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"Minimal Meliorism: Finding a Balance between Conservative and Progressive Pragmatism"

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The philosophy of pragmatism has often been linked to reformist movements of different stripes. For many, this is part and parcel of what it means to be a pragmatist. According to this view, an authentic representative of the movement emphasises change, progress, and active engagement in human affairs while distrusting traditional epistemological and metaphysical concerns with knowledge and truth. In other words, the primary task of the pragmatist philosopher is not to unearth the ultimate secrets of the mind and the universe, but rather to change the world for the better.

Leading pragmatists such as William James, F. C. S. Schiller, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty have arguably outlined transformative philosophical programmes along such lines, albeit with varying vocabularies, emphases, and aims. Thus, it is not surprising that *meliorism* has been singled out as a characteristic element of the pragmatist world-view (e.g., Ruetenik 2008). Conversely, pragmatism has been lauded as a philosophy particularly conducive to social-melioristic efforts (e.g., Payton & Moody 2008). Although calls for amelioration and societal reform are by no means the exclusive prerogatives of pragmatists, the term 'meliorism'

has occasionally even been used as a straightforward synonym for 'pragmatism' (e.g., Robinson 1924).[1]

On the other hand, C. S. Peirce—the 'putative father' of pragmatism[2]—all but dismissed meliorist conceptions of philosophy in some of his writings and lectures. Where a pragmatist would be expected to glorify concrete action, Peirce ended up stressing the theoretical nature of philosophical work. More than that, he declared himself to be a "sentimentalist" conservative, and as such insisted that philosophers should avoid direct attempts to change traditions and established social practices.

As with all wide-ranging isms, it is not surprising that there should be noticeable internal strains and significant differences of opinions within the ranks of pragmatism; it can hardly be described as a unified school of thought. Attempts to produce systematic accounts of the 'broad church' of pragmatism have typically acknowledged certain more or less significant intellectual divisions in the field. Susan Haack has emphasised the differences between revolutionary neopragmatism[3] (whether literary or scientistic) and classical pragmatism, but has also detected the insidious virus of "vulgar pragmatism" in Schiller's humanism (see, e.g., Haack 2004). In contrast, Nicholas Rescher (2000) throws James, Dewey, and Schiller into the class of 'pragmatism of the left' along with neopragmatism à la Rorty, while Peirce and Rescher himself are portrayed as staunch defenders of realistic and objectivist right-wing pragmatism. Howard Mounce (1997) and Cheryl Misak (2013) have perhaps even more straightforwardly suggested that the movement is split into two radically different camps, personified by Peirce and James, practically from the outset.

It looks as if the attitude towards meliorism would also divide the key pragmatists into two groups; but in spite of the fact that we again seem to find Peirce pitted against the rest, this distinction between a conservative

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[1] Of contemporary pragmatists, Colin Koopman (2009) has suggested that meliorism provides a "summary statement of pragmatism," construed as a "successful transitionalism" that encompasses humanism and pluralism (17–19). (I owe this reference to an anonymous reviewer of this article.)

[2] Looking back at the heyday of classical pragmatism and Peirce's (depending of perspective, laudable or perfidious) renaming of his own doctrine, Schiller (1927, 83) elevated James to the "real progenitor" of pragmatism while he dismissed Peirce as its "putative parent". Some fifty years later, Rorty echoed these sentiments as he asserted that Peirce's "contribution to pragmatism was merely to have given it a name, and to have stimulated James" (Rorty 1982, 161).

[3] Fittingly enough, probably the first to use the term 'neopragmatist' was none other than Peirce back in 1905. Peirce did not specify to whom the term referred, but the context suggests that he had James and Schiller in mind.

and a progressive wing does not exactly correspond to the more familiar partitions based on metaphysical, epistemological, or truth-theoretical perspectives. From this angle, Dewey appears to constitute the clearest counterpart to Peirce—although, as we shall see, it is Schiller that draws some of the most radical conclusions from the transformative viewpoint.

In this essay, I will first discuss some of the main forms of meliorism within classical pragmatism. Naturally, I cannot trace all the varying associations and upshots of the melioristic strand of pragmatism in this short article; here, emphasis lies on the general justification for meliorism and conservatism in classical pragmatist thought as well as on the programmatic implications of these stances; I will bypass Rorty's agenda in this context. At the heart of the discussion lies the far-reaching question of the proper goal of philosophical activity, which with a nod to Marx might be portrayed as a conflict between philosophy as world-explanation and philosophy as world-amelioration—but which in more pragmatist terms also can be taken to imply a basic tension between theory and practice. Such a discussion can easily slip into caricature, with the central issue reduced to a struggle between two straw men: the naïve good-doer and the fogyish defender of the *status quo*. Although pragmatist philosophers have at times given voice to both extremes, my central aim here is to argue that meliorism, in its broadest sense, underlies practically all forms of classical pragmatism—Peirce's pragmaticism included—while at the same time preparing the ground for a moderate pragmatist perspective on the objectives of philosophical work—one in which melioristic and conservative sentiments can act as reasonable correctives of each other.

Beyond optimism and pessimism

In spite of the close association between certain types of pragmatism and melioristic ambitions, the pragmatists did not invent meliorism. In different guises, related sensibilities have no doubt been expressed throughout history; and if Peirce was right, the same could be said about pragmatist ideas (see, e.g., EP 2, 399 [1905]). However, it is worth noting that the birth of the philosophical movement later named 'pragmatism' very nearly coincided with the explicit coining of the concept of 'meliorism'. Most likely, the first to use the term was the novelist George Eliot in the 1870s (Sully, 1877, 399; Clapperton, 1885, VIII). In his *Pessimism: A History and a Criticism* (1877), James Sully summarised the Eliotian view of meliorism as "a practical conception which lies midway between the extremes of opti-

mism and pessimism", emphasising that it was not just a matter of our capacity to reduce evil; the melioristic credo crucially also implied a positive power to increase the amount of good in the world (Sully 1877, 399). No doubt, the idea captured something of the spirit of the times; at any rate, it did not take long before Lester Ward (1883) presented his sociological version of meliorism as an alternative to the dominant mix of social conservatism and economic individualism promoted by certain disciples of Herbert Spencer, such as William Graham Sumner.[4] Jane Hume Clapperton (1885) expanded on this progressive perspective in her social-reformist and feminist writings.

Thus, meliorism was from the very beginning distinguished from both optimism and pessimism, which were typically regarded as two variants of a passive attitude. In contrast, the meliorists advocated a voluntaristic conception of human agency. For Ward, meliorism also implied the malleability of nature.

