

Improving Our Habits: Peirce and Meliorism

Although their perspectives and aims may differ greatly, most pragmatists tend to emphasize consequential practice rather than pure theory. Indeed, a *melioristic* inclination, a desire to improve the future lot of human beings in this world, could be identified as one defining characteristic of a pragmatist. However, while this transformative conception of pragmatism easily encompasses thinkers such as William James, F. C. S. Schiller, John Dewey, C. Wright Mills, and Richard Rorty, it seems to exclude certain others – most conspicuously Charles S. Peirce, the putative father of the movement.

In contrast to Dewey and Rorty, Peirce is manifestly sceptical of attempts to apply philosophy to concrete human affairs – to the “problems of men”, to use Dewey’s term. In his Cambridge Conference Lectures (1898), Peirce notoriously not only seems to advocate a rather sharp distinction between theory and practice as two incompatible forms of life, but also to disparage melioristic conceptions of the philosopher’s task. In his expressed view, philosophy is a theoretical science that should not be compromised by concerns with concrete applicability or societal relevance.

Admittedly, the polemical tone of the 1898 lectures can to some extent be attributed to the troubled circumstances of the talks in question. Furthermore, the sharp dualism between theory and practice is partly tempered by Peirce’s earlier account of the emergence of scientific investigation from everyday processes of inquiry (the belief-doubt model) as well as by his conception of *a* science as a practice determined by the goal-directed activities of a social group. Even so, Peirce does seem to distance himself from the kind of melioristic pragmatism that is usually associated with Dewey. While Peirce passionately defends radicalism (meaning freedom of imagination and experimentation) in science, he tends to endorse “sentimental conservatism” in other domains of existence, such as moral and (non-scientific) social life. For a meliorist inspired by Dewey’s programme of intelligent reform and philosophical activism, such a viewpoint can feel disheartening; it might even be interpreted as a cunning apology for an intellectualistic and introverted philosophy, promoting a *laissez faire* attitude to the problems of today while speaking abstractly of Truth and Justice as long-term ideals.

But is Peirce’s philosophy really anti-melioristic? In this paper, I will scrutinize this assumption, hoping to show that, in spite of appearances, Peircean thought is not only compatible with moderate forms of meliorism, but that it actually is animated by certain melioristic aspirations and ideals, albeit on a rather abstract and general level. This, I believe, is rendered feasible by a focus on critical common-sensism and a reconstruction of the normative disciplines in terms of criticism of habits. On a more basic theoretical level, however, I wish to argue that Peirce’s pragmatistic account of meaning and habit should not be reduced to mere analysis; by drawing attention to a mostly unexplored division on logical interpretants in his semeiotic, I will suggest that *habit-*

change can be construed as a higher stage of interpretant-development than the clarification of meaning in terms of habit.¹

Activism and Conservatism

Let us begin, however, by considering why, at first blush, Peirce might be viewed as wholly hostile to melioristic positions. This calls for a somewhat closer look at what meliorism – and especially *pragmatistic* meliorism – entails.

Perhaps the best place to start is the *Century Dictionary* (1889-91), where we find a definition that is most likely partly authored by none other than Peirce. According to the dictionary, “meliorism” can be 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”²

This definition nicely summarises two main variants of melioristic thought. “Meliorism” can be understood broadly as the theoretical position that the world is capable of improvement; but in the narrower sense, the term refers to the possibility of intelligently improving (*ameliorating*) human society. Both senses are distinguished from both pessimism and optimism. Furthermore, the *Century Dictionary* definition suggests a praxis-oriented conception, as “meliorism” is portrayed as an “active principle” according to which the world at large or society is susceptible to amelioration.

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 seem to embrace – and no one more influentially so than Dewey, who starkly distinguishes 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.

¹ Although I do not know of any attempt to address the question of meliorism precisely from the point of view proposed here, several Peirce scholars have scrutinized the closely connected issues of conservatism and self-control in ways that to a certain extent support the present endeavour, but also illuminate aspects of the matter that will not be addressed in this article (see, e.g., Colapietro 1997a, 1999; Hookway 1997; Misak 2004a).

² Tellingly, it is the second characterization of “meliorism” that has most likely been penned by Peirce. I am indebted to François Latraverse for this information.

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])

This characterization of meliorism is practically a condensed description of the ambition of Dewey's pragmatism, which famously calls for a recovery of philosophy as "a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men" (MW 10:46 [1917]). Naturally, Dewey does not think that philosophers are capable of performing this grand task on their own, but he reserves a special role for philosophy in his melioristic vision. The positive job of the philosopher, in distinction to the merely negative undertaking of combating timeworn prejudices and stale traditions, is to develop useful tools for intelligent planning and action.

...intellectual 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. (LW 15:166 [1946])

Therefore, Dewey espouses an explicitly *activist* conception of meliorism, which does not halt at the theoretical view that the world is improvable; opposing both pessimism and optimism, he moves on to an advocacy of the concrete involvement of philosophers in the present problems of society. For Dewey, this means, above all, a new conception of social philosophy. In contrast to the traditional social philosopher, who dwells "in the region of his concepts" and "'solves' problems by showing the relationship of ideas", the Deweyan meliorist purportedly assists human beings "by supplying them hypotheses to be used and tested in projects of reform" (MW 12:190 [1920]).

According to Dewey, the employment of intelligent method in dealing with the "concrete troubles" of the world entails the adoption of the techniques of scientific inquiry in social meliorism. In this context, "scientific method" means primarily experimentation, the conscious and deliberate implementation of new ways of seeing and doing things by means of an intelligently guided process of trial and error. It also involves a rather radical abolition of the distinction between theory and practice – between science and everyday life.

Of course, amelioration is not an easily accomplished task; ingrained habits frequently thwart the most intelligent and scientifically sound plans for social transformation. Therefore, Dewey argues that the most fruitful breeding ground for social improvement is to be found in the relatively flexible and immature, rather than in “adults whose habits of thought and feeling are more or less definitely set, and whose environment is more or less rigid” (MW 13:402 [1921]). This is the melioristic motivation underlying his pursuits in the field of education.

As noted, this Deweyan meliorism, with its characteristic opposition to dualisms in theory and practice, is often taken to be a distinguishing mark of the pragmatist mindset. However, moving backwards in time to Peirce, we seem to encounter a position that is almost diametrically opposed to the meliorism of Dewey. Peirce supports the separation of theory and practice as two modes of life, wishes to defend the autonomy of scientific inquiry, and argues that conservatism is the appropriate attitude in morals and non-scientific social affairs. This is the Peirce who declares that “the two masters, theory and practice, you cannot serve” (CP 1.642 [1898]).

