ethics. The first is the notion of final causation, such that ethics is above all a science of purpose, ordered to the ultimate end of human beings. The second is the notion of self-controlled action, insofar as ethics studies the deliberate action, especially from the point of view of its self-criticism and reflective quality. Finally, the third key is the character of normative science, which makes ethics the theoretical-philosophical science of secondness; and the positive science, with an objective basis, that investigates the way to achieving the self-control which will lead to the most elevated and universal ideals.

**Keywords:** Charles S. Peirce. Ethics. Final causation. Self-controlled action. Normative science.

**Resumo:** *Embora possa parecer uma noção simples e óbvia, a concepção de ética de Peirce possui uma complexidade e riqueza que se desenvolveu ao longo de toda sua vida intelectual. O objetivo deste trabalho é discutir três doutrinas que têm sido fundamentais para o desenvolvimento da ética peirciana. A primeira é a noção de causalção final, de que a ética é, sobretudo, uma ciência de propósito, ordenada ao fim último dos seres humanos. A segunda é a noção de ação autocontrolada, na medida em que a ética estuda a ação deliberada, especialmente sob o ponto de vista de sua autocrítica e qualidade refletiva. Finalmente, a terceira é a natureza da ciência normativa, que torna a ética a ciência teórica filosófica da segundidade; e a ciência positiva, com uma base objetiva, que investiga a forma de atingir o autocontrole que conduzirá aos mais elevados e universais ideais.*

**Palavras-chaves:** *Charles S. Peirce. Ética. Causação final. Ação autocontrolada. Ciência normativa.*

## Introduction

In a passage dripping with irony—but nonetheless, in my opinion, highly realistic—Peirce criticizes the disdainful attitude towards ethics which one encounters with a

certain frequency amongst the scientific community as well as in daily life. In his view, this attitude is purely and simply folly:

[I]t is merely the ordinary blindness of those who profoundly believe that lies are the most wholesome of diet, who, as Edgar Poe sagaciously said, when they get home, have once locked themselves in their several chambers, have undressed, knelt down by the bedside and said their prayers, got into bed, and blown out the candle, then, at length, and not till then, indulge in one veracious wink—the only veracious act of the day—and lull themselves to sleep with an inward ditty that Right is a silly thing without wealth or vigor in this work-a-day world (CP 1.251, 1902).

Nevertheless, Peirce is possessed of the certainty that, sooner or later, the human race will awaken from its slumber to see that the despised idea of the Right is the only irresistible power. At that time, an era will begin in which ethics will be included within each and every science, and will be so intimately rooted in the conduct of humankind, that both the former and the latter will fulfill their purposes and meet their ends in an ever more perfect way (CP 1.251, 1902). Peirce did not always think this way about ethics. Rather, he came to this position after a long—and at times, arduous—process of reflection which, one can say with complete certainty, embraced his entire life: from the philosophical exercises of a young Harvard student, to the solid arguments of a mature man, totally dedicated to the immense task of presenting the central ideas of his vast philosophical system to the world. The objective of this article is to discuss three doctrines which, in my view, have been key to the development of Peirce's ethics and of the place which it occupies in his philosophical system, namely: final causation, self-controlled action and the normative character of the science of ethics. In order to better understand these three key doctrines, I will first provide an outline of the evolution of Peirce's conception of ethics.

## 1 The evolution of the notion of ethics

The notion of ethics in Peirce possesses a complexity and richness which continued to grow over the course of his intellectual life. Starting with his lexicographical studies, which contribute to precisely determining the correct use of terms such as *ethics* and *morality*, and culminating in his applications of the doctrine of the categories to the normative sciences, which show that ethics is a secondness of a secondness, there is a development, an enrichment and an ever greater precision in his manner of understanding ethics, and in the significance that he grants it in his overall philosophical system. The first mentions he makes of ethics and morality are scattered throughout various texts, which range in date from 1857 up through 1892. Roughly speaking, these mentions tend to lack any substantial theoretical development; nonetheless, one encounters clear antecedents of the reflections which he will carry out with greater breadth and depth in later years. The questions being dealt with are many and varied: the link between beauty and morality; the relation between morality and religion, or between morality and science; the notions of morality and of ethics; the moral sense and emotions compared with

objective intellectual judgment; moral education; the study of ethics and logic; the place of ethics in the classification of the sciences; etc.<sup>1</sup> He develops a significant interest in ethics, as he himself notes (CP 2.197-198, 1902; CP 5.111, PPM 197, 1903), starting in 1882-1883, when he began to collaborate in the *Century Dictionary* with lexicographical studies on such terms as *ethics*, *moral* and *morality* (MS 1597; CD 3.2017; CD 5.3855; CD 5.3856). The contribution of Peirce to the compilation of this encyclopedic dictionary was enormous, and had a profound impact on the general development of his thought,<sup>2</sup> including his manner of understanding ethics.

During the decade of the 1890s, specifically between 1892 and 1898, he pays special attention to the relationship which might exist between ethics and scientific research, in the context of his work of clarifying the true nature of science.<sup>3</sup> There are three basic questions which Peirce discusses and attempts to answer. The first is whether there exists a morality which is intrinsic to scientific activity, a morality which is proper and specific to it, and which guides scientists in their investigations. And, if it exists, in what this internal morality would consist. The second question is whether morality, understood as the set of socially accepted norms of conduct, might influence the sciences, and if so, what consequences would follow. The third and final question is whether science or philosophy may in some way influence morality, both in the conduct or moral life of human actors as well in ethics understood as a scientific field of study in its own right. It is evident that Peirce is not interested in these topics for the sake of ethics itself, but rather insofar as he is a scientist who seeks to clarify the nature and conditions of his scientific activity.