> Both optimism and pessimism are passive states of mind. The true state is an active one. Optimism and pessimism assume nature to be in an active state toward man. The true attitude makes nature passive and man active. To the developed intellect nature is as clay in the potter's hands. It is neither best nor worst. It is what man makes it, and rational man always seeks to make it better. The true doctrine, then, is *meliorism* – the perpetual bettering of man's estate. This will be possible in precise proportion to man's knowledge of nature, so that the condition of the race ultimately depends upon the degree of it intelligence that shall attain.   Ward 1895, 136

With hindsight, it is easy enough to see how Ward's meliorism, with its emphasis on deliberate action, evolutionary change, and the indeterminacy of the world, might be interpreted as a close ally of some types of pragmatist thought. However, the pragmatists were rather slow in adopting an openly melioristic vocabulary, and generally failed to recognise a possible debt to the initial wave of meliorism. The first to clearly establish a bond between pragmatism and meliorism was William James, who in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907, 127) argued that the "sole meaning" of abstract concepts such as 'free will' and 'absolute mind' was given in the way they promised to improve this world, irrespective of their truth or falsity.[5]

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[4] Sumner's anti-meliorism is succinctly captured in his oft-cited laissez-faire dictum: "Society needs first of all to be free from meddlers" (1883, 120).

[5] There is at least one possible, but rather problematic, antecedent to James's linking of pragmatism to meliorism. In an undated manuscript (MS 953), which probably stems from

James introduced the melioristic approach as an alternative to both tender-minded rationalism, which optimistically defended spiritual sentiments and idealism, and tough-minded empiricism, which clung to the more pessimistic world-view of materialism and determinism. In his reflections on free will, in particular, James emerged as a natural meliorist, who desired to view the future as radically open—uncertain and precarious, but also full of opportunities. Symptomatically, James tended to express the matter in religious terms, as he defined optimism as the cheerful doctrine of the inevitability of the world's salvation and pessimism as the unhappy belief in the impossibility of such redemption, with meliorism as the reasonable compromise.

> Midway between the two there stands what may be called the doctrine of meliorism, tho it has hitherto figured less as a doctrine than as an attitude in human affairs. . . . Meliorism treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become. It is clear that pragmatism must incline towards meliorism.   James 1907, 285–6

Still, James's meliorism is more accurately categorised as a philosophical creed than as a social or practical programme. It was primarily a metaphysical theory or mind-set, which combined the potential for improvement with a basically individualistic *Weltanschauung* (see James 1907, 119–20).[6] James's meliorism was an unequivocally voluntaristic doctrine; a better existence was possible—but not guaranteed—if human agents were prepared to strive for it. This vision of struggle and possibility was predicated on the irreducible diversity of the evolving "melioristic universe". In James's (1907, 280) evocative phrase, the pragmatist chose to interpret the particulars of experience—"the world's poem"—in a pluralistic-melioristic way.

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the mid-1890s, Peirce associates his conception of the "predestinate settlement" of inquiry with an approach that he dubs 'meliorism', and which he characterises as the view that the universe has a tendency toward a definite state of things (the 'truth' or the 'good'). This perspective, which might better be labelled 'universal optimism' than 'meliorism', accords with the gist of Peirce's grand cosmogonic speculations; but it is also significantly qualified by his more modest contention that the 'final opinion' is to be understood as a hope pertaining to any particular genuine line of inquiry. However, Peirce also draws a kind of moral from this optimistic meliorism in the form of a 'maxim of happiness', which demands contempt for the individual ego and "love for the community of soul" as "the truest and happiest sentiment".

[6] In this respect, James's meliorism was in line with Ward's (1895, 132) "cosmological" reflections on "the true relation [. . .] of man to the universe."

In James's account, the melioristic attitude was deemed to be pragmatically admissible, as long as it made life richer and rendered the universe more meaningful for the human agent. In the face of real-world challenges, meliorism was expected to inspire 'healthy' tenacity and intelligent problem-solving rather than blind optimism or dispirited pessimism. Yet, despite James's recurrent appeals to the particulars of our experience, the melioristic aspect of his pragmatism was typically broadly painted in terms of individual free will, on the one side, and metaphysical pluralism and anti-determinism, on the other. His position included no overt demand for social engagement.

Still, some later commentators have submitted that James's writings do contain the seeds for a programme of social meliorism, although this 'activist' streak is mostly implicit. Tadd Ruetenik (2005; 2008), in particular, has argued that proposals such as "The Moral Equivalent of War" might be viewed as the melioristic manifestations of a pragmatist social philosophy (see James 1982). From this point of view, James's "heart-felt belief that human action can mitigate suffering in the world" (Ruetenik 2008, 498) is naturally followed by a hope for social justice, which in turn might lead to actual involvement in societal affairs.

Yet, the fact remains that James never properly linked his meliorism to concrete reform. While he undoubtedly wanted his philosophy to be generally accessible and did function as a public intellectual, his metaphysical position did not lead to an across-the-board reconsideration of the philosopher's task.[7] In later usage, 'meliorism' has typically been interpreted more concretely, as implying a specific demand for positive social activism. These two acceptations were nicely summarised in an early definition published in the *Century Dictionary* (1889–91), where 'meliorism' was characterised as

> (1) "[the] improvement of society by regulated practical means: opposed to the passive principle of both pessimism and optimism"; or (2) "[the] doctrine that the world is neither the worst nor the best possible, but that it is capable of improvement: a mean between theoretical pessimism and optimism".

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[7] One plausible explanation for James's failure—if it indeed was one—to follow through on his melioristic agenda may be the fact, bitingly recorded by George Santayana (1922), that Harvard professors in the pre-ww1 era tended to function as "clergymen without a church...at once genuine philosophers and popular professors" (43). It was perhaps only with the gradual professionalisation of philosophy that the need for a distinct 'public philosophy' and the idea of the activist-philosopher made themselves felt.

Part of what makes this delineation relevant is that the second part was most likely penned by Peirce;[8] but here, the juxtaposition of the two differing senses, which nicely brings out some key tensions in melioristic thought, is more pertinent. The latter use of the term is obviously broader, as it suggests that comprehensive meliorism is primarily to be understood as a theoretical doctrine; in broad outlines, it seems to accord with the Jamesian version of meliorist philosophy. In contrast, the first acceptation refers more narrowly to society, associates meliorism with practice rather than with theory, and suggests active involvement through regulative measures. It is also worth noting another difference: whereas the second part presents meliorism as a compromise position, the first pits it *against* both pessimism and optimism. Significantly, this suggests a more dynamic, materially transformative conception of meliorism.