At first, it might seem that Peirce’s advocacy of such a surprisingly sharp dualism between the theoretical and practical is simply motivated by his wish to protect scientific inquiry from outside pressures. As he frequently notes, traditional moralities, as they are embodied in the ordinary social habits of human beings, are prone to encroach on the free pursuit of knowledge. In particular, Peirce argues that the *habit of conservatism*, which sustains the everyday activities of human beings in society, has no place in science.

...conservatism 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 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 science. (CP 1.50 [c. 1896])

While conservatism “in the sense of a dread of consequences” obstructs inquiry, science has “always been forwarded by radicals and radicalism, in the sense of the eagerness to carry consequences to their extremes” (CP 1.148 [c. 1897]). Thus Peirce, who maintains that the dictum “do not block the way of inquiry” is a corollary of the first rule of reason, advocates speculative open-mindedness and progressivism in the domain of science (cf. CP 1.662 [1898]).

Insofar as the separation between the life-realms of theory and practice merely entails a defence of science from conservatism, it does not necessarily clash with Deweyan pragmatism. However, as the passage quoted above reveals, Peirce is not only a scientific radical out to protect inquiry from conservative intrusion; he also wants to keep scientific or pseudo-scientific “reformers and

rationalists” away from the province of everyday communal life. Arguing that morals and social norms embody “the traditional wisdom of ages of experience”, Peirce warns us against attempts to reform such habits by employing scientific intelligence; indeed, he maintains that it is not even safe to reason about such matters, “except in a purely speculative way” (CP 1.50 [c. 1896]). Hence, he defines the meaning of “true conservatism” – that is, the brand of sentimental conservatism he embraces – as “not trusting to reasonings about questions of vital importance but rather to hereditary instincts and traditional sentiments” (CP 1.661 [1898]).

This affirmation of conservatism involves a recognition of both the freedom and the inadequacies of human intellect. While there is no point in postulating artificial limits to human imagination and speculation – which would be like introducing a legal ban on jumping over the moon (cf. CP 5.536 [c. 1905]) – human beings are nonetheless fallible reasoners who necessarily rely on uncriticized habits in their everyday life. Such common-sense habits of feeling, action, and thought will appear to be practically infallible to the individuals who live their life without doubting their satisfactoriness – indeed, often without any awareness of the habitual character of the habits, a lack that renders the habits virtually “instinctual” (CP 1.633 [1898]).

This does not entail the postulation of a completely autonomous domain of intelligence, separated from the concrete life of habit. Peirce maintains that human reason “appeals to sentiment in the last resort” (CP 1.632 [1898]). Although there are to be no limitations on the workings of intelligence in the sphere of science, reason cannot function without sentiments; science (understood as a communal activity) is first and foremost fuelled by the desire to find truth that transcends individual interests (see, e.g., NEM 4:xix; NEM 4:227 [1905-6]). It is not the intellect that provides the scientist with such an aspiration, but something more basic in his or her social experience.³ Peirce characterizes “sentimentalism” as “the doctrine that great respect should be paid to the natural judgments of the sensible heart” (CP 6.292 [1893]). Such sentiments are not infallible; but they are more trustworthy than reasoning in dealing with questions concerning vital matters of everyday life, because they are backed by habits that have developed over generations and have been tested in experience.

Since “inquiry is only a particular kind of conduct” (MS 602:8), scientific research never fully transcends its humble origins in human experience. The ethical impetus of scientific investigation – the moral factors that are the “most vital factors in the method of modern science” (CP 7.87 [1902]) – is not a product of reasoning, but something that purportedly emerges naturally as human beings try to make their way in the world, adjusting to experience by constantly forming and revising beliefs.

³ In an earlier article Peirce argues for the sentimental ground of logic as follows: “It may seem strange that I should put forward three sentiments, namely, interest in an indefinite community, recognition of the possibility of this interest being made supreme, and hope in the unlimited continuance of intellectual activity, as indispensable requirements of logic. Yet, when we consider that logic depends on a mere struggle to escape doubt, which, as it terminates in action, must begin in emotion, and that, furthermore, the only cause of our planting ourselves on reason is that other methods of escaping doubt fail on account of the social impulse, why should we wonder to find social sentiment presupposed in reasoning?” (CP 2.655 [1878]; cf. CP 5.357 [1868])

Given these considerations, it would appear that the postulated chasm between theory and practice, between scientific reason and moral sentiment, is not as absolute as it might appear on first encounter. Peirce does explicitly qualify his position, warning us against taking conservatism to extremes; he acknowledges that there are exceptional situations where sentiment ought to be guided by reason, and maintains that even radical reforms may be acceptable under certain circumstances (CP 1.633 [1898]). On the one hand, Peirce holds that ethics ought to be an austere theoretical and “useless” pursuit, if it is to be a part of philosophical inquiry at all. On the other hand, he affirms that philosophical speculation may eventually affect moral conduct, but maintains that it should be allowed to do so “only with secular slowness and the most conservative caution” (CP 1.620 [1898]).

Although these are significant compromises, they do not render Peirce a Deweyan meliorist – far from it. In fact, parts of Peirce’s outpour sound like direct criticisms of the activist variety of meliorism.⁴ He calls 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 objects 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])

Not only does Peirce warn us of the dangers in thinking that intelligence would be a better guide to conduct than time-honoured habits of tradition; here, he appears to disallow *any* consideration of practical applicability in philosophy. In part, this stance amounts to a denunciation of the kind of utilitarianism that would reduce science to technology and philosophy to ideology (cf. Potter, 1996, p. 68); but it also allows philosophers (as “scientific men”) to ignore concrete problems that might trouble lesser mortals and to focus on the nobler “study of useless things” (cf. CP 1.76 [c. 1896]). Peirce seems to have little to offer to melioristic philosophy in Dewey’s sense; one might even feel that his social philosophy is reducible to the conservative maxim: “obey the traditional maxims of your community without hesitation or discussion” (CP 1.666 [1898]). This acceptance of the *status quo* is positively anti-Deweyan, perhaps even anti-pragmatic⁵ and anti-democratic.⁶

⁴ As Dewey’s transformative programme was properly articulated only after Peirce’s death, Peirce does not offer any specific criticism of Dewey in this respect. However, Peirce is sharply critical of related tendencies in other philosophers, such as the humanism of F. C. S. Schiller. Complaining that Schillerian pragmatism tries to pay attention to “every department of man’s nature”, Peirce declares it to be incompatible with his own conception of philosophy as a “passionless and severely fair” science (CP 5.537 [1905-8]). The misgiving that humanistic pragmatism is not “purely intellectual” is one that Peirce might very well have voiced in a criticism of Dewey. On the other hand, in a review of Dewey’s *Studies in Logical Theory*, Peirce does express concern that the Deweyan natural history conception may exclude normative logic (CP 8.190 [1904]; cf. CP 8.239 [1904]). As we shall see, this normative focus is not without melioristic aspects.