Up to this point, he conceives of ethics as a science whose object is "right conduct and character; the science which treats of the nature and grounds of moral obligation and of the rules which ought to determine conduct in accordance with this obligation; the doctrine of man's duty in respect to himself and the rights of others" (CD 3.2017, *ethics*, def. 1). There is no definition in which he makes reference to purposes or to the ultimate end of the human being. Ethics is located among the practical or applied sciences, or the arts, but in no way is it to be found among the

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1 Among the more interesting writings, one might mention: "The Sense of Beauty never furthered the Performance of a single Act of Duty" (W 1:10-12, 1857); "Private Thoughts Principally on the Conduct of Life" (W 1:6, 1860); "The Logic of Science; or, Induction and Hypothesis" (W 1:496, 1866); "Questions on Reality" (W 2:172, 1868); "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" (W 2:206-207; EP 1:23, 1868); "Review of A. C. Fraser's *The Works of George Berkeley*" (W 2:485-486, 1871); "The Order of Nature" (W 3:321-322; EP 1:184-185, 1878); "Introductory Lecture on the Study of Logic" (W 4:381, 1882); "Syllabus of Sixty Lectures on Logic" (W 4:476, 1883); "An American Plato: Review of Royce's *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*" (W 5:229-233; EP 1:236-240, 1885); "Directions to Agents" (W 6:32, 1887); "Morality and Church Creed" (W 8:240-241, 1891); "Review of Spencer's *Essays*" (W 8:242, 1891); "Abbot against Royce" (W 8:247, 1891); "The Sciences in Their Order of Generality" (W 8:275-276, 1892); "Plan for a Scientific Dictionary" (W 8:292-295, 1892).

2 Cf. DI LEO, J. R.; DE TIENNE, A. Coming Attractions: Peirce's Work for the *Century Dictionary*, *Peirce Project Newsletter*, III/1, 1999, p. 1-3; HOUSER, N. Introduction, W 4:lvi.

3 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "Review of A. B. Buckley's *Moral Teachings of Science*" (CN 1:155-157; W 8:345-348, 1892); "Lessons from the History of Science" (CP 1.43-125, c.1896); "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" (MS 435-437; CP 1.616-677; RLT 105-122, 1898).

philosophical sciences (MS 437.20, RLT 116, 1898; CP 2.198, 1902; CP 5.111, PPM 197, 1903). Furthermore, morality—i.e. the phenomenon that ethics studies—is generally conceived of as the doctrine or the practice of those inculcated duties which are recognized as valid by a society (CD 5.3855, *moral*, def. II.1; CD 5.3856, *morality*, def. 3), as well as the folklore and traditional knowledge about the conduct which must be followed in a certain community (CP 1.50, c.1896). It should be noted that in the majority of the texts he wrote up to 1898, Peirce tends to distinguish clearly between ethics and morality, although on some occasions he uses both terms as synonyms or as equivalents.<sup>4</sup> In addition, although he admits both an objective and a subjective aspect to the phenomenon of morality, that which prevails in his treatment during this period is clearly the second of the two. Hence, Peirce tends to associate it with a certain subjectivism (W 2:165-187; 2:193-211, 1868).

Another moment in the development of his ethical conception begins at the outset of the 20th century. As a result of his reflections of 1901 and 1902 on final causation and the notion of conscience, one sees important changes in Peirce's views on ethics and the phenomenon of morality.<sup>5</sup> Ethics ceases to be a science concerning moral conduct or duty, and is defined for the first time as a science of purposes, whose proper object is the ultimate end of the person, or the *summum bonum*.<sup>6</sup> The end becomes the essential determinant of whether moral conduct is correct or not. In addition, ethics is no longer seen as an art or a practical or applied science, but is recognized as a theoretical and normative science.<sup>7</sup> Its principal objective is

4 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "The Order of Nature" (W 3:321-322; EP 1:184-185, 1878); "An American Plato: Review of Royce's *Religious Aspect of Philosophy*" (W 5:229-230; EP 1:236-238, 1885); "Morality and Church Creed" (W 8:240-241, 1891). In these texts, one can see that ethics and morality are presented as so intimately related to religion that it could be said that Peirce practically identifies them with each other.

5 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents, Especially from Testimonies" (CP 7.164-255; EP 2:75-114, 1901); "Review of S. Mezes's *Ethics: Descriptive and Explanatory*" (CN 3:50-53, 1901); "On Science and Natural Classes" (MS 427; EP 2:115-132; CP 1.203-283, 1902); "Why Study Logic?" (CP 2.119-202, 1902); "Ethics" (MS 432-434; CP 1.575-584, 1902).

6 "What then, is the purpose of a man? That is the question of pure ethics, a very great question..." (CP 7.185; EP 2:85, 1901). "The question of pure ethics would have to be taken up, namely, the question 'What can a man deliberately accept as his ultimate purpose?'" (CP 7.201; EP 2:94, 1901). "The fundamental problem of ethics is not, therefore, 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?" (CP 2.198, 1902). "The *summum bonum* which forms the subject of pure ethics" (MS 433.3; CP 1.575, 1902).