Although not necessary, the step from holding the world to be improvable to maintaining that human beings *ought to* actively engage in such betterment seems to be a rather natural one. At any rate, this is the conclusion that many pragmatists have embraced—and no one more influentially so than Dewey, who also distinguished the melioristic tendency from both pessimism and optimism:

> Pessimism is a paralyzing doctrine. In declaring that the world is evil wholesale, it makes futile all efforts to discover the remediable causes of specific evils and thereby destroys at the root every attempt to make the world better and happier. Wholesale optimism, which has been the consequence of the attempt to explain evil away, is, however, equally an incubus.
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> After all, the optimism that says that the world is already the best possible of all worlds might be regarded as the most cynical of pessimisms. If this is the best possible, what would a world which was fundamentally bad be like? Meliorism is the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered. It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions.   MW 12, 181–2 [1920]

At first blush, this may not seem all that dissimilar from the position expounded by James. However, instead of emphasising individual change, Dewey spoke more generally of the "improvement of conditions". The tone was more active, as meliorism was supposed to inspire dynamic en-

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[8] I am indebted to François Latraverse for this information.

gagement in the betterment of this world. Thus, Dewey espoused an explicitly activist conception of meliorism, which did not halt at the theoretical view that the world is improvable; opposing the purported paralysis resulting from pessimism and optimism, he moved on to an advocacy of the concrete involvement of philosophers in the present problems of society. For Dewey, this meant, above all, a new conception of social philosophy. In contrast to the traditional philosopher, who dwelled "in the region of his concepts", solving problems "by showing the relationship of ideas", the Deweyan social meliorist was expected to ameliorate the lot of human beings "by supplying them hypotheses to be used and tested in projects of reform" (MW 12, 190 [1920]).

The starting point of Deweyan reformism was extant human habits and present social conditions; in this respect, his programme could be characterised as *immanent* meliorism.[9] This rootedness was needed to guarantee the feasibility of the meliorist agenda; as Dewey put it *Democracy and Education* (1916), the challenge was to unearth the desirable facets of actual community life, and to "employ them to criticize undesirable features and suggest improvement" (MW 9, 89). At the same time, Dewey strived to overcome what he viewed as a untenable choice between "positivistic" and "transcendental" approaches to social philosophy; in his naturalistic vision,[10] criticism was to be "derived from the positive phenomena" of this world, but not as a "mere record of given valuations" (MW 15, 230 [1923]). In this spirit, his programme was intended to accommodate preservation as well as reform, while the need for social-theoretical interventions was purportedly justified by actual conflicts caused by contacts between different social groups. The special task of social philosophy was to provide a technique for clarifying judgments and valuations with the aim of rendering "the social criticism and projection of policies which is always going on more enlightened and effective" (MW 15, 233 [1923]). At times, Dewey generalised this viewpoint to a recovery of philosophy as "a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems

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[9] This contention, and most of the rest of the arguments and direct quotations in this paragraph, were suggested by an anonymous reviewer. I am truly grateful for this amelioration of my essay; but the responsibility for the specific claims made here is mine.

[10] In the later essay 'Anti-Naturalism in Extremis' (1943), Dewey characterised philosophical anti-naturalism as the view "that anything remotely approaching a basic and serious amelioration of the human estate must be based upon means and methods that lie outside the natural and social world, while human capacities are so low that reliance upon them only makes things worse" (LW 15, 55). The consequence, he suggested, was a sweeping lack of respect for scientific method that led to dogmatism and 'finalism'.

of men" (MW 10, 46 [1917]). The distinct positive job of the philosopher, in addition to the negative undertaking of combating timeworn prejudices and stale traditions, was to develop useful tools for intelligent planning and action.

> [I]ntellectual instruments are needed to project leading ideas or plans of action. The intellectual instrumentalities for doing this work need sterilizing and sharpening. That work is closely allied with setting better instruments, as fast as they take shape, at work. Active use in dealing with the present problems of men is the only way they can be kept from rusting. Trial and test in and by work done is the means by which they can be kept out of the dark spots in which infection originates. The fact that such plans, measures, policies, as can be projected will be but hypotheses is but another instance of alignment of philosophy with the attitude and spirit of the inquiries which have won the victories of scientific inquiry in other fields.
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> LW 15, 166 [1946]

According to Dewey, modern science had made human beings susceptible to the idea of development, which manifested itself practically as the "persistent gradual amelioration of the estate of our common humanity" (MW 9, 233 [1916]). However, while Dewey appealed to the model set by natural science in his argument for immanent standards and methods in social criticism, he also maintained that social theory was "comparable not to physics but to engineering" (MW 15, 235 [1923]).[11]

Although Dewey's meliorism acknowledged the need to work with and within extant habits, values, and social conditions, his experimental approach to philosophy also seemed to imply a somewhat secondary or instrumental status for established social habits and customs. Thus, he contended that questions of precedents and origins were "quite subordinate to prevision, to guidance and control amid future possibilities", and suggested that any scheme and project that promised ameliorative consequences was worthy of consideration, free from interference from old theories and principles (MW 8, 201 [1915]). Dewey explicitly contrasted his own progressivism to the conservative "disbelief in the possibility of constructive social engineering", and argued that the "only genuine opposite to a go-as-you-please let-alone philosophy is a philosophy which

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[11] On the other hand, Dewey also suggested that natural science could or should be 'moral' in the sense of contributing to the broader cause of human improvement. The purported melioristic contribution of seemingly technical science was to provide "the technique of social and moral engineering" (MW 12, 179 [1920]).

studies specific social needs and evils with a view to constructing the spe-
cial social machinery for which they call" (MW 10, 241 [1916]). According
to Dewey, this active employment of intelligent method in dealing with the
"concrete troubles" of the world entailed the adoption of the techniques of
scientific inquiry in social meliorism, understood as a broad "philosophy
of life". In this context, 'scientific method' primarily meant experimenta-
tion, the conscious and deliberate implementation of new ways of seeing
and doing things by means of an intelligently guided process of trial and
error. Dewey argued that the most fruitful breeding ground for social im-
provement was to be found in the relatively flexible and immature, rather
than in adults whose "habits of thought and feeling" were more or less
fixed, and whose environment was relatively rigid (MW 13, 402 [1921]).
This was the melioristic motivation underlying his pursuits in the field
of education, the practice of which he also viewed as a form of social
engineering (LW 5, 20 [1929]).[12]