⁵ It is worth noting that this stance does not exclude *theoretical* references to practice or “practical upshots”; what Peirce wishes to ban from the purview of philosophy is engagement with practical problems in a more mundane sense.

Of course, this is not the whole story; one might, for instance, opine that Peirce's *Evolutionary Love* (1893), with its straightforward condemnation of the "gospel of greed", contains a singular contribution to social philosophy (cf. CP 1. 673 [1898]). But given the more systematic point of view articulated in the Cambridge Lectures and numerous other writings, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Peirce's conception of the philosopher's task is not well-matched with Deweyan meliorism, in spite of the fact that both advocate a scientific approach to philosophical work.

Note, however, that this does not mean that Peirce would be unable to embrace meliorism in the broader sense; that is, he might affirm the doctrine that the world is capable of improvement without thereby being committed to a melioristic approach that requires philosophers to take an active role in the betterment of society here and now.⁷ But is this really all that can be said about Peirce's contribution to meliorism? As far as actual input is concerned, it may well be so; yet, there are reasons to inquire a bit deeper into the potential of Peircean philosophy to contribute to the melioristic thread of pragmatism.

One important clue to how such a feat might be achieved is provided by the way the term "habit" tends to crop up in both Dewey's and Peirce's discussions of the matter. While the progressive Dewey laments how ingrained habits tend to prevent the application of intelligence to social problems, the segregationist Peirce seems only happy to leave traditional habits alone, as long as they do not hinder scientific inquiry. However, a somewhat different approach to the matter is suggested in some of Peirce's later writings, which are concerned with normative inquiry and criticism.

In the *Minute Logic*, having once more drawn attention to the persistence of moral traditions and social manners, Peirce declares that habits of reasoning are radically different – and not only those practices developed in the scientific laboratories, but also habits of everyday reasoning. In contrast to the conservative rigidity of custom and sentiment, such habits are allegedly characterized by a remarkable plasticity and adaptability; for Peirce claims that as "soon as it appears that facts are against a given habit of reasoning, it at once loses its hold", and adds that no "matter how strong and well-rooted in habit any rational conviction of ours may be, we no sooner find that another equally well-informed person doubts it, than we begin to doubt it ourselves" (CP 2.160 [c. 1902]).

⁶ Peirce's conservatism turns uncomfortably aristocratic when he declares that "in 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])

⁷ One might be tempted to construe Peirce's evolutionary standpoint as generically melioristic as it involves the idea of a changeable world becoming ever more rational. But that is a position more appropriately classified as cosmological optimism than as meliorism.

Such comments are noteworthy for two reasons: (1) they suggest that Peirce views at least social habits of reasoning, whether they are elements of *logica docens* or *logica utens*, as malleable; and (2) they raise the question of whether philosophy cannot, in spite of his insistence to the contrary, play a significant role in the domains that he at times wishes to exclude from its purview. If all habits of reasoning – and perhaps also connected habits of feeling and action – are even half as changeable as Peirce implies, it seems only natural to reassess the soundness of the division of life spheres into the inflexible world of practice, whose habits philosophers best not tamper with, and the dynamic world of theory, where habits ought to be treated as relatively disposable methods and hypotheses. Arguably, Peirce’s mature conception of normative inquiry and self-control points in this direction; but its intellectual kernel can be found in the more basic sign-theoretical examination of habit.

Habit and Habit-Change

Thus, before addressing the question of the possible melioristic implications of Peirce’s normative sciences, it is worthwhile to review his notion of habit. As so many issues in Peirce’s philosophy, this turns out to be a rather complex topic, made all the more confusing by some internal inconsistencies in usage.

Peirce distinguishes the “more proper” meaning of “habit” from a broader conception. While the wider sense of “habit” “denotes such a specialization, original or acquired, of the nature of a man, or an animal, or a vine, or a crystallizable chemical substance, or anything else, that he or it will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon a considerable proportion of the occasions) that may present itself of a generally describable character”, the narrower acceptance entails a distinction between attained habit and natural disposition (CP 5.538 [c. 1902]).⁸ Habit in the narrow sense could also be characterized as “acquired law” (CP 2.292 [c. 1902]).

Unfortunately, Peirce seldom clarifies which denotation of “habit” he is employing in various contexts. Although he suggests that “habit” can be used for the broader sense, and the concept “acquired habit” suffices to indicate the more focused meaning when needed, he often refers to the narrower sense simply as “habit”. This wavering turns out to be of some consequence; while habit in the broad sense encompasses possible innate tendencies as well as consciously or unconsciously adopted habits, the narrow acceptance is intrinsically connected to the idea of acquirement. Of course, from our point of view, the interesting question concerns what sense of habit is at stake in Peirce’s discussions of scientific radicalism and social conservatism.

While it is conceivable that some sentiments are based on natural dispositions, it seems reasonably clear that the traditional habits that Peirce wishes to protect from the assaults of overeager reformists are acquisitions. They are obtained, albeit not necessarily as the result of a conscious process of deliberation. This does not entail that such a habit would be easily

⁸ In its most general sense, habit is truly omnipresent; “What we call a Thing is a cluster or habit of reactions, or, to use a more familiar phrase, is a centre of forces” (CP 4.157 [c. 1897]).

changeable; as we have seen, Peirce tends to view certain habits that are passed on socially, and that manifest themselves as core moral beliefs or sentiments, as practically infallible – and therefore virtually unyielding in everyday life. Yet, while we are in a manner of speaking born into many such habits, they are not absolutely fixed, and therefore they are not strictly speaking innate dispositions.⁹

If traditional and moral habits were firm natural dispositions, there would be little or no need to protect them from rationalists; they would prevail in spite of everything. But the fact that habits are in some manner acquired renders them vulnerable, prone to be affected even by philosophical arguments. Thus, it is perhaps not so surprising to find that Peirce, almost in the face of his own conservatism, places a great deal of emphasis on the question of how habits *ought to be* grasped and transformed. Indeed, his pragmatism seems to be essentially connected to this problem.

In Peirce's early pragmatistic writings, discussions of habit tend to be restricted to the analysis of the fixation of belief. In this context, habit is basically understood as the underlying tendency to act that determines the pragmatic identity of a human belief.

