

# Peirce's Early Re-readings of his Illustrations: From Kant's Duty Ethics to Peirce's Communitarian Ethics of Ideals

*Generalizando em uma Sociedade Pluralista:  
Da Ética do Dever Kantiana à Ética Comunitária dos Ideais de Peirce*

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**Abstract:** In this paper the author reflects on the problem of generalizing in a pluralistic society. According to him, what is much needed in our post-modern era is an ethical perspective that, on the one hand, does not disregard the different particular, empirical settings in which moral criteria emerge and are being developed, and, on the other hand, endorses the possibility of pursuing common goals and ideals. This perspective is developed through a reconstruction of a dialog between Kant and Peirce.

**Keywords:** Generalizing. Pluralism. Kant. Peirce. Communitarian Ideals.

**Resumo:** Neste artigo, o autor reflete sobre o problema da generalização em uma sociedade pluralista. De acordo com ele, o que precisamos em nossa era pós-moderna é de uma perspectiva ética que, de um lado, não desconsidere a diferença particular, cenários empíricos em que os critérios morais emergem estão em desenvolvimento, e, por outro lado, promova a possibilidade de buscar objetivos e ideais comuns. Esta perspectiva é desenvolvida através da reconstrução de um diálogo entre Kant e Peirce.

**Palavras-chave:** Generalização. Pluralismo. Kant. Peirce. Ideais Comunitários.

## Introduction

In our (Western) pluralistic society it seems to be ever more difficult to establish which norms we must uphold and which values we must respect. The increasing contact with different and foreign perspectives and value orientations not only exposes the fact that people can have different beliefs and life projects but it also reveals that the criteria that enable us to judge which ideas and values are good and which should be avoided or challenged are far from self-evident.

A prominent ethical standpoint, which has many influential advocates, is that despite all the diverse perspectives and value orientations that people can have, it is still possible to formulate some minimal standards that every rational being would

agree on. The supporters of this view are often in one way or another indebted to Kant's duty ethics. Opponents of this perspective find Kantian ethics too formal, *i.e.*, they believe that Kantian ethics unjustly disregards the concrete, empirical context that determines to a great extent how decisions and actions are and must be evaluated. A problem, however, which advocates of this view have to deal with, is ethical relativism. If it is impossible to determine whether actions are good independently of a particular empirical context, how then could we formulate general (even if they are minimal, basic standards) ethical criteria or guidelines?

This observation indicates that what is much needed in our post-modern era is an ethical perspective that, on the one hand, does not disregard the context in which moral decisions are made and actions are executed, and, on the other hand, is able to show that the idea that moral decisions and actions cannot be evaluated independently of their concrete context does not necessarily have to imply ethical relativism. Although there are many ethical theories that could be explored in this respect, in this paper I want to restrict myself to two approaches. First, I want to discuss Kant's ethical view and take his objectives seriously, but also indicate which aspects of his view can no longer be sustained in our post-modern society. This way the scope of the problem can also be assessed more accurately. Secondly, I want to discuss Peirce's ethical theory and try to show that Peirce offers us a perspective that adopts contextuality without embracing ethical relativism. That Peirce's theory is influenced by Kant also confirms my conviction that although Kant's views require revision, they can still be of relevance for our time.

In sections 1 and 2 I will sketch the most important aspects of, respectively, Kant's duty ethics and Peirce's ethics. In section 3 I will confront the two philosophers with one another. In the last section I will argue that Peirce's ethics indicates that believing in ideals in our pluralistic society is not only possible but also imperative.

## 1. Kant's Duty Ethics

In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant sets the tone of his ethics with the following famous statement: "Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will."<sup>1</sup> This assertion is an allusion to many ethical theorists who preceded Kant and tried to ground morality on, for example, the law of god or of a sovereign monarch, a special feeling that we experience when we act morally good, or the perfection of natural qualities. Kant admits that qualities like wit, courage, and perseverance can be good in different respects, but these "gifts of nature" may also turn out to be extremely bad if the will that makes use of them is not good. Only a good will is good without restrictions.