7 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "On Science and Natural Classes" (CP 1.238-282, 1902); "Why Study Logic?" (CP 2.156, 2.197-198, 1902). Although Peirce recognizes the normative character of ethics, he still has some doubts: "A normative research supposes a definite end and seeks the conditions, voluntary or involuntary of its attainment. But to ask what is good, not as a means, but in itself; not for a reason, but back of every reason, is a more fundamental investigation. It is to ask a question which every normative science supposes to be already answered. Pure ethics, then, philosophical ethics, the doctrine of the *summum bonum*, is not a normative, but a prenormative science" (MS 432.4, 1902).

knowledge of the positive truth, as it is manifested in everyday experience, of moral conduct as ordered to the ultimate end of the person. On the other hand, for the first time ethics is clearly recognized as a science that logic depends on and by which it is supported.<sup>8</sup> Truth—which is the object of the science of logic—is seen as “a phase of the *summum bonum*”—which in turn is the object of ethics—since logic cannot carry out its studies if it does not know, beforehand and with precision, what its end is. The science, in turn, whose office it is to provide logic with its end is none other than ethics (MS 433.3; CP 1.575, 1902).<sup>9</sup> Finally, during these years Peirce begins to examine the notion of conscience from a moral perspective, which permits him to comprehend the role of reason in self-controlled action, and in self-criticism (CP 2.151-153, 2.156, 2.177; MS 434.12, 18-25, 1902).

The Peircean conception of ethics reached its full maturity starting in 1903, and would deepen until the end of his life. Beginning that year, Peirce makes a great effort to present his vision of pragmatism in a more or less definitive form, and calls his doctrine *pragmaticism*, in order to distinguish it from the opinions of other pragmatists then in vogue. In this context, his ethical doctrine acquires certain specific characteristics which permit distinguishing it as a properly Peircean ethics. One can speak of a *pragmaticist ethics*, perfectly integrated within his philosophical system. This doctrine incorporates the notions concerning ethics and morality that had matured over the years, and incorporates other theories—such as the doctrine of the categories—which permit him to develop a much more refined vision of ethics, and to clarify the relevance which this science acquires in his pragmatism.<sup>10</sup>

In the writings of this period, the doctrine of pragmatism is presented as a logical maxim, according to which the only meaning possible of any theoretical judgment is found in its tendency to make the corresponding practical maxim be fulfilled (PPM 110; CP 5.18, 1903). What we think is interpreted in terms of that which we are prepared to do on the basis of deliberation. This form of understanding pragmatism involves two issues. First, the pragmatic maxim turns out to be a maxim

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8 “Logic rests on ethics to a degree that few are aware of” (CN 3:51, 1901). “I fear that logic, as a definite theory, can be of no avail until one knows what it is that one is trying to do, which is precisely what ethics has to determine” (CP 2.120, 1902). “It is, therefore, impossible to be thoroughly and rationally logical except upon an ethical basis” (CP 2.198, 1902). Cf. “Ethics” (MS 432.6; MS 433.1-6,11; CP 1.575-576, 1.579, 1902).

9 “It may also be asked what the end of reasoning must be? But then the question is, must be for what? To attain a given end? But again, what end? What is required here is an answer to the question of what the end of reasoning ought to be, and this involves the question of what ends in general ought to be adopted. This inquiry, however, is clearly ethical. In so far, then, as logic is to be regarded as a normative science, it must depend upon the science of norms and therefore upon ethics” (MURPHEY, 1961, p. 361).

10 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. “Pragmatism: The Normative Sciences” (CP 5.14-40; EP 2:133-144; PPM 109-121, 1903); “The Reality of Thirdness” (CP 5.93-119; EP 2:179-195; PPM 189-203, 1903); “The Three Kinds of Goodness” (CP 5.120-150; EP 2:196-207; PPM 205-220, 1903); “What Makes a Reasoning Sound?” (CP 1.591-615, 7.611-615, 8.176; EP 2:242-257, 1903); “An Outline Classification of the Sciences” (CP 1.180-202; EP 2:258-262, 1903); “What Pragmatism Is” (CP 5.411-437; EP 2:331-345, 1905); “Issues of Pragmaticism” (CP 5.438-463; EP 2:346-359, 1905); “The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences” (EP 2:371-397, 1906); “A Sketch of Logical Critics” (EP 2:451-462, 1911).

of conduct, since the proposition which is deliberately adopted as a guide for action cannot be anything other than a maxim of conduct (CP 5.27; PPM 116, 1903). Secondly, the pragmatic maxim, just as with the science of logic, depends on ethics, since the action with which the maxim is linked, insofar as it is deliberated, is a species of the actions which ethics studies (CP 5.35; PPM 118, 1903). Here the notion of self-controlled action appears as a first key for understanding pragmatism. Similarly with the notion of end, since if the meaning of a symbol consists in how it could make a human agent act, this *how* refers principally to action insofar as it has a determined end or purpose. Therefore, a primordial question for pragmatism is determining what the ends are that persons are disposed to adopt on the basis of deliberation (CP 5.135; PPM 214, 1903). Thus, given that logicians cannot respond to this issue, they must appeal to those normative sciences on which logic is based and accept their teachings. That is to say, they must consult ethics, and beyond that, aesthetics (CP 5.35-36; PPM 118-119, 1903). Here the third key notion for understanding pragmatism appears: ethics as a normative science which studies the conditions of conformity of the phenomena with their ends.