...the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be. What the habit is depends on when and how it causes us to act. (CP 5.400 [1878])

In spite of being defined as the relatively objective ground of belief, Peirce is here using "habit" in the narrower sense that entails acquisition. According to one early definition, a "habit arises, when, having had the sensation of performing a certain act, *m*, on several occasions *a*, *b*, *c*, we come to do it upon every occurrence of the general event, *l*, of which *a*, *b* and *c* are special cases" (CP 5.297 [1868]). This view is restated in "Pragmatism" (1907), where Peirce asserts that habits "differ from dispositions in having been acquired as consequences of the principle [...] that multiple reiterated behavior of the same kind, under similar combinations of percepts and fancies, produces a tendency, - the *habit*, - actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future" (EP 2:413).¹⁰ Such characterizations make it clear that the focus of Peirce's pragmatistic interest is habits in the narrower sense – and moreover such acquired habits of which human beings can become aware in the form of beliefs. Indeed, "belief" can be defined as an

⁹ It is actually unclear whether Peirce's philosophy, with its evolutionary-synechistic animus, can accommodate dispositions in the strictest sense. In the *Minute Logic*, Peirce argues that we really cannot hold on to a hard and fast distinction, because "it is difficult to make sure whether a habit is inherited or is due to infantile training and tradition" (CP 2.170 [c. 1902]). Here, dispositions may be viewed as limiting cases, that is, as habit-like laws of action that would be distinguished from habits proper by being inborn principles that are definitely fixed. Some habits turn out to be more "instinctual" than others. In a looser sense, we may talk of "dispositions" or "instincts" when we mean habits that to the best of our knowledge are biologically based.

¹⁰ In "A Sketch of Logical Critic", Peirce identifies a number of different means by which habits may be formed, listing (1) custom, (2) the repetition of an act, (3) repeated imagination of an act and its consequences, and (4) a single act of will (e.g., giving oneself the order to wake up at a certain time the following morning) (MS 673:14-18 [c. 1911]). To this list, we could add a higher order of habit-creation by means of the combination of imaginative deliberation and external experiment.

“intelligent habit upon which we shall act when occasion presents itself” (EP 2:19 [1895]), or, more precisely, as a “cerebral habit of the highest kind, which will determine what we do in fancy as well as what we do in action” (CP 3.160 [1880]).

However, Peirce’s account of belief may cause some confusion because of an uneasy vacillation between the claim that belief is something of which we necessarily are aware and the view that a belief can be unconsciously entertained (for the former, see e.g. EP 2:12 [1895]; for the latter, see e.g. EP 2:336 [1905]; CP 2.148 [c. 1902]; CP 2.711 [1883]). Given the fact that human beings seem to be quite capable of holding beliefs without being actively conscious of them, it seems most appropriate to view beliefs as intellectual habits of which we are not necessarily aware, but of whose habitual character we can relatively easily become cognizant.¹¹ Peirce refers to the act of consciousness or “representation to ourselves that we have a specified habit of this kind” as a “judgment” (CP 3.160 [1880]; cf. EP 2:19 [1895]).

While there is no point in postulating incognizables, we can never be fully aware of *all* those beliefs that determine our actions – not to speak of other kinds of habits affecting our conduct. Still, it is a matter of fact that we constantly judge many beliefs to be habitual, which in this case entails an actual or a virtual awareness that they are in some sense acquired and not necessarily fixed for eternity. It is precisely with such beliefs that Peirce’s pragmatism and, more broadly, the normative sciences are concerned.

Peirce’s pragmatistic method is a tool for clarifying the habitual nature of beliefs. That is, using the well-known pragmatic maxim, we ought to be able to state what habits of action concepts and beliefs entail, and moreover to do so in an objective manner. Interestingly, in his pragmatistic analyses, Peirce does not tend to introduce any principled division between habits transmitted by tradition and habits acquired as the consequence of scientific experimentation. Consequently, the pragmatic maxim can supposedly be employed in the scrutiny of vitally important topics, such as deciding whether the argument between Protestants and Catholics regarding the doctrine of transubstantiation has any real merit or not (CP 5.401 [1878]; but cf. CP 5.541 [c. 1902]), as well as in more scientific contexts.

However, Peirce’s pragmatistic analysis goes beyond the mere breaking down of abstruse concepts and beliefs into tangible habits for the purpose of removing verbal barriers to inquiry and communication. In his mature writings, he broadens the scope of pragmatism by connecting it to the semeiotic analysis of the meaning of signs, arguing that the *ultimate* (or *final*¹²) logical interpretant of a sign – an interpretant that is capable of bringing a process of interpretation to rest, at least temporarily – must be a habit of action (CP 5.491 [1907]). Moreover, Peirce

¹¹ This to a large extent a matter of taste, of course; we might also choose to characterize belief as conscious intellectual habit. One could opine that all intellectual habits are beliefs according to the definition proposed, but the (admittedly vague) qualifier “relatively easily” helps us avoid such a conflation. To add to the confusion, Peirce also offers a definition of “belief” as “deliberate, or self-controlled, habit” (CP 5.480 [1907]), but this narrows the scope of the concept in an unduly rationalistic way.

¹² Peirce uses both “ultimate” and “final” in this context. Many commentators, most notably T. L. Short (2007, p. 57), argue that we should not conflate the concepts of ultimate and final interpretant.

frequently emphasizes that pragmatic meaning is not only habitual; it is, in a pregnant sense, controlled habituality. More precisely put, only *self-controlled* habits can be ultimate logical interpretants. This entails a recognition of the fact that human beings not only have habits, but are also capable of exerting a measure of deliberative control over their habits (EP 2:337 [1905]).¹³

Peirce identifies various levels of habitual meaning.¹⁴ Already in his early pragmatism, he recognizes three degrees of meaning – familiarity of use, analytic definition, and pragmatically clarified signification – but without recourse to the explicitly normative framework of his mature philosophy. When Peirce re-articulates his pragmatism in light of semeiotic, this focus becomes evident. Not just any habit entailed by a concept or belief is entitled to the laudatory status of ultimate logical interpretant, but only such habits that form the core of adequately examined and criticized concepts or beliefs.

There is, however, an interesting twist to the story. While it is nowadays widely recognized that Peirce associates the ultimate logical interpretant with the kind of habit that would be the result of critical deliberation on its potential consequences, less attention has been paid to the fact that Peirce occasionally defines this pragmatically clarified interpretant as *habit-change* – “a modification of a person's tendencies toward action” (CP 5.476 [1907]) - rather than in terms of habit, plain and simple.