In its recognition of remediable evils and call for active engagement,
Dewey's meliorism was akin to philanthropic perspectives, which no doubt
motivated many melioristic endeavours. However, there was a significant
difference between Deweyan meliorism and more general humanitarian-
ism. Although he at times spoke approvingly of new types of "classless"
philanthropy, Dewey also made a distinction between altruism and the
kind of social reformism he advocated. His meliorism was not primarily
portrayed as an ethical mission fuelled by compassion; it was to be guided
by intelligence—"the power which foresees, plans and constructs in ad-
vance" (MW 10, 238 [1916])—rather than by the heart. Perhaps mindful
of the potential scorn of Social Darwinists, positivists, and Marxists, who
tended to dominate much of the social-scientific debate of the day, Dewey
emphasised the scientific character of melioristic pragmatism. From this
perspective, society was approached as a laboratory, where the scientific
meliorist worked to find the best tools and solutions by the means of ex-

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[12] Dewey's work for educational reform is no doubt his best-known endeavour to con-
cretely improve the lives of his fellow human beings. However, it would be misleading to
claim that this engagement was simply an application of a previously formed philosoph-
ical idea; it is probably more accurate to say that his philosophical meliorism and his ac-
tivism developed in tandem. It is at any rate telling that his first explicit characterisation
of 'meliorism' (as "the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and
its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make better things")
occurred in a contribution to *A Cyclopedia of Education* (1912–13). Nor was Dewey's social
activism restricted to the field of education; his earlier attempt to improve society through
journalism—the abandoned newspaper project 'Thought News'—could also be cited as an
instance of meliorism-in-action, badly as it may have fared.

perimental methods. Consequently, in the end Dewey did not posit the humanitarian amelioration of particular problematic situations as the ultimate goal of meliorism; its ideal aim was the engineering of optimal conditions for communal development.

Admittedly, Dewey himself did not push this line of thought to its possible extremes. In contrast, Ward, whose social theory had many affinities with pragmatist thought,[13] did not hesitate to promote meliorism as unsentimental rationality.

> [Meliorism] may be defined as humanitarianism *minus* all sentiment. Now, meliorism, instead of an ethical, is a dynamic principle. It implies the improvement of the social condition through cold calculation, through the adoption of indirect means. It is not content merely to alleviate present suffering, it aims to create conditions under which no suffering can exist. It is ready even to sacrifice temporary enjoyment for greater future enjoyment—the pleasure of a few for that of the mass.   Ward 1883, 468

From such a 'scientific' and broadly utilitarian meliorism, which not merely worked to improve specific situations but endeavoured to abolish suffering altogether by radically transforming the conditions of human life, there was arguably but a short step to the brave new world of Aldous Huxley—or perhaps something even more disturbing. The stated aim of Ward's 'sociocracy'—or "the scientific control of the social forces by the collective mind of society for its advantage"—was to acknowledge natural inequalities while eliminating artificial imbalances (Ward 1897, 822). To accomplish this, it professedly needed to distance itself from naïve philanthropy, which was just "injurious to society, as tending to preserve and perpetuate those who are naturally unfit to survive" (Ward 1883, 468). Meliorism was not necessarily tender-hearted.

During the glory days of pragmatism, meliorists such as Ward and Clapperton advocated versions of quasi-Darwinian eugenics. It was unquestionably a hot topic in education and social philosophy when Dewey articulated his melioristic approach. Thus, given his pledge to address the 'problems of men' and his well-known egalitarian sensibilities, it may feel a bit puzzling that the question was all but ignored in his writings (McCune 2012).[14] Of course, not all of the things advocated in the name of

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[13] It is worth noting, however, that Dewey found Ward's psychology wanting and that Peirce was critical of the sociologist's individualism.

[14] In contrast, George Herbert Mead discussed the problem, e.g. in the essay 'Experimentalism as a Philosophy of History' (Mead, 1938, 494–519).

eugenics—birth control, for example—were automatically condemnable; but in addition to suspect racial and medical views, the progressivism of some eugenicists could take on rather authoritarian guises. The possibly inconvenient truth is that pragmatist philosophies were not necessarily incompatible with or even indifferent towards the eugenicist agenda. In the later development of Schiller's 'humanistic' pragmatism, eugenics came to play an increasingly central role.[15]

While Schiller did not really promote his philosophy under the banner of meliorism, his eugenicist ideas can plausibly be interpreted as a version of meliorist pragmatism—an engineering application of what was perceived to be state-of-the-art biological science to societal problems. Essentially, it amounted to a proposal for the rational improvement of society by means of both negative and positive eugenics—or, to put the matter in the more provocative Schillerian lingo, "a sort of social hygiene on a large scale" (Schiller 1914, 241). Although we may recoil at such opinions today, it is clear that they were fundamentally motivated by a broadly melioristic animus (cf. Porrovecchio 2010). Contemporary readers may feel even more troubled by the fact that Schiller later expressed approval of certain tendencies in Fascism; to a lesser degree, he also found something acceptable in the spirit of Nazism (see, e.g., Schiller, 1934; 1935).

With Schiller, we come face to face with one of the potential dilemmas of melioristic pragmatism. Although social reformism is typically associated with democratic ambitions, pragmatists such as Dewey and Schiller lived and worked in politically turbulent times, where an avant-garde disposition could assume an anti-democratic as well as an egalitarian guise. While it is possible to detect a markedly traditionalist undercurrent in Schiller's eugenics—namely his promotion of the family unit as the prime agent of society—it is also evident that his programme was progressive in its emphasis on conscious regulation and in its focus on future development. Although some old-style conservatives embraced certain aspects of eugenics (typically the negative variant that aimed at blocking the reproduction of 'bad stock') and the agenda eventually became tainted by the actions of far-right regimes, eugenicist ideas often found natural allies

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[15] It might also be worth noting that Jane Addams, who is often included in the ranks of the Chicago pragmatists, approved of certain aspects of eugenics (Kennedy, 2008); and that Oliver Wendell Holmes, a close associate of the classical pragmatists, notoriously proclaimed that "Three generations of imbeciles are enough" in a Supreme Court decision concerning forced sterilisation.

among feminists, socialists, and some democratic activists.[16] This is not
to say that eugenics or similar hard-core measures were necessary conse-
quences of a melioristic spirit; but nor did meliorism provide automatic
defences against such outcomes. This may have been particularly true of
the scientific variant, with its call for cold calculation, intelligent control,
and social engineering. When combined with a pragmatism that firmly
focused on the future and treated the world as radically plastic, the results
of meliorism could be unpredictable.