What Kant has seen sharply is that grounding morality on an externally imposed law or foreign institute – and we will see further on that also our natural faculties are external to our genuine self – jeopardizes the autonomy of the will. Because we can only be held accountable for our autonomous actions, acting under orders of a

1 KANT, Immanuel. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. W. Weischedel (ed.). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993, p. 18. [Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott.]

will that is not our own discharges us from being accountable for our deeds. Put yet differently, we can only be held responsible for what is within our control. All that happens in the external, empirical world is, according to Kant beyond our control. The only thing that I can control is the decision that I make before I physically act, *i.e.*, my intention. That is why Kant can say that only a good will is intrinsically good. The equation of will with decision making implies, as we will see, that the will for Kant is not something that is detached from reason but that it rather is a certain modus of reason.

If qualifying an action as good or bad is only justified if the action is the result of an autonomous will, then the question that emerges is: when do we act autonomously? Distinctive for agents with an autonomous will is that they do not simply act but are able to reflect and decide whether they would want to act in a certain way. In other words, they have the capacity to act deliberately. Acting under the influence of passions or impulses is, according to Kant, a feature of a heteronomous will. It is action that is not the result of a deliberate and self-legislated choice but action that is governed by a foreign, external faculty. We act autonomously only if we act in accordance with a law that is dictated by our own reason.

Acting autonomously, and therefore reasonably is, thus, not the same as doing whatever I please. Reason is for Kant not determined by subjective preferences or particular circumstances, but has rather its own objective laws, which are valid for every rational being. Moreover, that we experience these laws as imperatives that we ought to follow, as constraints, does not imply that we act under the influence of a foreign legislator but rather indicates that we are only partly rational, *i.e.*, that we also have a bodily nature, which is not necessarily in accordance with our reason.

Kant believes that a principle can only be called reasonable if it is valid in all situations and circumstances, regardless of subjective inclinations or desires; reason is the same at all times and for all people. From this, it follows that only categorical, unconditional imperatives (in contrast to hypothetical imperatives) can be considered reasonable in a genuine sense. Consequently, reason becomes not only the source for morality but also the criterion for establishing the moral value of an action.

Once we recognize that moral law is universal, we can determine the "content" of the categorical imperative. If we strip away all empirical considerations that are part of a hypothetical and heteronomous point of view, we discover that the content of the moral law is in a certain sense its form. It says that an action is morally good if it is not dependent on arbitrary impulses or preferences but rather is motivated by a maxim that we could will in all possible circumstances – "arbitrariness" is, we could say, the opposite of "rationality".

Kant's categorical imperative can be characterized more sharply by discussing shortly his two most known formulations of it. His first formulation is: "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law."<sup>2</sup> On the first sight this seems to be not more than stating in a weighty way a principle that is used commonly in everyday life, namely "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself" or "Treat others as you would like them to treat you" (St. Luke 6:31). In a footnote Kant, however, warns us against confusing

2 *Ibidem*, p. 51.

his categorical imperative with such popular sayings.<sup>3</sup> Those everyday life maxims usually appeal to the wants and likings of particular persons and are, therefore, based on self-interest, whereas Kant's imperative wants to radically exclude self-interest from moral consideration and overcome particularity. His categorical imperative does not say that I, for example, may not steal because I would not like it if people would steal from me, but rather indicates that stealing is morally wrong because I cannot will it to be a universal law, irrespective of my personal desires or particular circumstances. Actions ought to be performed exclusively *for the sake* of duty.

Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative is: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."<sup>4</sup> I may not treat other rational beings as mere means to my purposes because in pursuing their goals, they, like myself, never consider themselves as mere means to other purposes. Put differently, rational beings cannot be treated as mere means because they are simultaneously the authors and the subjects of the laws and principles they execute through their will. An ideal world would be a kingdom in which persons never are treated merely as means but always also as ends. Kant's ethics has laid the foundation for the great importance that we ascribe to autonomy today.

The major problem that Kant's ethics has to contend with from the start is that morality for him is only possible *if* we can really determine our own law for ourselves, *if*, in other words, we are really free. In the last chapter of his *Grundlegung* he shows that the reality of freedom can never be proven by empirical observation because the world that we perceive and understand is governed by the principle that every event is caused by another, prior event. Kant's way out of this determinism is through his introduction of the distinction between the intelligible world and the world of appearances. Kant not only argues that we are members of both worlds but he also states that the first has a certain primacy over the latter: appearances are no more than the picture that reason develops in making sense of the world. Although we can never prove the reality of freedom, he concludes in the *Grundlegung*, we necessarily presuppose it, especially when we engage in practical endeavours. In the following section we will see that Kant's radical distinction between the rational and the empirical world forms an unbridgeable gap between him and Peirce.