This may, at first blush, seem like a rather ill-advised move on Peirce's part – and from a certain point of view, it is. Namely, if the pragmatic method is meant to elucidate the significations of concepts such as “lithium”, “democracy”, and “reality”, it seems rather peculiar to assert that their proper meaning is to be found in the way they would change a person's tendencies to act, rather than saying that their appropriate acceptance is the kinds of habits of action they would involve after sufficient critical investigation (with “sufficiency” left intentionally vague). The addition of “change” does not seem to add anything of value to the analysis of meaning. In fact, if taken literally, such a definition could lead to some rather unwelcome consequences for the pragmatistic elucidation; if meaning is habit-change, then the signification of a sign would be slighter for well-informed agents than for persons with little knowledge, as the latter would be more likely to have their habits greatly modified by acquaintance with the sign in question. This would almost inevitably undermine any claim to objectivity the pragmatistic method might make. Also, the meaning of a sign would seem to diminish the more its usage would be established in processes of inquiry and communication, as it would no longer be capable of producing habit-changes. True, such undesirable results could be avoided by adding certain qualifications; but that would lead us back to a conception of signification as *ultimate habit* – that is, an understanding of the meaning

¹³ Peirce is mostly careful not to exaggerate this human capacity, but occasionally – especially when extolling the power of ideals – he lets down his guard: “Each habit of an individual is a law; but these laws are modified so easily by the operation of self-control, that it is one of the most patent of facts that ideals and thought generally have a very great influence on human conduct” (CP 1.348 [1903]).

¹⁴ In addition, Peirce acknowledges that there may be non-habitual meanings, significant feelings and actions associated with emotional and energetic interpretants.

of *x* in terms of habits of action involved in the deliberate acceptance of *x* - rather than as habit-change.

Nonetheless, we should not give up on the idea of habit-change yet. There are some indications – albeit very sketchy – that the ultimate logical interpretant is *not* the highest logical interpretant in Peirce’s scheme. In some partly unpublished fragments of the seminal essay “Pragmatism” (1907), he proposes a division of the logical interpretant into first, second, and third logical interpretant, adding that the second may be further divided into two, and the third into three subtypes (MS 318:00168-00172).¹⁵ Although such an exposition seems to bear all the marks of Peircean triadomania run amok, this mostly-ignored analysis contains some potentially rewarding suggestions.

The first logical interpretant is defined as a conjecture, which establishes a habit that enables imaginary experimentation in the inner world; we “imagine ourselves in various situations and animated by various motives; and we proceed to trace out the alternative lines of conduct which the conjectures would leave open to us” (CP 5.481 [1907]). Working on the concept or belief in this manner, we are gradually led to more refined logical interpretants – improved conjectures and more general depictions of the involved – which Peirce characterizes as lower and higher second logical interpretants. This is a perhaps only a somewhat schematic way of describing the critical process by which we work our way toward a more adequate pragmatic conception of our “virtual resolve” (cf. EP 2:19 [1895]), but the upshot is of great interest.

The second logical interpretants constitute the ultimate normal and proper mental effect of the sign taken by itself (I do not mean removed from its context but considered apart from the effects of its context and circumstance of utterance). They must, therefore, be identified with that “meaning” which we have all along been seeking. In that capacity, they are habits of internal or imaginary action, abstracted from all reference to the individual mind in which they might happen to be implanted, and whose future actions they would guide. (MS 318:00171 [1907])

Peirce emphasizes that such internal analysis, which in its more advanced forms amounts to experimentation in the internal world, can lead to the kind of *habituation* that really would guide our conduct, were the circumstances to arise (CN 3:278 [1906]).¹⁶ But what, then, is the *third*

¹⁵ It might be tempting to interpret this division of the logical interpretant in terms of the three degrees of clarity Peirce identifies in his pragmatistic writings. The trichotomies are not straightforwardly identical, however, and may indicate somewhat different perspectives on the problem of meaning. While the first logical interpretant is clearly not familiarity, the second logical interpretant involves a higher level of clarification than mere analytic (or dictionary) definition. If the third degree of clarity is understood as “an account of the role the concept plays in practical endeavours” (Misak 2004b, p. viii), then such a “pragmatic elucidation” encompasses the second and parts of the third logical interpretant, but does not necessarily capture the full scope of the latter. It would seem that the identification of first, second, and third logical interpretant are meant to describe the process of deliberation involved in the adoption and modification of habits, rather than degrees of clarity of meaning *per se*.

¹⁶ Indeed, Peirce sometimes argues that it is only through experimentation that we become aware of our habits; we “can only know that we have formed a habit by some experiment, although it may be an involuntary experiment or may be an experiment in the imagination” (CN 3:188 [1904]).

logical interpretant? According to Peirce, such interpretants are called into being when the activity is for some reason turned “from the theatre of internal to that of the external experience” (MS 318:00171 [1907]).

...the experience which is consequent upon the production of the second (or, sometimes, directly upon that of the first) logical interpretant is sought and found by a deliberate, self-controlled, purposive, muscular effort. In a word, the performance is that of an *experiment*, or, at least, of a quasi-experiment... (MS 318:00172 [1907])

This is as far as Peirce’s analysis goes.¹⁷ Admittedly, it is scant, but it may open the door to further developments in unexpected directions. It is at least conceivable that Peirce’s problematic references to habit-change are results of conflating the second and the third logical interpretant. This would allow us to say that the second logical interpretant – that ultimate interpretant identifiable as the pragmatic meaning of a sign – is indeed a habit of action, while at the same time acknowledging a higher level of semeiotic labour – one that might be aimed at reforming external conditions through modification of our habits of conduct rather than merely analyzing the meaning of signs. That is, active habit-change would then turn out to be a part of the philosopher’s task alongside intellectual analysis of meaningful habits; indeed, the two would be practically inseparable.

In view of the fact that Peirce stresses that habit-change includes *dissociation* as well as alterations of association, and further identifies active effort and experimentation as legitimate initiators of such modification in addition to external experiences that cause doubts (see CP 5.476-9 [1907]), it does not seem too farfetched to maintain that he is here indicating that pragmatistic philosophers need to move beyond mere analysis – the “solving” of problems by describing conceptual relationships that Dewey criticizes – toward a more active engagement in the makeover of habits. The third logical interpretant is not reached merely by analysis and experimentation in the internal theatre of imagination; it calls for “muscular” effort. This indicates that the logical interpretant, in its third degree, is not merely an intellectual conception; it gains its characteristic import from the way it can affect the outer world.

It seems to be in this direction that Peirce is pushing his pragmatism in his oft-cited but cryptic reference to “concrete reasonableness”.

...the maxim has approved itself to the writer, after many years of trial, as of great utility in leading to a relatively high grade of clearness of thought. He would venture to suggest that it should always be put into practice with conscientious thoroughness, but that, when that has been done, and not before, a still higher grade of clearness of thought can be attained by remembering that the only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness. (CP 5.3 [1902])

¹⁷ The manuscript breaks off a few words after the quote above; the following pages are missing.