Thus, the critical problem of meliorism might be rephrased in terms
of the legitimacy of applying certain scientific perspectives—or what are
perceived as such—to societal affairs. This also includes the wide-ranging
promotion of such a programme by philosophers, irrespective of whether
they perceive of philosophy itself to be a science or not. As partisans of
Darwin, both Dewey and Schiller deplored the detachment of idealistic
philosophy from the scientific world; in this, at least, they seemed to fol-
low in the footsteps of Peirce. However, with regard to the application
of philosophy—scientific or not—to the 'problems of men', their disputed
predecessor appears to have drawn almost diametrically opposite conclu-
sions to the melioristic pragmatists.

Radical science, conservative sentiments

When James asked Peirce to deliver a series of talks on 'vitally important
topics' in 1898, he had no idea what he was about to unleash. Peirce, who
had wanted to discourse on logic, responded with a polemical opening
lecture on the irrelevance of philosophy for practical concerns. At the
same time, he offered a spirited defence of 'pure theory' and the search
for truth, freed from external motives and pressures. Here, Peirce os-
tensibly advocated the complete separation of the life of inquiry from
the world of practical needs and desires; in what looked like a resolutely
un-pragmatistic motto, he proclaimed that "the two masters, theory and
practice, you cannot serve" (CP 1.642 [1898]).

This contentious position, which seems to fit poorly with the pragma-
tistic viewpoints that Peirce had introduced in the 1870s, has sometimes
been dismissed as mere hyperbole brought on by James's patronising
treatment of Peirce in the build-up to the lectures in question. However,

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[16] Only recently has it been revealed to what extent the Nordic social democracies—
often viewed as the paragons of political moderation and reason—embraced eugenicist pro-
grammes in their treatment of the mentally ill.

Peirce had already expressed similar opinions in manuscripts a couple of years before the lectures were even conceived, so that explanation is partial at best. It is not clear what brought on Peirce's change of heart—if it ever was one—but the motives surely ran deeper than mere annoyance at James. In the wake of the Darwinian revolution, calls for a more scientific approach to social affairs had increased in strength, promoted by second-generation positivists and meliorists alike (two by no means mutually exclusive groups). Although Peirce did not object to the development of social science or utilitarian theories *per se*, he was deeply suspicious of rationalistic programmes for transforming society on such grounds as well as of attempts to reduce science to a producer of social goods. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in his rejection of Karl Pearson's (1900) claim that science ultimately aims at the maintenance of societal stability— a position that Peirce acerbically branded as "narrow British patriotism" (EP 2, 60 [1901]).[17]

Still, whatever motives lay behind Peirce's unexpected validation of the chasm between theory and practice, the fact is that we encounter a position largely opposed to a Deweyan melioristic approach in his later writings. At first, it might seem that Peirce's advocacy of such a surprisingly sharp dualism between the theoretical and practical was simply motivated by his wish to protect scientific inquiry from outside pressures. This was indeed part of the story. Peirce repeatedly argued that traditional moralities, as embodied in the ordinary social habits of human beings, were prone to encroach on the free pursuit of knowledge. In particular, he insisted that the *habit of conservatism* had no place in science:

> [C]onservatism is a habit, and it is the law of habit that it tends to spread and extend itself over more and more of the life. In this way, conservatism about morals leads to conservatism about manners and finally conservatism about opinions of a speculative kind. Besides, to distinguish between speculative and practical opinions is the mark of the most cultivated intellects. Go down below this level and you come across reformers and rationalists at every turn—people who propose

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[17] Peirce wrote appraisals of the 1892 and 1900 editions of 'The Grammar of Science'. In the first, Peirce offers a sharp criticism of Pearson's 'Kantian nominalism' and the accompanying approval of notions of immediate sense-impressions and the relativity of motion (W 8:352–4), but has nothing to say of the social justification for science that is explicitly denounced in the later review. In view of Peirce's negative assessment of Pearson's programme, it may be of some interest to register that the book in fact inspired many prominent scientists of the 20th century, most notably Albert Einstein. It is also worth remarking that Pearson was a leading promoter of eugenics.

> to remodel the ten commandments on modern science. Hence it is
> that morality leads to a conservatism which any new view, or even
> any free inquiry, no matter how purely speculative, shocks. The
> whole moral weight of such a community will be cast against sci-
> ence.   CP 1.50 [c. 1896]

While Peirce argued that conservatism "in the sense of a dread of con-
sequences" obstructed inquiry, he also maintained that science had "al-
ways been forwarded by radicals and radicalism, in the sense of the ea-
gerness to carry consequences to their extremes" (CP 1.148 [c. 1897]). Thus
Peirce, who maintained that the dictum "do not block the way of inquiry"
was a corollary of the first rule of reason, advocated speculative open-
mindedness and progressivism in science (cf. CP 1.662 [1898]).

However, as the passage quoted above reveals, Peirce was not only
a scientific radical out to protect inquiry from conservative intrusion; he
also wanted to keep scientific or pseudo-scientific "reformers and ratio-
nalists" at bay. Arguing that morals and social norms embodied "the tra-
ditional wisdom of ages of experience", Peirce warned against attempts
to reform such habits by employing scientific intelligence; indeed, he
averred that it was not even safe to reason about such matters, "except
in a purely speculative way" (CP 1.50 [c. 1896]). Hence, he defined the
meaning of "true conservatism"—that is, the *sentimental* variant of con-
servatism he embraced—as "not trusting to reasonings about questions
of vital importance but rather to hereditary instincts and traditional sen-
timents" (CP 1.661 [1898]). Peirce's 'sentimentalism'—"the doctrine that
great respect should be paid to the natural judgments of the sensible
heart" (CP 6.292 [1893])—was in effect a creed for everyday life; but as
a theoretical ism, it was also part of a broader philosophical world-view.

So, Peirce not only wished to defend the autonomy of scientific in-
quiry, but also emphatically argued that sentimental conservatism was
the appropriate attitude towards morals and non-scientific social affairs.
In part, this was predicated on a rejection of the excesses of rationalism—
that is, the belief that 'cold calculation' and scientific deliberation should
always guide our conduct. Science, for its part, was to be given complete
freedom in its abstract pursuits, no matter how outlandish and perilous
they might seem to traditional mores. Philosophical thought was thus
liberated and restricted at the same time; while theoretical ethics was per-
mitted to question traditional proscriptions like the incest taboo as well as
to freely imagine and discuss alternative social arrangements, it was not
to have any direct consequences for our established habits, whether these
manifested themselves as seasoned traditions or as instinctual sentiments.

Parts of Peirce's argumentation could easily be read as direct criticisms of the activist brand of meliorism.[18] He called the tendency to allow mere reasoning to subdue "the normal and manly sentimentalism which ought to lie at the cornerstone of all our conduct" "foolish and despicable" (CP 1.662 [1898]), and objected strongly to the view that philosophy should be of practical use.