## 2. Peirce's Ethics of Ideals

Although Peirce has not written a systematic treatise on ethics, his scattered remarks in published and unpublished texts give us a reasonably coherent impression of the content and boundaries of his ethical theory. Peirce makes from the beginning a distinction between what he calls practical morality and ethical theory: when confronted with "topics of vital importance" in our everyday lives, we should, according to him, not entrust our decisions to our extremely fallible and indigent individual reason but behave how we have been brought up to behave.<sup>5</sup> In situations that require instant

3 *Ibidem*, p. 62.

4 *Ibidem*, p. 61.

5 See CP 1. 666.

decisions we should trust our feeling, or as Peirce sometimes calls it, our sentiment or instinct. Sentiment is for Peirce not an individual faculty, but in a certain sense exactly the opposite: a moral code is an “instinctive or sentimental induction summarizing the experience of all our race.”<sup>6</sup> When confronted with moral dilemmas in our everyday lives we should therefore take on a *conservative* disposition.

Within the region of ethical theory, on the other hand, it is not necessary to make instant decisions, which allows us to experiment with different rational hypotheses that in practical affairs are often not only impossible but even dangerous. In science there is room to learn from one's own mistakes and from mistakes that others make. Science requires upholding a broad point of view. Making practical decisions, on the other hand, necessarily requires strongly narrowing our point of view.<sup>7</sup>

The distinction between reasoning and sentiment is significant because it indicates that Peirce situates the criterion for what is good not in individual reasoning (recall Kant's approach) but rather in social sentiment, which is the result of a long process of interaction between and modification and correction of different points of view. This distinction, however, is not irreducible: not only does social interaction generate certain sentimental attitudes, but in the end it will also determine what is good (“individual”) reasoning. This could be an explanation for why in some of Peirce's later texts the distinction between ethical theory and practical morality seems to be less strong. That he, nevertheless, has sustained that distinction is due to his strong conviction that (individual) cognition is much more subject to making mistakes than (social) sentiment. Because a sentimental attitude is the result of a long history of social interaction it is less dependent on contingent, individual preferences and less determined by particular situations.

The emphasis on the importance of a certain inertia in the modification and development of moral judgments is consonant with Peirce's view that the task of ethics is not to establish directly what good action is. Ethics for him should rather study the *conditions* under which certain habits are formed, which *could* generate good conduct. We can, according to Peirce, only form certain habits if we submit our conduct to certain general ideas that we consider to be worthy to pursue in different situations, *i.e.*, if we submit our conduct to certain *ideals*. The task of ethics is to discover the general goals and ideals that could prompt us to form habits by virtue of which we could act well.

An ideal, in Peirce's meaning of the word, must not be identified with a motive of action. Every action has a motive, whereas the pursuit of a goal or ideal refers to *deliberate* conduct, which is incited by self-criticism. Self-criticism implies that an actor reflects on his (important) actions and judges whether he wants his future conduct to be in accordance with them or not. Reflecting upon his conduct, the actor is led to want to make it conform to a certain ideal that he believes in: “His ideal is the kind of conduct which attracts him upon review.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, he will, however vaguely and implicitly, formulate certain rules of conduct. Such reflection on rules, as well as upon the general ideas behind them, will ultimately influence his disposition so as

6 EP: 32.

7 Cf. CP 2.198.

8 EP 2: 377.

to modify what he is naturally inclined to do. Put differently, self-criticism followed by more or less conscious decisions will in the long run result in the formation of a certain habit. A habit influences future conduct but is not the immediate cause of action. It is a kind of mental formula that predicts how we will and want to (re)act under certain conditions.

It is not easy to grasp how ideals can attract a certain way of acting and living. What seems to be easier to understand is that we can form and modify our habits only if we devote ourselves to certain ideals. There is a kind of reciprocal reinforcement: the more we devote ourselves to certain ideals, the better we will be able to form and cultivate certain habits; and the better we form and cultivate certain habits, the more sensitive we will become to the attractive power of the ideal that we wish to incorporate. Moreover, the incorporation of ideals and the formation of habits are in reality one and the same process. We can make a distinction between them only *in abstracto*.

