

Resenha

Book Review

BOERO, Hedy. *Charles S. Peirce: Claves para una ética pragmaticista*. Eunsa, Pamplona, 2014, 316 pp.

Sara Barrena

Grupo de Estudios Peirceanos
Universidad de Navarra – España
sbarrena@unav.es

Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) combined his activity as a scientist with a deep interest in logic and philosophy. Penetrating questions about knowledge and human action were always present in his thought. As Hedy Boero shows in this book, he was particularly concerned with making the nature of his scientific activity more clear and transparent. Peirce was always interested in explaining the mechanisms that lead human beings to produce new knowledge. In 1892, he wrote that one of the most interesting questions is how things grow, not only in each division of science but also in the development of art (MS 1277). That question refers not only to the true nature of knowledge, but also to the ultimate purpose of scientific endeavor, which in the end takes on ethical overtones, since Peirce's answer to that question is precisely a participation in creative activity: the cooperation of human beings in the manifestation and growth of reason as such.

That end will, for Peirce, become the ideal for the conduct of all people, which shows that ethics was not something far from his thoughts. On the contrary, ethical considerations, understood in a broad sense as the pursuit of the good life—that is, the approach to the *summum bonum*—formed a part of Peirce's reflections on an overall vision for the growth of human beings, and for discovering and explaining the universe. For Peirce, human experience situates itself within a broader perspective of reasonableness.

While ethics has not aroused much interest among Peirce scholars until now, it is, as Hedy Boero shows, more than just a side issue in Peirce's thought. His reflections on that science “extended throughout practically his entire life, from the philosophical exercises of a young student at Harvard, up to the solid arguments of a mature man who toiled in the immense task of presenting to the world the central ideas of his vast philosophical system” (p. 12). In this book, with the help of the author, who guides us with great skill, we accompany Peirce through the main stages in the development of the ethical issues he studied.

The book is organized into four chapters, which, thanks to a chronological, comprehensive approach—including a judicious selection and analysis of texts—guide us in experiencing firsthand Peirce's doubts and advances in ethical reflection. Through a detailed analysis of the sources, moral issues are carefully examined, together with the difficulties that Peirce faced and the findings that allowed him to

provide solutions to certain problems. Our idea of a Peircean ethics advances step by step, and we come to see how it came to be. Boero shows how, in Peirce, ethics is not something over and done with, completed and fossilized. Rather, it is a living and growing process, something which, for Peirce, must characterize any science.

In Boero's first chapter, which contains texts dated between 1857 and 1892, two initial, basic issues are considered: what do we mean when we speak of ethics and morality, and when did Peirce's interest in ethical issues arise? In this regard, the author presents biographical and textual evidence that allows her to situate the beginning of Peirce's work in ethics in the years 1882-1883. In particular, the entries on ethics and morality that Peirce prepared for the *Century Dictionary* are especially relevant.

The second chapter, which covers the period between 1892 and 1898, deals with the first moral issue that, for Peirce, deserved careful development: the relationship that may exist between ethics and scientific research. As a scientist who seeks to clarify the nature of his task, Peirce tries to answer the question of whether there is a morality that is intrinsic to scientific activity and, if it exists, what it is. Another question is whether morality can influence science and whether science can have any influence on morality. In this chapter the author analyzes a little-known text of Peirce that contains interesting reflections: the review of the book by Arabella Buckley, *Moral Teachings of Science* (CN 1.155-157; W 8.345-348, 1892); other texts examined are the manuscript "Lessons from the History of Science" (CP 1.43-125, c.1896) and the first of the *Cambridge Lectures*, "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" (MS 435-437; CP 1.616-677, 1898).