> No doubt a large proportion of those who now busy themselves with philosophy will lose all interest in it as soon as it is forbidden to look upon it as susceptible of practical applications. We who continue to pursue the theory must bid *adieu* to them. But so we must in any department of pure science.   CP 1.645 [1898]

Thus, Peirce's 'purified' philosophy apparently excluded *any* consideration of practical applicability. Interpreted charitably, this stance could be viewed as a denunciation of the kind of utilitarianism that would reduce science to technology and philosophy to ideology (cf. Potter, 1996, p. 68). However, it was also clearly designed to let philosophers ignore concrete problems that might trouble lesser mortals; genuine 'scientific men' were to focus on the nobler "study of useless things" (cf. CP 1.76 [c. 1896]).

In sum, then, Peirce's position boiled down to the separation of two spheres of life, each of which needed to be protected from the baleful influence of the other. No doubt, his primary motivation was to ensure the autonomy of science, but the flipside of the coin revealed a deep suspicion of philosophical meddling in social affairs. This faith in the wisdom of tradition could slip into outright conformism, as when Peirce condensed his conservatism to the maxim "obey the traditional maxims of your community without hesitation or discussion" (CP 1.666 [1898]). Such an acceptance of the *status quo*, with its blunt ban on societal debate, had definite authoritarian undertones. It may have been an exaggeration on Peirce's part, but the outburst was not entirely unanticipated; already in 'The Fixation of Belief', he had opined that the "method of authority will always govern the mass of mankind" (CP 5.386 [1877]). In some of Peirce's later writings, this supposition was developed into a distinctly elitist vision of societal affairs.

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[18] Peirce offered no assessment of the melioristic tendencies in Deweyan pragmatism; but he did worry that Dewey's natural history conception of logic might exclude normative concerns (CP 8.190 [1904]; cf. CP 8.239 [1904]). However, complaining that Schillerian pragmatism tried to pay attention to "every department of man's nature", Peirce declared it to be incompatible with his own conception of philosophy as a "passionless and severely fair" science (CP 5.537 [1905-8]).

> [I]n any state of society about whose possibility it is at all worthwhile to speculate, there will be two strata, the poor and the rich, the virtual slaves and the truly free; and every individual of the lower stratum, as long as in it he is, is forced to live to do the will of some one or more of the upper stratum, while every one of the higher stratum is free to realize whatever ideal he may, working out his own self-development, under his own governance, subject to such penalties as there are certain to be, if he fails to govern himself wisely. [. . .] [Liberal education] befits those who, belonging to the upper of the two main classes of society, are to be free to govern themselves and to take what consequences may befall them.   MS 674, 7–8 [c. 1911]

In fairness, Peirce's conservatism was hardly meant to serve as a social philosophy in a Deweyan sense. In spite of the aristocratic yearnings conveyed by the quotation above, Peirce does not really strike the contemporary reader as a politically engaged figure;[19] at any rate, such considerations seem to have had little if any direct influence on the development of his core interests in logic. It should also be noted that his anti-egalitarian views were at least to some extent offset by a softer side to his sentimental conservatism. In 'Evolutionary Love', Peirce condemned the capitalistic 'gospel of greed' in terms that contrast starkly with the views expressed in the previous quote.

> [P]olitical economy has its formula of redemption, too. It is this: Intelligence in the service of greed ensures the justest prices, the fairest contracts, the most enlightened conduct of all the dealings between men, and leads to the *summum bonum*, food in plenty and perfect comfort. Food for whom? Why, for the greedy master of intelligence.
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> CP 6.290 [1893]

Peirce was not even a complete stranger to proposals for concrete social reform; in 'Dmesis' (1892), he put forward a system of more humane treatment of prisoners on sentimental-Christian grounds.[20] It is perhaps debatable whether Peirce was speaking as a theoretician or a concerned citizen in this context; but one can in any case question whether he was really able to stop his philosophical speculations from creeping into practical considerations in the manner in which his conservatism dictated.

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[19] Most commentators have simply ignored the possible political undertones of Peirce's writings; but T. L. Short (2001) has argued that Peircean pragmatism is compatible with a more contemporary political conception of conservatism.

[20] In the article, Peirce refers approvingly to Jesus's "profound" dictum "You cannot serve God and Mammon". This is obviously the precursor to his own ban on serving the two masters of 'Theory' and 'Practice'.

Consequently, it is not surprising that Peirce did qualify his position by issuing a conservative warning against pushing *any* position or doctrine—including conservatism itself—to extremes. He acknowledged that there might be exceptional situations in which sentiment ought to be guided by reason, and admitted that even radical reforms could be acceptable under certain circumstances (CP 1.633 [1898]). However, in general Peirce insisted that philosophical speculation should be allowed to affect moral conduct "only with secular slowness and the most conservative caution" (CP 1.620 [1898]). Thus, it is obvious enough that he was not a meliorist in the sense of actively calling for the "improvement of society by regulated practical means"; and it is highly unlikely that he would have approved of Dewey's reconstructionist and reformist projects, had he lived to witness them in full bloom. Nor, may we surmise, would Peirce's sentimental conservatism have been sympathetic to a 'scientific' programme of social hygiene. In these respects, at least, it looks evident that conservative and progressive pragmatism were—and possibly still are—expressions of two incompatible philosophical temperaments.

Towards better habits

Few, if any, contemporary intellectuals can be exactly classed as radical meliorists or anti-meliorists along the lines sketched above. Progressive pragmatists of today are not likely to prescribe to an agenda of calculative control of society in Ward's or Schillers's sense—at least not without significant qualifications—and often tend to emphasise the ethical and even personal implications of meliorism rather than promoting a strictly social-scientific programme of improvement (see, e.g., Hildebrand 2013; McDonald 2011; Stroud 2007). No doubt, most self-professed pragmatists would balk at being labelled 'conservatives'; but they might still agree that the singular emphasis on the future needs to be tempered by a moderate respect for tradition as a manifestation of more or less intelligent social habits. Yet, practically all variants of present-day melioristic pragmatism seem to subscribe to a leading idea traceable to Dewey, namely the notion that "philosophy's *raison d'être* is to make life better" (Hildebrand 2013, 59). That is, moving beyond the mere acknowledgement that the world is improvable, meliorism is explicitly taken to involve a call to action; it entails a moral *duty* to ameliorate the conditions of existence (McDonald 2011, 171).