Thus, pragmaticist ethics can be understood on the basis of three essential notions: final causation, self-controlled action and the character of ethics as a normative science. The nature of the ethics of Peirce cannot be grasped or explained if one of these elements is lacking. I will now move to the consideration of what each of these three doctrines consists in, and what characteristics they confer on Peircean ethics.

## 2 Final causation

The first key is the notion of *final causation*.<sup>11</sup> Without a notion of the end, there is no way to understand the phenomenon of moral action, since the purpose or ideal that people possess is that towards which they orient their deliberated conduct. Pragmaticist ethics is the science which studies the conformity of self-controlled action with the ultimate end of human persons, i.e. the science which studies the path to achieving the self-control which will carry them to the supreme ideal of human life. It does not study action as such, nor the end as such; rather, it considers both on the basis of the relation of conformity which is established between them. The essential and determining element for the existence of this relation is the end or purpose—the operative desire—for which the subject undertakes the action (CP 1.205; EP 2:118, 1902). More precisely, the ultimate end is that which establishes what is correct and incorrect. What the subject acts in relation to is that which defines what makes a deliberated action right or not. Without an ordering or reference to an end, it makes no sense to speak of self-controlled, deliberated or moral action; indeed, it makes no sense even to speak of ethics. Furthermore, in Peirce's judgment, final causation is that from which all the objects that there may be in the universe and which respond to a certain description derive their existence

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11 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents, Especially from Testimonies" (CP 7.164-255; EP 2:75-114, 1901); "Review of S. Mezes's *Ethics: Descriptive and Explanatory*" (CN 3:50-53, 1901); "On Science and Natural Classes" (MS 427; EP 2:115-132; CP 1:203-283, 1902).



(CP 1.204; EP 2:117, 1902). Applying this idea to the class of human beings, when ethics asks about their purpose or ultimate end, it is asking about a common final cause, that due to which all men and women respond to the general description of human beings, or that to which they owe their existence as such beings. The final cause, in this sense, explains both the nature of human beings, as well as that kind of action which is most proper to them, i.e. self-controlled or moral action. Such action is right—insofar as it conforms to the final end—or wrong—to the degree that it does not so conform.

One can see, then, that Peirce's conception of ethics has become clearly teleological. Without the end, there is no way to understand the phenomenon of moral action, given that the end or ideal that persons possess is that which moves them to action; it is that towards which all deliberated conduct is oriented. But it is also the norm according to which human agents judge their own actions, taking into consideration how they wish their future conduct to be, but above all, taking into consideration their personal representations of what a good, full and meaningful life is. Furthermore, there is no way to fully understand pragmatism without the notion of final causation. The idea of purpose or end acquires a central place in pragmatist doctrine. According to Peirce, the very term *pragmatism* expresses what, for him, is one of the most important characteristics of his theory, namely, the recognition of an unbreakable linkage between rational cognition and rational purpose (CP 5.412; EP 2:332-333, 1905). When the pragmatist maxim affirms that the meaning of a theoretical judgment consists in *how* it may make a person act, what it intends to say is that the action in question has a determined purpose or end. This is why it is a question of crucial importance for pragmatism to know what ends persons are willing to adopt on the basis of deliberation. Or, what the ultimate end is which they can tend towards always and under any circumstances.

The importance of the matter for pragmatism is obvious. For if the meaning of a symbol consists in how it might cause us to act, it is plain that this "how" cannot refer to the description of mechanical motions that it might cause, but must intend to refer to a description of the action as having this or that *aim*. In order to understand pragmatism, therefore, well enough to subject it to intelligent criticism, it is incumbent upon us to inquire what an ultimate aim, capable of being pursued in an indefinitely prolonged course of action, can be (CP 5.135; PPM 214, 1903).

An essential characteristic of final causation is its causal influence, insofar as it is an ideal cause. This is a characteristic which is present in all final causes without distinction, but it acquires a special relevance when one speaks of the ultimate end of the human person. The ends or purposes of each concrete action of human agents are that in virtue of which they act. If they did not tend to a determined end, not only would they not act in a certain way, but indeed would not act at all. But if one takes a further step in the order of ends, arriving at the ultimate end, this latter provides the ultimate reason for which human agents act. Even more importantly, it is the ideal in accordance to which they configures their entire lives, since it is thanks to that ideal that they perceive life as a totality of meaning.