In the third chapter, which focuses on the years 1901 and 1902—especially productive for Peirce—the author analyzes those texts that began to lay the foundations for an ethical doctrine that Peirce would later—beginning in 1903—develop with much more clarity and strength than in his earlier works. It is during these years that Peirce recognized ethics to be a philosophical or theoretical science and distinguished it from a practical study or art. Selected texts in this chapter include "On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents, Especially from Testimonies" (CP 7.164-255; EP 2.75-114, 1901), the review of the book of Sidney Mezes, *Ethics: Descriptive and Explanatory* (CN 3.50-53, 1901), and three texts from 1902 belonging to a book that Peirce had planned, *Minute Logic*: "On Science and Natural Classes" (MS 427; EP 2.115-132; CP 1.203-283, 1902), "Why Study Logic" (MS 428; CP 2.119-202, 1902) and "Ethics" (MS 432-434; CP 1.575-584, 1902).

The fourth chapter, the longest one, covers Peirce's writings from 1903 until 1911, that is, the period of maturity of his thought which Max Fisch called "Arisbe," in reference to the name of the house in Milford where Peirce and his wife lived during those years. This period of Peirce's life was philosophically the most productive, although it was marked by poverty and disease. During those years, faithful to his habit of correcting, rewriting and revising his thought again and again, Peirce constantly returns to subjects previously treated, introducing twists and shedding new light on them. At this final stage, Peirce reached intellectual maturity, fully developed his theory of signs and produced many of his theories about metaphysics. The reformulation of pragmatism occupied a central place during those years, since Peirce wanted to carefully distinguish his own doctrines from other versions, such as the theories of William James and F.C.S. Schiller.

Peirce changed the name of “pragmatism” to “pragmaticism,” and it can be said that the development of his ethical thought was not unrelated to the task of redefining pragmatism itself. Quite the contrary: “ethics cannot be understood any more without its relation to pragmaticism, and pragmaticism necessarily requires ethics as essential for its testing or demonstration” (p. 19). In those final years ethics would be definitively established as a normative science, and the concepts of self-control and final causality, which provide a new understanding of the notions of end and purpose, will appear as essential. The last section of the book attempts to lay out in a more systematic way the keys to a pragmaticist ethics. The writings selected in this last chapter are three of the *Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism* of 1903 (CP 5.14-40, 5.93-119, 5.120-150, EP 2.133-144, 2.179-195, 2.196-207), one of the *Lowell Lectures*, “What Makes a Sound Reasoning” (CP 1.591-615, EP 2.242-257, 1903), and the texts “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), and “A Sketch of Logical Critics” (EP 2.451-462, 1911).

As this book demonstrates quite rightly, the true nature of pragmatism can't be understood without the doctrine of the normative sciences, particularly of ethics, while at the same time ethics is enriched in the effort to define pragmatism, thereby constituting a feedback loop that greatly enriches both sides.

On the one hand, in his last years pragmatism became for Peirce a maxim according to which the only possible meaning of something is found in those dispositions that it originates, in what we are deliberately prepared to do. As Peirce himself stated in a manuscript dating from c.1907, pragmatism is built on the principle that the beliefs of human beings are the propositions which they will find satisfactory to act upon (MS 296). The pragmatic maxim thus becomes a maxim of behavior. That something has meaning entails being prepared to deliberately adopt a proposition as a guide for action. In 1903, speaking of the normative sciences, Peirce says that he is on the trail of the *secret* of pragmatism (CP 5.130), because to clarify the pragmatic maxim we must find out what is logically good, and to find out what is logically good we must have a clear understanding of the nature of the ultimate end, of that end, admirable in itself, according to which we should think and act. What we think is interpreted in terms of what we are prepared to do, and what we are prepared to do in terms of what we are prepared to admire.

That *secret* of pragmatism, as Hedy Boero rightly points out, is nothing other than self-control, which consists in acting according to an admirable ideal. Rational self-control is closely linked to the idea of end, of an ideal, because, as Peirce claims, when we say that the meaning of something is *how* we would act, it is plain that this “how” cannot refer to the description of the mechanical motions that it might cause, but rather to a description of the action as having this or that *aim* (CP 5.135); it does not refer to individual reactions but to how those reactions contribute to the development and pursuit of a purpose. And so, to properly understand pragmatism, we must ask what the ultimate aim is, that is, the end that can be pursued over an indefinitely prolonged course of action. In short, to be rational and to act according to pragmatism, that is, to consider the consequences so as to clarify the meaning of things, means taking into account deliberate conduct; it means being subject to self-control, and acting in accordance with a purpose that an ultimate end illuminates.