Arguably, such development must entail improvement by means of habit-change, conscious modification of existing habits and even the growth of relatively new habits. Here, we are not far from an acknowledgement that amelioration is an inherent element in what could be dubbed the *significance* or *adequacy* of the sign. Peirce defines “pragmatistic adequacy” as “what ought to be the substance, or Meaning, of the concept or other Symbol in question, in order that its true usefulness may be fulfilled” (MS 649:2 [1910]). Remarkably, this conception of the highest level of clarity combines a normative point of view with an emphasis on utility, and is compatible with the definition of ultimate meaning as habit.¹⁸ Building on this, it is viable to maintain that pragmatistic adequacy of symbols – what they *should* signify rather than what they *do* mean – is something that is discoverable or developable only by active experimentation in both the internal and the external world, that is, through intelligent habit-change.

Criticism and Amelioration

If my conjecture is not entirely erroneous, then Peirce’s pragmatistic account of the logical interpretant may contain the theoretical seed of a more progressive conception of philosophy than his polemics against reformists suggest. Of course, this is merely a beginning – and a rather abstract and threadbare one as such. Certainly, what has been said does not suffice to show that Peirce would be a meliorist in any strong sense of the word. So, in conclusion I will add some considerations that I believe show that my hypothesis is not as fanciful as it may seem, and that Peirce’s intermittent references to habit-change may indeed point towards a more nuanced understanding of the philosopher’s task than his segregation of science from the rest of the social world would lead us to believe.

Perhaps the weightiest argument in support of the reconstruction proposed here is provided by the normative development of Peirce’s thought after the 1898 lectures. It is a well-known fact that he gradually embraces a trivium of normative sciences, comprised of esthetics, ethics, and logic (or semeiotic), in his mature philosophy. While the precise character of and division of labour among these modes of inquiry is a vexing question, this evident move in the normative direction could be taken as a sign of an increasing sensitivity to melioristic concerns. On the other hand, Peirce is adamant in his defence of the abstract nature of esthetics, ethics, and logic; they are allegedly “the very most purely theoretical of purely theoretical sciences” (CP 1.281 [c. 1902]) – and as such, not to be confused with practical efforts to induce certain kinds of conduct in society.

But what, then, *does* the normative character of such inquiry really consist in? Peirce tends to offer rather vague definitions of the task of the normative sciences. For instance, they are purportedly concerned with distinguishing “what ought to be from what ought not to be” (CP 1.186 [1903]); or they perform analyses “of the conditions of attainment of something of which purpose is an essential ingredient” (CP 1.575 [c. 1902]). Generically, the normative disciplines are

¹⁸ Note, however, that this is a more focused conception than the notion that the third degree of meaning entails all the consequences that would follow upon the acceptance of a word or other symbol, which would make the highest level of clarity practically equivalent to the interpretant (cf. EP 2:256 [1903]). Signs may very well have effects that are not part of their pragmatistic adequacy.

the ones that make basic distinctions between the good and bad whenever control is possible – esthetics in the domain of feeling or presentation, ethics in the domain of action or effort, and logic in the domain of signs or representations (CP 5.36 [1903]; CP 5.129 [1903]; CP 1.574 [1906]; EP 2:459 [c. 1911]; but see CP 5.127 [1903] for an important qualification).

Consequently, the normative sciences would appear to be concerned with forms of valuation – with criteria that allow us to distinguish something as good or bad in the domains of esthetics, ethics, and logic – without any concern for the actual application of the insights. However, Peirce also frequently suggests a strict hierarchical dependency among these disciplines; as one mode of controlled and goal-directed conduct, logic is dependent on ethics as a source for principles, while both rely on esthetics to provide an account of the objectively admirable *per se* (EP 2:260 [1903]). This tends to reduce normative esthetics to the discovery of a highest standard (*summum bonum*) by which to judge aims and ideals of action. I do not believe such a conception is truly viable, but will mostly bypass this difficult issue here, and merely suggest a somewhat more mundane understanding of the province of esthetics in terms of criticism of habits of feeling and ideals.¹⁹

Like Cheryl Misak (2004b, p. xv), I believe that the Peircean project can survive without recourse to an ultimate end of mankind that “recommends itself in itself without ulterior consideration” (EP 2:260 [1903]) – that is, the “one quality that is, in its immediate presence, *καλός*” (CP 2.199 [c. 1902]). Indeed, as the foundation for normative science, esthetics would seem to be nothing but the reiteration of a foregone conclusion, as Peirce does not leave any room for doubt that there is *one* ultimate ideal (Bernstein 1991, p. 37). Rather than reducing esthetics to the registration of the self-sufficient transcendent ideal,²⁰ it seems more productive to say that the pragmatist’s *operative summum bonum* entails the goal to manifest reasonable generals in existents, or “the

¹⁹ See Colapietro 1997a for an illuminating discussion bearing directly on this issue. While I endorse Vincent Colapietro’s attempt to push Peircean pragmatism and sign theory toward a more contextualist and historicist direction – to conceive of the deliberative subject as an “implicated participant” rather than as a disinterested spectator – it is not always easily reconcilable with certain absolutistic tendencies in Peirce. Colapietro (1997a) is right when he points out that one reason to emphasize that signs have a life of their own is that “it acts as a check on our tendency to absolutize ourselves, [...] to take ourselves as the ultimate source of both intelligibility and significance” (p. 281); but we should also beware of the opposite trap of ‘absolutising’ external signs, objects, and ideals. Arguably, the young Peirce hits the right note when he states that “men and words reciprocally educate each other” (CP 5.313 [1868]).

²⁰ At times, Peirce suggests that the highest good, which requires the suppression of individual interests and duties, is a *sentimental* obligation. Arguing that “vitaly important matters” – meaning activities driven by interests other than the absolute *summum bonum* – are “the veriest trifles”, he maintains that “the very supreme commandment of sentiment is that man should generalize, or [...] should become welded into the universal continuum”, and adds that in “fulfilling this command, man prepares himself for transmutation into a new form of life, the joyful Nirvana in which the discontinuities of his will shall have all but disappeared” (CP 6.673 [1898]). It may be telling that Peirce singles out the self-sacrificing mother as a living manifestation of this sentimental ideal. Also, it is of some interest to note that he does not even consider whether the supreme commandment of sentiment threatens the freedom of inquiry, although it seems to violate the dictum that “natural” reason ought not to have any voice in theoretical issues (SS 19-20 [1904]). Should not science remain open to hypotheses of all kinds, including ones that do not postulate general uniformity as an ideal, but accept individual differences as valuable as such? However, like Christopher Hookway (1997, p. 220), I believe that we can accept Peirce’s point regarding the “sentimental” underpinnings of rationality without thereby necessarily committing ourselves to the “religion of reason”, where complete homogeneity of habit is postulated as the ideal and aim. Arguably, Peirce’s own emphasis on self-control and habit-change (which ought not to be construed as mere habit-adjustment) leads us in a different direction.

continual increase of the embodiment of [...] idea-potentiality" (EP 2:343 [1905]). This might be translated as the development and formation of intelligent habits and practices in the world (cf. Colapietro 2005, p. 361). It is a matter of "rendering the world more reasonable, whenever [...] it is 'up to us' to do so" (CP 1.615 [1903]), but in full acceptance of the thoroughly fallible and contextual character of such endeavours. Such a worldly ideal is not strictly speaking admirable in itself, but only in relation to the practices from which it emerges and which it can guide.