The equalization of the pursuit and incorporation of ideals with the formation of habits also indicates that this process is not purely intellectual. Peirce stresses in this respect the importance of actions and even more that of feelings. We can only be attracted to an ideal if we are sensitive enough to let ourselves be affected by it. Feeling or instinct is for Peirce not an invariable condition but something that can be developed and refined.<sup>9</sup> Mature feeling, which Peirce calls a “habit of feeling”, is the relative end result of a process of formation of “habits of thought” and “habits of action” respectively.

Although Peirce admits that we can be attracted by different ideals, he does not adopt a relativist position. On the contrary, he claims that in the end the different ideals that we pursue must point in the same direction. To stress this view maximally he even says: “Life can have but one end”<sup>10</sup>. Although Peirce does not justify this claim directly, his argument seems to be roughly as follows: whenever we make a distinction between good conduct and bad conduct we always seek for a criterion that can be applied to as many situations as possible. In its essence, reasoning is a form of *generalization*. Reasoning and self-control would be in vain if we would not *believe* in the reality of an ultimate aim, that is, an aim that can be pursued in every possible context.

Peirce calls this ultimate ideal that prompts the development of ever better habits “concrete reasonableness”<sup>11</sup>. Although human beings to some extent embody reason as something manifesting itself in the mind, reason is for Peirce at the heart of nature or evolution itself; evolution is a development towards ever more reasonableness. This is also why this ultimate ideal seems to be situated both in the “subject” (matured formation of habits) and “object” (ultimate goal) side, indicating that this dualism should be overcome.

9 See CP 1.648.

10 CP 2.198.

11 Cf. CP 1.612. In the strict sense, the “ultimate ideal” is not the subject of ethics but rather that of esthetics. See for a more extensive elaboration of the ultimate ideal, as well as the relation between ethics and esthetics: AYDIN, C. On the Significance of Ideals: Charles S. Peirce and the good life. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 45/3, p. 422-443, 2009.

If applied to the human context, the moral task of the human being consists in contributing to the further development of reason by embodying ideals that can be pursued in every possible situation in his concrete conduct. Peirce writes:

The creation of the universe, which did not take place during a certain busy week, in the year 4004 B.C., but is going on today and never will be done, is this very development of Reason. I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood. [...] 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.<sup>12</sup>

Peirce's view that reason has not reached complete perfection but is always in a state of incipency, of growth, is based on very empirical observations: confronted with circumstances in which we do not know how to think and act, we are compelled to develop ideas by virtue of which we can make sense of what is happening to us. Those ideas, however (and this underlines again the interconnectedness of reason and the empirical world), only generate meaning as far as they *are* and *can be* incorporated in our concrete interactions. Incorporated ideas, in their turn, stimulate the further development of reason.

Genuine ends or ideals have the power to bring about reasonable conduct. The orientation towards a good end will relate our different, scattered interactions, which constitute the things that we encounter, to one another, regulating them and prompting the occurrence of their meaning and value, which enables us to act in an adequate way.<sup>13</sup> The things that we encounter coincide with the reactions that they generate but can only be conceived in the light of proper ends by virtue of which they are submitted to a certain form.

Although the multitude of interactions that constitute our world can only be related to one another through submission to a certain form, Peirce emphasizes that regulation and self-control should not be executed at the expense of the multitude: "See that self-government is exercised; but be careful not to do violence to any part of the anatomy."<sup>14</sup> The orientation towards "ideals" that do not illuminate the aspects that we (can) encounter in our life but rather deny or conceal them cannot be qualified as good ideals. A genuine ideal transforms a maximum of inefficient, futile, and meaningless facts into an efficient, fruitful, and meaningful life. By submitting an ever more unorganized 'multitude' to a certain form, the undifferentiated is able to differentiate itself. Concrete reasonableness is a development towards ever more "organized heterogeneity", or, [...] 'rationalized variety'.<sup>15</sup>

Peirce sometimes calls this complex principle of relating things to one another without destroying their independence "creative love". This is in reference to the belief that is set out in the gospel of St. John, whom he calls the "ontological evangelist,"<sup>16</sup> that "God is love". He writes:

12 CP 1.615.

13 EP I2: 201.

14 MS 675, p. 15-16; cf. COLAPIETRO, V. *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A semiotic perspective on human subjectivity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989, p. 111f.