At first blush, it would appear that the pragmaticists—that is, the Peircean pragmatists—simply have to disagree, at least if they wish to stay true to the outlook of Peirce. The demand that philosophy ought to contribute to the betterment of concrete human existence, now or in the near future, sounds precisely like the kind of intrusion of 'Practice' into the autonomous province of 'Theory' that Peirce abhorred. In his division of labour among intellectual agencies, the "passionless" and "abstract" philosopher was unequivocally excused from dealing with practical aspects of life—with human existence *in toto* (CP 5.536 [c. 1905]). The only overriding scientific obligation was the ideal commitment to pursue truth wherever it might lead the inquirer, with no concern for external demands or consequences. Presumably, the possible real-life damage of such theoretical activity was to be kept in check by the proscription against application and the dictum that scientific speculation ought not to directly influence actual moral or social conduct.

Given this antagonism between the melioristic and the conservative temperament, it does look as if we have uncovered another deep rift—or an alternative way of articulating an essential divide—in the field of pragmatism. It is certainly difficult to see how Peirce could ever be brought into the ranks of the reformists; and those pragmatists who follow in the footsteps of James and Dewey are unlikely to rescind their aspirations to assist humankind in the face of Peircean censure. Yet, there may be room for some rapprochement. It all depends on how we understand 'meliorism', and to what extent and in what respect a melioristic outlook is taken to demand engagement in actual social affairs.

For this purpose, it is useful to introduce a couple of coarse distinctions. Actually, the first has already been sketched; it is the differentiation between the "improvement of society by regulated practical means" and the non-committal doctrine that world is "capable of improvement", which could be dubbed *societal meliorism* and *metaphysical meliorism*, respectively. The former presumes the latter; but it is perfectly possible to be a metaphysical meliorist without thereby being obliged to engage in societal amelioration. A Peircean world-view can accommodate a metaphysical meliorism of sorts. As his logic of vagueness, metaphysical doctrine of tychism, and endorsement of a "thoroughgoing evolutionism" indicate, his universe could hardly be characterised as finished, static, and determinate—although his idealist-tinged talk of final opinion and absolute truth may suggest otherwise.[21]

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[21] As noted, Peirce's developmental standpoint could be construed as generically melioristic, since it involves the idea of the world becoming ever more rational (see n. 5; MS 953).

However, there is a second sense in which Peirce's philosophy might be described as involving meliorism, or, perhaps more accurately, as being conducive to a broadly melioristic viewpoint. Expanding on a key insight of his original pragmatism, Peirce envisaged a trichotomy of normative sciences—esthetics, ethics and logic (or semiotic)—busied with the criticism and improvement of habits of action. Using Peircean terms, this could be understood as a matter of developing a *logica docens* from the *logica utens*[22]—that is, logic in use—that coping in a challenging world inevitably produced in human beings and which, to a large extent, was inherited through varying traditions (in the broad sense that, among other things, included linguistic habits). Viewed from this perspective, the special province of Peirce's normative philosophy was the deliberate formation and reformation of habits of feeling, action, and thought (or, more broadly, sign-utterance and sign-interpretation) (cf. CP 1.574 [1903]).[23] It was an explicitly critical process ultimately aimed at clarifying and improving our habitual ideals. On the other hand, Peirce emphasised that such habits were not simply made, but a product of active experimentation in a world—internal and external—which did not simply bend to our will; in this sense, we might say that they were discoveries at least as much as artefacts. This point of view does would not necessarily entail abandoning the search for truth for a more instrumentalist conception of philosophical work, for in the end the development of ideally optimal habits of thought would coincide pragmatically with the discovery of truth.

Not only did Peirce suggest that normative inquiry could be construed as a critical review of habits—or, perhaps more accurately, as criticism of the processes by which habits are evaluated and developed—he also argued that the "continual amelioration of our own habits [...] is the only alternative to a continual deterioration of them" (MS 674:1 [c. 1911]). In a sense, this is pragmatist meliorism in the broadest acceptation con-

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However, that position is perhaps more accurately classified as cosmological optimism than as meliorism.

[22] Here, 'logic' is best understood broadly, as semiotic. It is worth pointing out that 'logica utens' does not have to refer to reasoning in a narrow sense; it can plausibly be said to encompass our 'rhetorica utens' as well as the ideals in use that form the experiential groundwork of Peircean esthetics and ethics.

[23] Often, Peirce presented this process hierarchically, with esthetics (as the science of ideals) taking precedence over ethics, which in turn provided principles for logic; but the process is perhaps more fruitfully understood as one of cyclical phases within one department of inquiry.

ceivable. From this angle, the course of life could be described as incessant modification of habits of different grades of concretion and abstraction; normative philosophy simply represents a higher level of awareness and abstraction in this process. We might designate such a conception as *minimal meliorism*. Again, it might be argued that societal meliorism involves such a comprehensive perspective, as any attempt at reform must presuppose at least some degree of modifiability of personal and communal habits by means of reason. Still, minimal habit-meliorism is not equivalent to the metaphysical variant. Although they do not exclude each other, the former is narrower than the latter without thereby necessarily presupposing it. A minimal meliorist is specifically committed only to the notion that *human* habits can to some extent be improved by rational means.[24] True, it might be argued that a synechist perspective implicitly entails metaphysical meliorism, insofar as human agents are viewed as parts of the world and not as 'subjects' over and against a fundamentally indifferent 'objective' universe;[25] but one can very well be a minimalist without accepting such cosmological commitments.

Granted, this perspective will render practically all forms of self-conscious cognitive activity ameliorative to some extent; and it is still a far cry from a reformist notion of meliorism. Yet, in his conception of normative philosophy Peirce may—unwittingly, perhaps—have hit on the common core of the pragmatist-meliorist outlook. The fact that such normative activity is not restricted to pragmatists, but can embrace the endeavours of many different schools of philosophy (and beyond), is not a defect; pragmatism simply makes this more explicit. The particular contribution of the minimalist conception is its highlighting of the core significance of the concept of habit for meliorism. In fact, this may indicate a subtle but substantial difference between pragmatist meliorism and some other programmes of social altruism. *Deep meliorism* (to introduce yet another term) requires the improvement of personal and social habits, not just the mitigation of current circumstances of existence.

Similar considerations led Dewey—the father of transformative pragmatism—to sharply rebuke the reformers of his day for pursuing too restricted aims.

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[24] For Peirce, such a capacity for meliorism would not have been restricted to human beings; arguably, it would have been one of the characteristic marks of his broader (but somewhat misleadingly named) conception of a 'scientific intelligence', i.e. "an intelligence capable of learning by experience" (CP 2.227 [c. 1897]).

[25] Here, one might refer to Peirce's approval of the *il lume naturale* thesis and his particular conception of anthropomorphism (on the latter, see Bergman 2014).