This explains the preeminence that the final causation has over the efficient causation. In the first place, because it is an idea that has the capacity to incarnate itself through the action of agents, and even confer on them their capacity to be operative: “ideas are not all mere creations of this or that mind, but on the contrary have a power of finding or creating their vehicles, and having found them, of conferring upon them the ability to transform the face of the earth” (CP 1.217; EP 2:123, 1902). But its preeminence also is due to the generative power that it possesses, since, as an ideal cause, the end gives organic existence or life to those beings which tend towards or order themselves with regards to it: “what I mean by the idea’s conferring existence upon the individual members of the class is that it confers upon them the power of working out results in this world, that it confers upon them, that is to say, organic existence, or, in one word, life” (CP 1.220; EP 2:124, 1902).<sup>12</sup> In Peirce’s opinion, all ideas, as such, have life, and thereby the capacity to become incarnate and generate life. Hence all ideas have, to a certain degree, the capacity to act on the world, above all the ideas of *truth* and of *right*:

It so happens that I myself believe in the eternal life of the ideas Truth and Right. What I do insist upon is not now the infinite vitality of those particular ideas, but that every idea has in some measure, in the same sense that those are supposed to have it in unlimited measure, the power to work out physical and psychical results. They have life, generative life (EP 2:123; CP 1.219, 1902).

Thus, the final causation, understood as an ideal cause, broadens the field of study of ethics in an extraordinary way. The purposes of human agents not only acquire the character of an idea which explains their actions and their own existence, but, more importantly still, makes them participate in a universe of ends or ideals of which human beings make up nothing more than a small part.<sup>13</sup> One might say that the characteristic of being an ideal cause which the end possesses manifests the presence of a *Logos* in everything which exists. This is why Peirce often proposes as an ultimate end, ideal or *summum bonum* the knowledge of pure ideas, or the contemplation of universal forms and eternal truths. In this way, human beings participate in creative activity, incarnating concrete reasonableness in the world and making it grow.

In this way the eternal forms, that mathematics and philosophy and the other sciences make us acquainted with, will by slow percolation gradually reach the very core of one’s being; and will come to influence our lives; and this they will do, not

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12 In order to clarify what Peirce means, Menno Hulswit presents two interesting examples—the first is the natural class of socialists, and the second, the Peircean example of a dissected corpse—in which shows that the final causation is the cause which animates and unifies, but also makes a thing to be what it is (Cf. HULSWIT, 2002, p. 114-115).

13 As Vincent Colapietro writes: “Moreover, our commitments to ideals are, especially with regard to the loftier ideals, more like acts of surrender than acts of acquisition: The higher ideals take possession of us rather than we of them. In fact, Peirce maintained the realization of the self demanded a series of acts by which the self surrenders itself to ever more inclusive ideals” (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 96).



because they involve truths of merely vital importance, but because they are ideal and eternal verities (MS 437.31; CP 1.648; RLT 122, 1898).<sup>14</sup>

### 3 Self-controlled action

The second key notion for pragmatist ethics is that of *self-controlled action*.<sup>15</sup> Together with the notion of the end, this type of action is the other theme which permits Peirce to interweave logic together with ethics, assigning the latter a space among the normative sciences and in his doctrine of pragmatism. While from the earliest definitions of ethics, generally speaking, self-controlled action has been the basic object of study recognized by Peirce, the fact that he insists more and more on speaking of deliberation and self-control indicates that he is considering the same phenomenon, but in a new light. In my view, among the elements which may have contributed to this change, that which is of most importance is the notion of conscience. Peirce's studies on this topic, in particular during 1902, open the way for his understanding of the essential role which reason plays in moral conduct. This further permits him to see much more closely the ordering of ethics to the logical order and to create a bridge between them (MS 433.6; CP 1.576, 1902).

A logical reasoner is a reasoner who exercises great self-control in his intellectual operations; and therefore the logically good is simply a particular species of the morally good. Ethics—the genuine normative science of ethics, as contradistinguished from the branch of anthropology which in our day often passes under the name of ethics—this genuine ethics is the normative science *par excellence*, because an *end*—the essential object of normative science—is germane to a voluntary act in a primary way in which it is germane to nothing else. For that reason I have some lingering doubt as to there being any true normative science of the beautiful. On the other hand, an ultimate end of action *deliberately* adopted—that is to say, *reasonably* adopted—must be a state of things that *reasonably recommends itself in itself* aside from any ulterior consideration. It must be an *admirable ideal*, having the only kind of goodness that such an ideal *can* have; namely, esthetic goodness. From this point of view the morally good appears as a particular species of the esthetically good (CP 5.130; PPM 213, 1903).

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14 Cf. COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 96-97; PFEIFER, 1971, p. 144-145; NUBIOLA, 2009, p. 125-134.

15 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "Why Study Logic?" (MS 428; CP 2.119-202, 1902); "Ethics" (MS 432-434; CP 1.575-584, 1902); "What Makes a Reasoning Sound?" (CP 1.591-615, 7.611-615, 8.176; EP 2:242-257, 1903); "What Pragmatism Is" (CP 5.411-437; EP 2:331-345, 1905); "Issues of Pragmatism" (CP 5.438-463; EP 2:346-359, 1905). About the notion of self-control and its relation with various elements of Peirce's philosophy, see HOLMES, 1966, p. 113-130. About the genesis and development of the notion of self-control in Peirce's thought, see PETRY, 1992, p. 667-690.

I believe that if he had not discovered how reason operates in the process by which a person comes to a deliberated decision, or the self-critical character inherent in the judgment of conscience, it would have been unlikely that he would have discovered the intimate relation that exists between logic and ethics, or to accommodate the latter among the normative sciences and in his pragmatist doctrine.