15 CP 6.101; cf. 6.191.

16 CP 6.287.

The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse *projecting creations into independency* and *drawing them into harmony*. This seems complicated when stated so; but it is fully summed up in the simple formula we call the Golden Rule. [...] It is not by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them *as I would the flowers in my garden*. [...] Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely. [my italics]17

Genuine love generates, on the one hand, as much multiplicity and independence as possible and relates, on the other hand, the different parts to one another so as to establish a harmonious unity. Ideals stimulate the thing evoked to realize its potential to its maximum; they transfigure hard facts and brute interactions into meaningful life by imparting a form on them.<sup>18</sup>

That particular ideals may sometimes exclude one another is something that cannot be denied. Our moral task from a Peircian point of view consists in the continuous embodiment of and devotion to ever more inclusive ideals; ideals that do not exclude and destroy other 'life plans' but stimulate and encourage them. The ultimate ideal encompasses all ideals, and it can, therefore, be pursued continuously in every possible context.<sup>19</sup> The failure to pursue an ultimate ideal amounts eventually to detaching ourselves from the rest of our natural and social world and, consequently, to not making the world more reasonable. That is why Peirce can say: "The only moral evil is not to have an ultimate aim."<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Kant vs. Peirce

Kant was and remained a philosopher of the utmost importance for Peirce from very early on until his death. Although Peirce mainly reacts to Kant's epistemology and there seems to be, as far as I can judge, no explicit discussion with Kant's ethics in Peirce's published articles and notes, one can recognize some parallels. First of all, overcoming an individual-subjective standpoint lies at the heart of both Kant's categorical imperative and Peirce's notion of generalizing.<sup>21</sup> Kant's imperative indicates that we can only obtain a universal morality, which is the only genuine morality, if our actions are motivated by a maxim that we could will in all possible circumstances. For Peirce conduct can be considered good if it can be maximally generalized, *i.e.*, if it can be pursued continuously in every possible context. Secondly, both Kant and Peirce put much emphasis on the importance of acting reasonably. Reason seems to be for both admirable in itself, the one thing whose admirableness is not due to something else. Thirdly, both Kant and Peirce state that we can never be certain that our conduct is good. Whether conduct is good or bad seems to be for

17 CP 6.288f.

18 See CP 2.274 and 5.520.

19 POTTER, V. G. *Charles S. Peirce*. On norms and ideals. New York: Fordham University Press, 1967/1997, p. 49.

20 CP 5.133.

21 See also COLAPIETRO, V. Toward a Pragmatic Conception of Practical Identity. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 42(2), p. 182, 2006.

both something that is dependent on a criterion that is to such a degree independent from every particular view that it can never be completely annexed. Fourthly, there seems to be a similarity between Kant's kingdom of ends and Peirce's ethical ideals. Both philosophers seem to project teleologically an ideal world that we should try to realize in our actual lives.

Although at first sight these similarities indicate a common approach, a slightly closer look reveals great differences between both philosophers. To explain a crucial difference, we have to take together the first and second similarity that I have mentioned: although both Kant and Peirce's ethics are concerned with overcoming an individual-subjective standpoint, their criterion for establishing whether – using Kant's idiom – a maxim can be universalized is different. For Kant the ultimate measure that evokes our admiration, the categorical imperative, appeals to and coincides with our rational part, which is completely detached from our empirical nature. Due to its *a priori*, universal status, the categorical imperative is absolutely autonomous and, therefore, beyond our control and not susceptible to empirical criticism. As a consequence, every agent is, at least potentially, able to “calculate” *individually* and independently of every possible context whether a maxim can be qualified as good.

For Peirce, in contrast, the ultimate measure that should govern our conduct does not coincide with our *actual* rational nature, but is something that could be attained in the *future* within an unlimited community of critical minds.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, what is good action cannot be established by *individual* assessment but the pursuit and devotion to common ideals will hopefully produce in the long run habits that will enable good action, *i.e.*, that will enable reasonable *interaction* with our social and natural environment. For Peirce the necessary condition for moral conduct is not *knowing* what our duty is but, rather, is the development of a self-reflexive and self-controlled *disposition*, which will enable adequate interaction. It is by virtue of the “indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control”<sup>23</sup> that we could render our very *empirical* world more reasonable.<sup>24</sup> An ideal that has generalizing power is capable of regulating my interactions with my social and natural environment in such a way that I become a part of it, *i.e.*, that I no longer experience it as foreign but am able to understand it (and myself) properly and to continuously react to it adequately.