Now, focusing on the other direction of that feedback existing between ethics and pragmatism, the author explains that ethical notions are also enriched by the mature Peirce's vision of pragmatism. In particular, the notion of final cause enables a much more solid and harmonious link to develop between the normative sciences; the notion of consciousness becomes the notion of criticism, and the doctrine of categories allows for each one of the normative sciences to be defined more precisely.

Hedy Boero shows that there is an ethics that can quite properly be called, by its association with key aspects of pragmatism, "pragmaticist ethics." The notions of normative science, self-control and end are the three foundations on which this ethics is to be based. Despite initial doubts, Peirce clearly established ethics as a normative science, one that concerns self-control in the field of action, and which stands as the science that studies the conformity of deliberate action with the end. It corresponds to aesthetics, the first normative science and foundation of logic and ethics, to tell us what that ultimate end is, that is, what is admirable in itself. The notion of self-control involves the notion of end, insofar as it presupposes the capacity to review our own actions and to make them approach the ideal.

Therefore, Peircean ethics is built on reason, which, having a critical and teleological character, allows us to carry out deliberate action. Reason helps us to reflect on our actions and guide our future, thinking first about the nature of the ideal, considering the conceivable consequences, and helping to review our actions and to judge and form a resolution for the future. As Boero has noted, all self-controlled action involves, first, being ordered to an end, and second, being clearly forward-looking, since it allows a critical analysis of one's own conduct, a modification of planned acts and the acquisition of certain habits in light of the consequences for the future action. All converges in the notion of ultimate end, of the ideal that is, for Peirce, none other than making the world more and more reasonable, embodying reasonableness in concrete manifestations—in concrete actions, in the case of ethics. Conformity to the ideal of Reasonableness thus becomes one of the most important elements of the Peircean notion of ethics.

Boero's book is an essential contribution to Peirce studies. She deals with a subject that until now might have seemed minor, but, as is shown in her book, it turns out to be fundamental to the correct understanding of pragmatism. She powerfully illuminates the mutual enrichment of ethics and pragmatism. While in the end one might miss a more systematic approach—the analysis of texts can sometimes deprive us of a more global vision—the chronological approach is always wise when discussing any aspect of Peirce's thought. Further, Boero's comprehensive approach means that, at the end of the book, Peirce's ethics appear as a complete system that sustains itself, as well as being related to other fundamental aspects of his thought.

The author proves that ethics has been present in Peirce's writings throughout his entire life, sometimes more deeply and sometimes less. It becomes much more important starting at the turn of the century, when Peirce undergoes an evolution that brings aesthetics and ethics decisively within his purview. Peirce's ethics, far from being a moral doctrine, is a theoretical science, which does not speak of specific practical actions but of the *general* conditions under which phenomena must relate to ends. According to Peirce's pragmatism, the normative sciences

deal with *conceivable* action, as opposed to practical action. We must not expect from the normative sciences any practical advice, specific indications or discoveries of new techniques or forms of action. These sciences are not related to real and specific occurrences, with particular phenomena, nor are they limited to a good/bad dualism that would be appropriate for a practical science.

What makes ethics a normative science is that it studies what *should* be, that is, the conditions to be fulfilled in order that actions should conform to the ultimate end. The normative sciences are theoretical and “positive”: they are the most purely theoretical sciences amongst all purely theoretical sciences (CP 1.281, c.1902). Only by affirming positive and categorical truth can they demonstrate what they call good. Once again, Peirce does not provide recipes or simple answers, but he makes us wonder and reflect on deep questions, in this case about the elements present in all human action, and about the ultimate goal to which our lives should be directed. As a result, this book will be of interest to any Peircean scholar, but also to all those interested in the big questions about human life and the deepest questions of ethics.

Endereço/ Address

Sara Barrena
Grupo de Estudios Peirceanos
Departamento de Filosofía
Universidad de Navarra
31080 Pamplona, España

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