Self-controlled action is that which human persons deliberately perform, knowing what they do and freely choosing to do so. The fact that human agents have control over their actions is the indispensable condition for such actions to be reviewed and criticized (CP 5.130; PPM 212, 1903). This is because one cannot make a moral judgment—determining whether an action is good or bad—concerning an action which cannot be controlled. In regard to this type of actions, there are two basic aspects which Peirce takes into consideration: the first refers to deliberated action as such, i.e. when human agents perform free actions; the second refers to the reflexive moment, in which the agents return upon their own actions and judge whether they were in accordance with the proposed end—and thus whether they were good or bad—and whether it would be appropriate to continue the given line of action in the future. In moral action, then, there are two levels of self-control and of exercise of reason. While Peirce pays attention to both levels, I suggest that that which attracts his interest to a much greater degree—perhaps because he sees it as having a great deal in common with logic—is the level where one encounters the self-criticism which is proper to the conscience. Reason is involved in deliberated or self-controlled action at various moments: when it establishes what the ideal is towards which the action must tend, when it reflects on the rules which will be followed in its undertaking, when it lays out the plan of action to be followed, or when it determines what the most appropriate means are for attaining the desired end (CP 1.592-594; EP 2:246-247, 1903). Moral conduct is no longer circumscribed within the realm of instinct or sentiment, as Peirce held in 1898;<sup>16</sup> instead, the exercise of reason is accommodated within it.

It is the reflexive moment of self-controlled action, when human agents return upon their own actions and judge them, which appears to be of most interest to Peirce, given the attention he pays to it in his writings (CP 1.596-599; EP 2:247-248, 1903). He clearly assigns an essential value to the exercise of self-criticism and to the judgment of conscience, given that if this capacity to review one's own actions and judgments did not exist, the moral order would be destroyed, since one would not be able to distinguish between right conduct and wrong conduct. In "What Makes a Reasoning Sound?" Peirce writes: "What would be requisite in order to destroy the difference between innocent and guilty conduct? The one thing that would do it would be to destroy the faculty of effective self-criticism" (CP 1.604; EP 2:249, 1903).<sup>17</sup> He recognizes two levels of criticism in self-controlled action, one which is practical and another which is theoretical. In the first case, one is dealing with the phenomenon of conscience as such. This is, in essence, a reflexive act by which human agents

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16 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" (MS 435-437; CP 1.616-677; RLT 105-122, 1898). See AYIM, 1982; ANDERSON, 2005, p. 277-289; TRAMMELL, 1972, p. 3-25; MISAK, 2002, p. 64-82.

17 Something similar occurs in the logical order, where without criticism one could not judge the validity or invalidity of a line of reasoning.

return upon their actions and evaluate them. Conscience is a judgment in which the rectitude of an action (or the lack thereof) is established, via the comparison of the action with an objective moral norm. This norm may be the person's own ideal, the law, or human nature itself, which for Peirce is the ultimate and objective source of morality (MS 434.12-25, 1902). Therefore, affirming that human conscience is the last bastion of morality does not imply, for Peirce, that it has a subjective foundation. Rather, he recognizes that the conscience has an objective basis, insofar as it must make its judgments concord with the nature and ultimate end of the human being.

The best opinion about morality likewise is that it 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. It is true that there are a few moralists who divorce the source of morality from human nature, but they are forced into a double doctrine; for they are still obliged to say that a man ought to obey his conscience, unless they abandon the very idea of morality. [...] That morality is far more objective than taste is certainly the primitive judgment of common sense, to which some weight ought to be attached by those who propose to judge of reasons by natural common sense. It is true that the majority of writers on ethics in the past have made the root of morals subjective; but the best opinion is very plainly moving in the opposite direction (CP 2.156, 1902).

All persons must obey their consciences in their actions, but this is not an absolute norm of action. Rather, it is a regulated norm, insofar as they have internalized the law or have made the moral norm their own. This explains why Peirce insists on the importance that all persons do everything possible to attain a certain moral maturity, such that they act with freedom and conviction, insofar as they have—voluntarily and based on reflection—made the norm of right conduct their own.

It is every man's duty to enlighten his conscience as much as possible. Conscience itself requires him to do that. But still, when all is done that circumstances permit, it is his duty to act conscientiously. [...] Conscience is like our Supreme Court, which intends to frame its decisions according to the principles of law. But when it has decided a point, its decision becomes law (CP 2.153, 1902).

If the exercise of self-criticism or the judgment of conscience are accompanied by decisions about how the given persons will act in the future, this implies perfecting their own manner of acting, correcting their errors and reinforcing their right actions, such that they acquire certain habits or virtues which conform ever more closely to their ideal of life or ultimate end. As Peirce writes, "Whether the man is satisfied with himself or dissatisfied, his nature will absorb the lesson like a sponge; and the next time he will tend to do better than he did before" (CP 1.598; EP 2:248, 1903). The other level of criticism or reflection on human action is theoretical criticism, which does not consider self-controlled action and ideals in any given concrete case, but

rather in general. It has the goal of establishing what the necessary conditions are so that there is a conformity between the action and the end in all human action. This theoretical type of study is that which is proper and specific to the science of ethics: “there are the purely theoretical studies of the student of ethics who seeks to ascertain, as a matter of curiosity, what the fitness of an ideal of conduct consists in, and to deduce from such definition of fitness what conduct ought to be” (CP 1.600; EP 2:248, 1903).<sup>18</sup>