There are also significant differences regarding the third similarity that I have drawn: Kant and Peirce have different reasons for their view that we can never be certain whether our conduct is good. According to Kant, we can never be certain of this because it is always possible that our actions are motivated by particular desires or circumstances and not by our pure and universal reason. From Peirce's point of view, we can never know with certainty that the ideal that we pursue will ultimately turn out to be a good ideal because it is always possible that it will encounter so much resistances in our empirical interactions that it will lose its power of attraction. In the long run we, then, discover that it cannot be pursued as an ultimate, common aim and should, therefore, be falsified.

22 See also ERNY, Nicola. *Konkrete Vernünftigkeit*. Zur Konzeption einer pragmatischen Ethik bei Charles S. Peirce. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, p. 134.

23 CP 5.402 n.3.

24 See also COLAPIETRO, 2006, p. 173-205.

Moreover, from Peirce's viewpoint we can never be certain that our conduct is good because the good itself is something that is in a process of development. We can contribute to that development by discovering the goals and ideals by virtue of which we can give our very empirical interactions a harmonious, non-destructive form, thereby enhancing the occurrence of ever-richer meaning. For Kant, on the other hand, we can never be completely certain about whether our conduct is good, not because the ultimate good has not been developed yet but because our empirical nature can block its access.

If we take Peirce's evolutionary framework and his different view on reason into account, then the fourth similarity that has been drawn can also be put into perspective. In Kant's kingdom rational beings can never be treated merely as ends because their rationality has not relative but absolute value in the sense of being the ultimate criterion by virtue of which actions are judged. Also Peirce's ideals have a special status: they are the instances that give form, meaning, and value to dissimilar parts and unrelated facts by relating them to one another in a harmonious way. If they, however, continuously fail to shed light on our very empirical interactions with the world, we will be compelled to modify them.

This difference also sheds some light on Kant and Peirce's notions of relations. Although Kant's "kingdom" indicates that human beings have relations, their interconnectedness is merely based on their sharing in the same impersonal and formal rationality. Their concrete, empirical relations to one another are of no moral significance. In Peirce's communitarian ethics, on the other hand, concrete interactions form the basis of his moral considerations. Generalizing is an attempt to overcome conflicts by virtue of the devotion to common ideals. This is to take place in such a way that common ideals have the power to relate different individuals to one another so that they regard themselves as members of the same society, or as parts of the same organism.

Kant not only disregards the fact that the qualification of an action as good or bad is always done within a particular context and that what is considered to be reasonable thinking is as such contextual and historical, but he also does not take into account that the empirical effects of our actions cannot be simply ignored and that those effects can signify whether our actions are good and how we could modify our conduct to act better in the future. Peirce, in contrast, does not detach reason from the empirical world but believes that the criterion for judging whether the ideals that govern our conduct are reasonable and good can ultimately only lie in the very empirical effects that they prompt. Nevertheless, Peirce's view does not indicate that we have to adopt a relativist, 'anything goes' point of view because bad ideals will not prompt the development of habits that enable us to interact with our environment in an adequate way.

#### 4. Ideals in a Pluralistic Society

Peirce integrates Kantian elements in his ethics but without becoming a Kantian: he incorporates Kant's view that an action only can be qualified as good if it can be generalized but repudiates Kant's view that we can judge whether that is the case independently of its empirical effects.

Besides Kant we can also recognize traces of other authors in Peirce's ethical theory. Peirce's emphasis on the development of habits and his endorsement of a teleological framework, for example, refer undoubtedly to Aristotle. Nevertheless, Peirce does not presuppose Aristotle's view that the goals that we should pursue are already engraved in our nature. Peirce's concentration on the importance of the effects of our actions might also bring him close to utilitarian ethics. The Aristotelian and Kantian influences on his view, as well as his fallibilistic perspective that whether an ideal proves itself to be good is dependent on what an unlimited community will decide on in the long run, however, make it clear that Peirce cannot be simply qualified as a utilitarian in the line of Bentham or Mill. Elaborating the relations between respectively Aristotle and utilitarianism and Peirce's ethics, however, would be an objective for other papers. In the rest of this closing section I will try to examine a little further how our pluralistic society could be analysed and diagnosed from the perspective of an ethics of ideals.