Peirce hints at such an approach when he notes that ethics and logic call for a science that "would have for its purpose to make our ideals, our aim, conform to what sufficient experience, consideration, and human development generally would tend to make them conform" (MS 673:13 [c. 1911]). But perhaps we should rather say that esthetics, ethics, and semeiotic *all* entail a practice of this kind, in which the improved self is construed as an achievement through indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control (CP 5.402 n. 3 [1906]),²¹ rather than isolating it to esthetics. On the one hand, it seems to unreasonable to make the aesthetician carry the entire burden of distinguishing the *summum bonum*; on the other hand, it seems somewhat peculiar that ethicists and logicians should passively accept a standard set by esthetics when engaging in their own critical activities. Arguably, the three disciplines are better construed as essentially intertwined activities, where the dependency entails that the semiotician/logician should also be an ethicist and aesthetician.

Furthermore, there is no infallible guarantee that there is one ideal "to rule them all". In lieu of the consoling qualitative end-in-itself, we have to settle with the ends-in-view that emerge from our practices (cf. Stuhr 1994, p. 10) – which, however, does *not* amount to saying that all views are of the same rank. What this *does* entail is a moderate contextualization of normativity, through which "objectivity will come to be seen as (in large measure) a demand *we* assume for ourselves" (Colapietro 1997a, p. 264).

But pushing our naive questioning a bit further, we may go on to ask why one should even engage in normative inquiry – indeed, why practise philosophy at all? Not surprisingly, one answer to be found in Peirce's writings is that such activity is a pursuit of "truth for truth's sake" (see, e.g., CP 1.46 [c. 1896]). Still, one may also infer a seemingly different Peircean answer to this question from the normative disciplines. Namely, normative inquiry entails, by necessity, criticism of previous habits, in particular of habits of reasoning and interpretation. Given that human beings are in possession of a *logica utens* that supposedly functions well enough for everyday purposes, one might expect that the theoretician Peirce would describe the extant forms of reasoning and their grammar – and so he does, but *not* for mere intellectual pleasure, but *as a means* for criticism of existing habits. This much is implied by Peirce's repeated emphasis on self-criticism

²¹ Noting that the ultimate purpose of everything is beyond human comprehension, Peirce tends to encase this point in the religious language of Henry James senior, alluding to a puzzling "vir" as the goal of self-control, and arguing that human beings take part in the grander scheme of creation by growing an esthetic ideal by intelligent action (see Krolikowski 1964, for an examination of the Jamesian-Swedenborgian connection). This brings Peirce to the brink of the kind of "wholesale optimism" that according to Dewey borders on cynicism; however, I believe that this viewpoint is adaptable to a more secular and melioristic approach.

and self-control in view of purposes and ideals in normative inquiry. His pragmatism does not merely imply common-sensism; it entails *critical* common-sensism.

However, does not such a call for criticism and control amount to a recognition of the fact that one function of philosophy is precisely the reform and improvement of our habits? At the very least, the Peircean logician would seem to be engaged in an activity that aims at improving habits of sign use; and it does not seem to be too much of a stretch to conceive of the labour of the aesthete and ethicist in a similar manner.

This does not add up to telling human beings how they are bound to think, act, or feel (cf. EP 2:459 [c. 1911]). Human freedom is self-government; and in one sense that entails a degree of independence from habit. Indeed, habit is not, as such, creative; it is “mere inertia, a resting on one’s oars”, while intelligence can be characterized as “plasticity of habit” (CP 6.86 [1898]). In view of Peirce’s claim that the “highest quality of mind involves a great readiness to take habits, and a great readiness to lose them” (CP 6.613 [1893]), it seems feasible to maintain that one central purpose of Peircean philosophy is precisely to revise habits, or, perhaps more correctly, to provide means that render telic *habituation* possible. Such tools would be habits of criticism aimed at keeping our personal and social minds flexible and active; there “is no habit more useful [than the] habit of easily taking up and easily throwing off mental habits” (RLT 189 [1898]).²²

It is not surprising, then, that Peirce declares, in an almost Deweyan spirit, that “continual amelioration of our own habits [...] is the only alternative to a continual deterioration of them” (MS 674:1 [c. 1911]). Arguably, this amounts to a call for active testing and implementation of habits developed by thought - for experimentation in the worlds of experience, both internal and external. Eventually, such experiments might even affect sentimental habits, although the relatively foundational character of sentiments – of morals and “taste” – will necessarily render them comparatively rigid. At any rate, there is no reason to presume that habits of tradition would not need continual nurturing, fertilizing, and pruning from time to time; as Colapietro (1997b) stresses, “the recovery of tradition requires the cultivation of habits” (p. 41). Somewhat more radically, it could be suggested that philosophers, who in their professional capacities are allowed to imaginatively reflect on the effects of habits, might perform a valuable social function by drawing attention to some weeds in the garden of habit (cf. Colapietro 1997a, p. 281).²³

²² This does not mean that strong habits should or could be easily broken up by mere acts of will; in the end, it is brute experience – or the *secondness* of experience – that tends to trigger the process of habit-change. “[Belief], while it lasts, is a strong habit, and as such, forces the man to believe until some surprise breaks up the habit. The breaking of a belief can only be due to some novel experience, whether external or internal. Now experience which could be summoned up at pleasure would not be experience.” (CP 5.524 [c. 1905]) In this context, experience should be understood as “a brutally produced conscious effect that contributes to a habit, self-controlled, yet so satisfying, on deliberation, as to be destructible by no positive exercise of internal vigour” (EP 2:435 [1908]). On the other hand, higher-level habit-change is not merely a matter of adaptation to external pressure. While “conversions and reformations [...] are always consequent upon impressive experience”, habituation – in the sense of development of the potential of human beings – is something that generally requires deliberate effort (NEM 4:143).