#### 4 Ethics as a normative science

The third key to pragmatist ethics is the fact that it is *a normative science*.<sup>19</sup> Assigning ethics a place among the normative sciences, together with logic and aesthetics, first entails recognizing it as a theoretical and philosophical science. On reformulating the object of study of ethics, its position in the order of the sciences naturally changes. Before, it was a practical or applied science, whose purpose consisted in studying moral conduct in view of the utility that this knowledge would have for one’s life. Now, however, it is a theoretical science, whose purpose is to study moral conduct as it appears in everyday experience, in order to understand its characteristics and conditions as such. Given that its end is now the search for the truth of moral phenomena in itself, ethics rightly forms part of theoretical knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it is now a philosophical science or *coenosopic*, insofar as it studies the positive truth about self-controlled action, on the basis of the observation of this phenomenon as it presents itself in habitual experience (CP 1.239, 1902). In Peirce’s opinion, “Ethics as a positive science must rest on observed facts. The only solid foundation for ethics lies in those facts of every-day-life which no skeptical philosopher ever yet really called in question” (CN 3:51, 1901). Its

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18 James Liszka describes a way in which this theoretical criticism can take place in ethics: “Initially, as ethical theorists introduce new ideas and criticize existing norms, there is a strong resistance among practitioners accustomed to the dominant norms. Yet, often within a passing decade, the novel theories are accepted as if they had always been part of the tradition. It is hard to imagine slavery as an acceptable practice today, yet in Peirce’s own time that issue was rife with controversy; and, although Peirce’s own beliefs and position on slavery during the Civil War were distressingly conservative, he undoubtedly could see the normative changes that happened to the American belief system on that issue over time” (LISZKA, 2012, p. 75).

19 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. “Ethics” (MS 432-434; CP 1.575-584, 1902); “Pragmatism: The Normative Sciences” (CP 5.14-40; EP 2:133-144; PPM 109-121, 1903); “The Reality of Thirdness” (CP 5.93-119; EP 2:179-195; PPM 189-203, 1903); “The Three Kinds of Goodness” (CP 5.120-150; EP 2:196-207; PPM 205-220, 1903). See POTTER, 1967, p. 8-67; PARKER, 1998, p. 48-54, 128-133; PARKER, 2005, p. 27-45.

20 About the theoretical nature of normative sciences Christopher Hookway explains: “We do not look to these disciplines to *justify* our choice of ultimate aim, or for guidance on what standards to adopt. [...] The normative sciences attempt to provide an abstract and perspicuous description of the kinds of standards, of all kinds, that can be adopted unconditionally, thereby providing a vindication of the objectivity of the ultimate standards employed in aesthetic, ethical and logic evaluation” (HOOKWAY, 1985, p. 59). Cf. ROBIN, 1964, p. 276-277.

purpose is to “look to [that which is] common,” to discover the characteristics or properties shared by all self-controlled actions, as ordered to the ultimate end of the human person. Consequently, ethics becomes a positive science, which is based on observational data and experience, and whose principal interest is the analysis of the conditions which are necessary for self-controlled action to conform itself to the ends or ideals of the human being. Influencing concrete moral action is only of secondary interest.

In the second place, the fact that ethics is a normative science entails that it is one of the sciences which study the laws and conditions of the conformity of phenomena with the ends which pertain to them, “that is, perhaps, to Truth, Right, and Beauty” (CP 5.121; PPM 208, 1903). The normative sciences are those which establish the norms of what ought to be, but they are also the sciences which examine the conditions of attainment of a purpose or end (MS 433.1; CP 1.575, 1902). Among the three normative science recognized by Peirce (logic, ethics and aesthetics), there is a successive relation of dependence and of providing foundations proceeding from one to the other. Peirce's explanation of this relation tends to be the following: logic is the science concerning what we ought to think, but what we ought to think is interpreted in terms of what we are prepared to do based on deliberation. Ethics, on the other hand, is the science concerning that which we are prepared to do based on deliberation. In turn, that which we choose to do is nothing other than the end or the purpose which we freely choose. Finally, the study of these ends or purposes is the task of aesthetics, the science concerning ultimate ends, ideals, the *summum bonum*, and that which is admirable in itself. Hence, logic must base itself on ethics, which in turn bases itself on aesthetics; in other words, the logically good is a species of the morally good, which is itself a species of the aesthetically good.<sup>21</sup> As one can appreciate, the two basic notions which permit establishing a relation of dependence between the normative sciences are the notion of deliberated action and the notion of end. However, there exists a third doctrine, the theory of the categories, which also permits establishing this relation, and which gives it even greater firmness and solidity in the overall context of Peircean thought.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the link established by Peirce between the normative sciences and the categories is an essential element which strengthens his conception of pragmatist ethics.<sup>23</sup> The normative sciences are, among the philosophical disciplines, those

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21 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. “Pragmatism: The Normative Sciences” (CP 5.35-36; PPM 118-119, 1903); “The Reality of Thirdness” (CP 5.108; PPM 196, 1903); “The Three Kinds of Goodness” (CP 5.129-135; PPM 212-214, 1903); “What Makes a Reasoning Sound?” (CP 1.611-613; EP 2:252-253, 1903); “The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences” (EP 2:376-378, 1906).