> "Social reform" is conceived in a Philistine spirit, if it is taken to mean anything less than precisely the liberation and expansion of the meanings of which experience is capable. No doubt many schemes of social reform are guilty of precisely this narrowing. But for that very reason they are futile; they do not succeed in even the special reforms at which they aim, except at the expense of intensifying other defects and creating new ones. Nothing but the best, the richest and fullest experience possible, is good enough for man. The attainment of such an experience is not to be conceived as the specific problem of "reformers" but as the common purpose of men. The contribution which philosophy can make to this common aim is criticism.
>
> LW 1:307–8 [1925]

Instead of "the richest and fullest experience possible", we could perhaps speak of ideal habits of feeling, action, and thought. True, the Deweyan conception, with its focus on 'problematic situations', entails a stronger implication of changing the world than a more conservative Peircean notion of habit-amelioration would allow; but the primary target remains the same. It is our assemblage of habits—and by extension, our sphere of meaningful experience—that is meant to be improved or expanded.

Accordingly, it is possible to find a common pragmatist denominator in minimal meliorism, thin as it may be. Yet, even if one accepts that there may be a link between Peirce's talk about habit-amelioration and the more familiar senses of pragmatist meliorism, one might still feel that his point of view, like James's (cf. Ruetenik 2005), was too focused on personal amelioration and omitted the vital social dimension. It is undeniably true that Peirce tended to speak of *self*-criticism and *self*-control, and that the overriding focus and aim of his 'normative science' was the development of reasoning. However, this does not mean that the self in question was strictly speaking a human being; Peirce suggested that a community may be viewed as a kind of person in a loose sense (EP 2, 338 [1905]), and repeatedly argued that seemingly private reflection was more adequately understood as communication between temporal 'selves'. Furthermore, he contended that reflection should not be construed "in that narrow sense in which silence and darkness are favorable to thought", but "should rather be understood as covering all rational life, so that an experiment shall be an operation of thought" (EP 2, 337 [1905]). In its fullest sense, critical reasoning is something that takes place in the external as well as the internal world; Peirce's conservatism notwithstanding, this can

also entail the testing of normative conceptions in and through their social consequences—as long as we proceed with due conservative caution.[26]

Another argument that might be marshalled against the inclusion of the Peircean conception of habit-improvement in the meliorist fold is that it is severely marred by Peirce's quest for the *summum bonum*, or an esthetic end that "recommends itself in itself without ulterior consideration" (EP 2, 260 [1903]; cf. CP 2.199 [c. 1902]). Hugh McDonald (2011), in particular, has contended that "meliorism constitutes an argument against absolute standards" (p. 216), of which the notion of a highest aim would seem to be a prime specimen. Peirce certainly appeared to break with pluralist sentiments when he suggested that there could really be only one *summum bonum*, "the broadest, highest, and most general possible aim" (CP 1.611 [1903]) common to all mankind (if not to all forms of 'scientific intelligence'). However, he also proposed that the ultimate good could be understood in terms of "the development of concrete reasonableness" (CP 5.3 [1902])—a notably vague conception that might be spelled out in terms of embodying ideas "in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognition" (CP 6.476 [1908]). Although this might not allay all possible worries concerning Peirce's perfectionism, there is no obvious reason why such a view of the highest objective could not accommodate a meliorist notion of gradual and relative improvement.

That said, it needs to be acknowledged that Peircean conservatism can be overly restrictive, in effect denying the philosopher a voice in the public sphere. If taken literally, Peirce's defence of the autonomy of scientific philosophy would also muzzle some of his most spirited followers today.[27] To this one could append some of the less appealing features of his standpoint; in his almost nostalgic yearning for an intellectual aristocracy, Peirce seemed to forget his own cautionary warning against doctrinal extremes. Perhaps more worryingly, he appears to have ignored the possibility that a strict theory-practice divide could violate *synechism*, the methodeutic cum metaphysical principle of continuity—thereby blocking some paths of inquiry. Yet, in spite of the often un-pragmatist tone of Peirce's conservative arguments, there is also wisdom to be found in Peircean sentimentalism. At the very least, Peircean conservatism might function as an apposite reminder of the dangers of reformist fervour. Charitably interpreted, sentimental conservatism can be construed in terms of

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[26] I have developed this argument in greater detail in (Bergman 2012).

[27] Here, I am primarily thinking of the kind of public philosophy developed by Susan Haack (1998; 2008).

admonitions against scientistic hubris—warnings that any wise pragmatist should take seriously, especially keeping in mind Schiller's troubling forays into eugenics and flirtation with real political authoritarianism of the darkest kind.

Both melioristic and conservative variants of pragmatism involve certain perils. The former can lead to an excessive confidence in progress, where the capacity of reason to control habits of action is exaggerated and traditions are treated as mere prejudices. At the end of this road awaits extreme rationalism, fuelled by visions of brave new worlds but haunted by the spectre of eugenics. As it turns quasi-scientific, meliorism risks losing sight of its original ethical impetus. For its part, conservative pragmatism, with its simplistic partition of life into the spheres of theory and practice, can all too easily descend into an insidious form of social conventionalism. This is not to deny the prudence of a division of labour; in many respects, Peirce's worries about crass utilitarianism and imperialistic scientism were entirely justified. But there can also be something disconcerting in Peirce's advocacy of perfect autonomy for science, at least if it causes us to forget that we are still talking about a fallible endeavour, one that is rooted in more mundane pursuits and always—even in the most abstract mathematical speculations or outlandish physical theories— to some degree connected to human experience. To quote Peirce, our science is a "middle-sized and mediocre" affair, for all its glory rather insignificant in the bigger picture of things (CP 1.119 [c. 1897).

What I have sketched in this this article is in effect a compromise position, in which the social-melioristic and scientific-conservative temperaments could—perhaps even should—restrain each other. It is not a programme for action, and as such it provides no prescription for how any particular problem that we may encounter ought to be treated; in each case of proposed social engagement and application, pros and cons will need to be weighed afresh, taking heed of sentiments as well as of the judgments of reasoning and the possibilities for renewal. However, the approach suggested here can provide a different way of assessing the pragmatist tradition; an interpretation of the normative core of Peirce's philosophy in terms of minimal meliorism, with an accompanying metaphysical meliorism, may at least help us avoid dividing pragmatism into two radically disconnected camps in a way that is simply not productive. This is not just a matter of saving Peirce from isolation; it can also be seen as an opportunity to put Peircean instruments to work in the kind of projects envisaged by Dewey—with some conservative care, of course.

Only time can tell if this is truly practicable; but whatever the outcome, the investigation will almost certainly contribute to the improvement of pragmatism.

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