²³ This does not entail methodological doubt in the Cartesian sense, but more moderate “laboratory doubt” produced by engaging habits in imagination and experience. It can never touch common sense as a whole. Only a relatively small

Have we thus established that Peirce is in fact a closet meliorist of a reformist stripe? No, but we may have succeeded in removing some impediments to a fruitful dialogue between Peircean and Deweyan pragmatism. However divergent Peirce's and Dewey's take on the engagement of philosophy in social affairs may be, they at least share an interest in developing intelligent forms of conduct. When we add the suggestion that Peircean pragmatism, as a part of semeiotic rhetoric, is not merely a tool for the analysis of meaning, but may ultimately be seen to be concerned with habit-change, then we would indeed seem to have discovered some common melioristic ground between Peirce and Dewey. This may prove to be beneficial for both Peirceans and Deweyans; the former may explore new avenues through which to establish the relevance of Peirce for social thought, while the latter can find useful intellectual tools in Peirce's phaneroscopy and semeiotic.

Some worries of elementary incompatibility may remain, however. Notably, whereas Dewey focuses on social reform, Peirce's habit-meliorism seems to occur exclusively on the personal level. In this case, appearances are deceiving. While Peirce does talk of *self*-criticism and *self*-control, the habits of a person are not to be construed as strictly individual possessions. Furthermore, the relevant agent is not necessarily a singular human being; nor should thought be understood too narrowly.²⁴ Peirce goes as far as to suggest that a community may be viewed as a kind of person in a loose sense (EP 2:338 [1905]) – and as such, presumably amenable to certain forms self-criticism and self-control. This point of view takes us one step closer to Deweyan reformism.²⁵

Peirce's blanket disapproval of any kind of consideration of applicability in philosophy (quoted earlier) is more problematic. Here, the best recourse may be to simply choose to adopt the standpoint Peirce propagates in the *Minute Logic*, where he argues that "a theory cannot be sound unless it be susceptible of applications" (CP 2.7 [1902]).

It might be that a normative science, in view of the economies of the case, should be quite useless for any practical application. Still, whatever fact had no bearing upon a conceivable application to practice would be entirely impertinent to such a science. It would be easy enough - much too easy - to marshal a goodly squadron of treatises on logic, each of them swelled out with matter foreign to any conceivable applicability until, like a corpulent man, it can no longer see on what it is standing, and the reader loses all clear view of the true problems of the science. (CP 2.7 [1902])

part of our habits can be criticized at any given time; the majority of them are taken for granted and remain uncriticized. On the other hand, no acquired habit is absolutely beyond criticism.

²⁴ "There is no reason why 'thought' [...] should be taken in that narrow sense in which silence and darkness are favorable to thought. It should rather be understood as covering all rational life, so that an experiment shall be an operation of thought." (EP 2:337 [1905]) From this point of view, Peirce's claim that "the whole business of ratiocination, and all that makes us human beings, is performed in imagination" (CP 6.286 [1893]) can be somewhat misleading – not because of the important emphasis on imagination, but because the statement might suggest an needlessly introverted conception of reasoning. In the fullest sense, reasoning takes place in the external as well as the internal world.

²⁵ As Colapietro (1999) notes, "the fostering of genuine community and the reform of traditional institutions are of a piece – the one cannot be accomplished without the other" (p. 26).

I believe that such considerations move Peircean philosophy toward a position more inclined to accept meliorism, even of a moderate activist kind. However, this should not be interpreted as an acknowledgement that pragmatism makes “Doing to be the Be-all and the End-all of life” (CP 5.429 [1905]). Admitting that practical applicability may, after all, be a factor to consider in philosophy does not entail that theory, in the sense of freedom to imagine and experiment, would need to justify itself in terms of usefulness here and now; it only reminds us that severing all ties to conceivable application easily renders philosophy a trivial glass-bead game – an introverted “seminary philosophy” rather than a living “laboratory philosophy” (cf. CN 2:102-103 [1895]; CP 1.126-1.129 [c. 1905]). This focus on experiment certainly indicates a point of agreement between Peirce and Dewey; as Dewey notes, pragmatism “as attitude represents what Mr. Peirce has happily termed the ‘laboratory habit of mind’ extended into every area where inquiry may fruitfully be carried on” (MW 4:100 [1908]). The unresolved point of contention concerns which domains may fruitfully be researched by such means.

So, lest we start sounding like the overzealous reformists and rationalists that Peirce loves to ridicule, it is good to remember that there *is* also much wisdom in Peircean conservatism. While parts of the conservative stance can appear to be nothing more than a set of lazy excuses for disengagement and a defence of the *status quo*, it is sobering to keep in mind that philosophical reason was partly responsible for the rationalistic state-building project in the Soviet Union and that scientific meliorism can take the form of eugenics.²⁶ Peircean conservatism might function as an apposite reminder of the dangers of reformist fervour. I do not wish to let off Peirce too easily here – some of his statements do suggest rather shadowy political views – but his sentimental conservatism can charitably be construed in terms of admonitions against scientific hubris – warnings that any wise pragmatist should take seriously. If the Deweyan meliorist slides too far in the direction of rationalistic progressivism, a dose of Peircean sentimentalism may be just what is needed to remind him or her of the value of some traditions and the habitual base of reason.

On the other side, Dewey offers a poignant response to those who feel that any kind of interest in social meliorism degrades philosophy by turning it into a mere instrument of social reforms. Indeed, his argument reads almost as a rejoinder to Peirce’s conservative assault on reformism.

“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

²⁶ Interestingly, when faced with Peirce’s conservative attitude to scientific reforms, Victoria Welby replies by extolling Francis Galton’s eugenics (SS 21 [1904]).

purpose of men. The contribution which philosophy can make to this common aim is criticism. (LW 1:307-8 [1925])

Dewey wishes to expand philosophical investigation to fields such as the arts and morality, domains where truth is not necessarily the primary ideal and criterion, and thus seems to move in a direction that would not have been acceptable to Peirce. However, Dewey's contention that the proper task of philosophy is to liberate and clarify meanings, "including those scientifically authenticated" (LW 1:307 [1925]), rather than the pursuit of truth in a narrow sense, is perhaps less at odds with the Peircean point of view than meets the eye.²⁷ In any event, Peirce and Dewey should be able to agree that one of the central aims of the pragmatist philosopher – if not *the* purpose – ought to be the criticism that aspires to the amelioration of human habits. At least, I see no reason why the philosophical tools that Peirce spent his life sterilizing and sharpening should not be enlisted and further developed in attempts to cultivate and enrich human experience.

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²⁷ Here, I deliberately leave open the possibility that the quest for truth in a broader sense – as a hope animating inquiry – would nonetheless be a defining feature of philosophy. It is at least feasible that one can say truthful things about realms of meanings to which truth and falsity as such are secondary or even irrelevant.

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