It is, first of all, clear that Peirce's ethics of ideals is not an attempt to rehabilitate a traditional realm of norms, values, and ideals that everybody must agree on. Its starting point is not a world *order* of shared beliefs. The pursuit of ideals is rather an attempt to cope with the *disorder* and *conflict* that continuously threaten us. This perspective makes Peirce's ethics suitable for our post-modern, pluralistic era. It acknowledges that we are constantly being confronted with things and people that we do not understand and cannot relate to. The search for goals and ideals must be understood in the light of these kinds of agitations: we seek goals and ideals that might help us to understand our problematic situation and prompt the development of habits that might enable us to tackle it. The search for adequate goals and ideals is not initiated by some kind of (Greek) theoretic contemplation and wonder but rather by the necessity of dealing with the resistances and irritations that we continuously encounter in our lives.

Peirce's ethics, one could say, is even more radical in acknowledging the reality of contrasts and conflicts than many pluralists and multiculturalists do. Pluralists and multiculturalists often presuppose a multitude of perspectives, value orientations, and identities, which, they say, all demand and must be given recognition and respect. From a Peircian point of view, there is not only no covering social unity, which according to pluralists and multiculturalists must harbour a multitude of identities, but the different (ethnic, national, virtual) identities within a social "order" also never completely coincide with themselves. Every form of identity and unity is an attempt to overcome the primordial dissimilarity and conflict within and without itself. Even the individual subject as such is characterized by this attempt; one could even say that he or she *is* this attempt. Goals and ideals function as an orientation point that enables both social and individual identity formation.

Our liberalist society with its strong emphasis on individual autonomy often does not take this aspect into account sufficiently. It often takes individuality to be an already pre-given, present reality instead of something that yet has to be realized. Moreover, it fails to see that we are unable to realize our individuality on our own, independently of our social and natural environment. The liberalist view that different individuals and groups must be able to live *next to* one another without bothering each other not only bypasses the fact that internal and external conflicts and dissimilarities are inherent to every form of identity but also fails to see that

the efforts to overcome these contrasts initiate the development of an identity that, on the one hand, is sufficiently dynamic to continuously integrate foreign elements and, on the other hand, is sufficiently stable to repel disintegration. Focussing solely on individual autonomy will not only result in an “atomized” society and a thinking in terms of “I vs. you” and “us vs. them” but will ultimately also contribute to the destruction of the “atoms” as such.

This communitarian critique of liberalism should not be confused with traditionalist or fundamentalist approaches. For a fundamentalist, identities are exclusively formed in the *past* and must be maintained by all means, including violence. However, from the perspective of an ethics of ideals, identity is primarily a goal that is situated in the *future* and requires continuous modification through a struggle for perfection. Although the content of a common ideal will, to a certain degree, depend on past experiences (recall Peirce’s conservatism), it will not be completely exhausted by them. Peirce’s non-relativist, objective approach does not exclude but rather includes fallibilism. His notion of generalization, which implies the quest for an ultimate ideal, requires a continuous attempt to include (and not exclude or destroy) foreign views, and to establish, modify and re-establish harmonious relations. Not striving for this ultimate, all-inclusive ideal means in the end isolating others or ourselves from the world and not contributing to making the world more reasonable.

This emphasis on the development of right habits and the formation of a proper identity by virtue of the orientation towards admirable ideals also sheds light on the character and scope of Peirce’s ethical theory. Peirce, unlike Kant, does not offer us normative, *a priori* criteria for distinguishing good from evil. This might be unsatisfactory if we have to deal with dilemmas that ask for immediate action. It can, however, prove itself fruitful in the long run precisely because of its broader point of view. Peirce’s ethics incites us to be aware of the *conditions* under which judgments are formed. It teaches us to critically examine the goals that are presupposed in a certain situation. Today ethical issues are often tackled by rationally calculating what is a just action in a problematic situation without taking into consideration that a problem is only a problem and things only have a certain meaning and value in the light of certain goals that we want to realize. What is needed is to investigate which ideals will prompt the development of habits that enable making good choices when confronted with dilemmas. The focus of Peirce’s ethics is not primarily on commandments and prohibitions but rather on the conditions that enable self-awareness, self-control and self-formation.

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