22 Cf. PEIRCE, C. S. “On a New List of Categories” (W 2:49-59; CP 1.545-559; EP 1:1-10, 1867); “The Universal Categories” (CP 5.41-65; PPM 123-165, 1903); “The Categories Continued” (CP 5.66-92; PPM 167-188, 1903). For an exhaustive analysis of “On a New List of Categories”, based on its sources and antecedents and including a close analysis of the text, see DE TIENNE, 1996.

23 “These three normative sciences correspond to my three categories, which in their psychological aspect, appear as Feeling, Reaction, Thought. I have advanced my understanding of these categories much since Cambridge days; and can now put them

which study phenomena in their secondness, i.e. the laws which determine the relation of the phenomena to their ends (CP 5.123, 5.129; PPM 209, 212, 1903). Similarly, among the normative sciences, ethics is that which studies the laws which determine the relation of conformity between self-controlled actions and the ultimate end of human beings. That is to say, it studies the phenomenon of morality in its secondness. Thus, ethics is the normative science par excellence, since it is the secondness of a secondness. The phenomenon of morality which it studies possesses a mode of being which is proper to secondness, since when people perform free actions, they make them conform themselves to the concrete purpose of the action and with the end that they have adopted as ultimate. In turn, when pragmaticist ethics, as a normative science that studies phenomena in their secondness, studies moral conduct, it is examining the relation of conformity which is established between deliberated action and its purpose, or the ultimate end of human persons. It does not consider the self-controlled action as such, nor the ultimate end as such, but rather the relation which exists between them.

*Ethics is the study of what ends of action we are deliberately prepared to adopt.* That is right action which is in conformity to ends which we are prepared deliberately to adopt. That is all there *can be* in the notion of righteousness, as it seems to me. The righteous man is the man who controls his passions, and makes them conform to such ends as he is prepared deliberately to adopt as *ultimate* (CP 5.130; PPM 213, 1903).

Or, to state it another way, it studies the action and the end insofar as a relation is established between them, with the purpose of discovering what the conditions and common laws are that determine this relation in all cases. Thus, the application of the categories, both to pragmaticist ethics as well as to the phenomena which it studies, provides ethics with a greater solidity and confirms its place among the normative sciences, as it also does for the link that exists between them.

## 5 Conclusion

Now that we have seen what each of these three key notions of pragmaticist ethics consists in, it remains for us to describe the essential characteristics that they confer on this ethics. In the first place, it is a *theoretical-philosophical* science which studies the phenomenon of morality with a speculative rather than a practical purpose. It is a *positive* science, which studies the facts which common experience offers to observation, in search of their common features and of those conditions which must be satisfied in order to attain a given end. In addition, it is an *objective* science. Although it examines a phenomenon which has both a subjective and an objective dimension, its knowledge of the phenomenon lays claim to an objective basis, given by the nature of human beings and their ultimate end. This basis, furthermore, confers objectivity on the norm of action. Thus, this norm is not arbitrary but

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in a much clearer light and more convincingly. The true nature of pragmatism cannot be understood without them” (Letter from C. S. Peirce to W. James, November 25, 1902, JAMES, 2003, p. 157-158).

regulated, and is based on a real order (which can be called nature, end or law). It is also the philosophical science of *secondness*, a science of relations, which studies the conformity between an object—the deliberated action—and a quality—its ordering to the end. In addition, it is a science with a marked *critical* character. Reviewing the deliberated action reflexively, judging its moral quality in order to correct and improve the future manner of acting, acquiring certain virtues which aid human agents to conduct themselves ever more in conformity with their ends or life ideals: all of these give reason a fundamental role in pragmaticist ethics. Finally, one of the most notable features of this ethics is its *teleological* character. Indeed, without an ordering to ends it cannot be understood. In the first place, for Peirce the ultimate end of human beings takes center place in the phenomenon of morality and in its study. In addition, given that it is an ideal cause, the end opens to human beings a horizon in which their own ideals of life are embraced, and, at the same time, transcended by a much more elevated and universal ideal. This ultimate end consists in constantly making the world a little more reasonable: collaborating in the incarnation, manifestation and growth of Reason as such, or *Noûs*.

This development of Reason consists, you will observe, in embodiment, that is, in manifestation. 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. The one thing whose admirableness is not due to an ulterior reason is Reason itself comprehended in all its fullness, so far as we can comprehend it. 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 (CP 1.615; EP 2:255, 1903).

This should be, in Peirce's judgment, the ideal for conduct both for the scientist and philosopher, as well as for all of humankind. His representation of what a good and well-lived life can be manifests an outlook that goes far beyond the human being as such. Peirce conceives of humankind as a simple mote of dust in the universe of reasonableness. This universe is a *Logos* which embraces humankind, is present in it in a special way, but at the same time transcends it. This is why, in his opinion, every dimension of the human experience, in order to be properly measured in its own worth, must be contemplated from this transcendent perspective of reasonableness. Beginning with the scientist, all human beings must be able to observe their own life and their own purposes from a higher point of view. They must be able to distance themselves from their own personal interests, transcending themselves and taking charge of their own existence while forming part of a much broader whole (CP 1.611; EP 2:253, 1903). When we human beings are conscious of this, of what our true place in the universe is and what our authentic task consists in, then, as Peirce says, “behind the outline of that huge mountain [we can] descry a silvery peak rising into the calm air of eternity” (MS 435.35; CP 1.675, 1898).



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