

PRAGMATICIST HOLISM AND MORAL INTEGRITY

A Study on the Ethical Dimensions of the Pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce

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Charles Sanders Peirce, one of the greatest intellectualists that America has ever produced, introduced Pragmatism as a system of philosophy to the American philosophers and later classified it as Pragmatism to distinguish it from popular interpretations. The basic theoretical stand of Peirce is expressed in his famous pragmatic maxim which is a tool for scientific study; first, when a concept appears to be clear, it can be further explored whether this concept is true or false. This means that the action which tests and clarifies the meaning of a belief is not the end of the inquiry, but it is only a starting point for further thought looking for the final opinion of the community of inquirers where particular individual opinions are only contributions to the final opinion of such a larger community. The clarification of doubt is not just the individual's responsibility alone, but is also a prerogative of the community to ensure rightness of the individual's actions to bring about the maximum good. Good reasoning depends on good habits of the mind. One such habit which, without being fully aware of, we employ in our everyday living is our hypothesis of Reality, the guiding principle of all our reasoning.

In the process of inquiry Peirce further introduced his theory of categories. These categories are called phenomenological categories. They are: Firstness or quality of feeling which represents positive qualitative possibility; Secondness or actuality or facticity which represents action or encounter to facticity or actuality; Thirdness or

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law which represents the interpretative dimension of reality. Thirdness is both *thought as meaning* and *generality as law*. Being the generals or the law, Thirdness becomes the foundational category for understanding the relational nature of reality. In the process of inquiry Peirce considers all thought as signs. Peirce even conceived man himself as a thought-sign. Each of these categories is a sign in its own level representing possibility, facticity and law. In every sign situation there is the abductive inference which is a hypothesis derived out of the sign situation which demands interpretation and verification. Such rationality demands an understanding of the normative disciplines of ethics and aesthetics. Control of conduct or ethics then is dependent on the reasonableness and the sustainability of the end, even in adverse situations functioning as an agent of the *admirable per se*. This means that an ultimate end of ethics is deliberately adopted by a rational agent (logical thinker) in consultation with the aesthetically good that is *admirable per se*, over against the unadvisable or evil. Thus, aesthetics and ethics together set the stage for logic to have a rational, deliberate and self-controlled adoption of ends for a moral conduct. Pragmaticism, thus, invites a rational agent to clarify his/her thoughts to acknowledge the basic goodness or the admirability of reality in his/her encounter with the actual world leading towards a moral integrity. A moral action is the result of a holistic rational process that takes into consideration man's emotions and instincts, under the guidance of the normative sciences of aesthetics, ethics and logic. The holistic rational process then enables the individual to recognize aesthetical ideals and the emergent ethical values, by applying the norms of logic or concrete reasonableness. The guiding principle or ultimate reason behind the entire process is man's faith in a hypothesis of Reality. Pragmaticism, therefore, provides optimism in the ultimate reasonableness of Reality and makes our actions subjected to normative principles, and hence, moral, by promoting aesthetico-ethical goodness.

Peirce rejected the mechanically purposeless and selfishly-oriented evolutionary theories and proposed the theory of evolutionary love in which growth of rationality becomes a qualitative growth of man's sense of Inter-subjectivity or *anthropo-cosmic semiosis*. The integral progress of humanity then is not understood as mere mechanical and material changes taking place in the world, rather, it has a deeper interior dimension which is expressed in man's rationality, the finite face of the living spontaneity or the eternal idea. The growth then includes the material and the spiritual, the rational and emotional. Aesthetico-ethical action, or moral conduct, then, is not the outcome of any response to an outside law giver but is an inner necessity, an inner call for the realization of the integrated self which takes our

whole being, including our commonsensical inferences and rational sentiments, into account. Evolutionary growth then begins, first in the mind, and then it may affect the whole people or community in its collective personality, and is then communicated to all who are in sympathetic connection with the collective whole in spite of the various ways, methods and standards of their understanding of it.

The implications of such a self-controlled pragmatic rationality leads to the fallibilistic and fallen nature of the self as a background for the self-critical and self-sacrificial attitude, a pragmatist has to maintain for the realization of Reality through the abductive rational process. In this self-critical rational process, community is the authentic source of critique that engages in inter-subjective dialogue by accepting the basic reality of fallibilism. In the process of inter-subjective dialogue, language, tradition, history, etc., are to be seriously taken into consideration as means of effective participation of the individual in the community. Above all, the individual is in a constant dialogue with his inherited historical realities and ideals. Hence he is a dialogical subject and is an agent, self-consciously concerned with historical practices and responsive to other human beings. Thus, the dialogical subject of pragmatism ought never to be confused with the isolated individual self of Cartesian speculative tradition and the agnostic and anxiety ridden individual of the non-theistic existentialism.

The further consequence of this inter-subjective and self-critical rationality is solidarity with nature and the acceptance of the mind-body unity. Such a holistic and inter-subjective rationality demands a commitment to an all inclusive humanity, rooted in the principle of altruism, and the consequent attitude of optimism, in the final convergence of truth in the hypothesis of Reality, a living faith in the reality of God. This is the typical development of a human person into a culture of love, which is the basis of man's commitment to humanity and nature. This culture of love rejects aggression and violence against nature and humanity. Pragmatism then is an ethical culture of love with a rational foundation. This power of love is the divine present in the world as logic and reason, which is the driving force behind all evolution and growth, all spontaneity and variety, amid regularity and order. This is the dynamic law that preserves and transforms the original *firstness* or the quality or the aesthetical dimension to make it the end of human moral action.

Granted such a holistic and interconnected existence, pragmatism considers Nature as the embodied form of the Ultimate Reality, the Living Mind, the *summum bonum* of man, the end of all his search and research. Nature is not an instrument but is an end in man's search

for truth. Our relationship to the nature is a relationship that accepts the subjective dimensions of nature as equally dignified with our own subjectivity. Here actions are not decided by any selective practicality of the instrumental or use value of nature but is motivated by the intrinsic value of nature which accepts the qualitative dimension of the facticity or *secondness* on its own merit.

Considering all these, one can say that practising pragmatic ethics is an art of promoting and doing right in the world with a self-controlled rationality. That is, it is a movement from theoretical aesthetics to practical aesthetics and finally to moral action. In this sense it is an action-reflection-action process. The primary action produces an aesthetical ideal which is followed by a rational testing of the ideal in the context of the community of inquires and the final moral action capable of leading man to *summum bonum*.

This ethics of self-controlled rationality further leads to the functional autonomy and dignity of the individual self in forming one's conduct with proper critical and rational analysis of the ideals one has adopted. This enables a person to make morally right decisions, while not being enslaved by any limiting systems of dogmatically imposed socio-political and religious ideologies. This anti-dogmatic stand of Peircean ethics extends its applicability to all sorts of ideologies, religious views, races and nations. Even an atheist who respects the value of being may find the Peircean ethical views as meaningful and acceptable. Peircean Pragmatic ethics, while defining a moral action as that which promotes the qualitative growth of man and the universe, challenges the validity of the scientific researches that are aimed at the mass destruction of humanity and the world. Genuine scientific growth respects the collective and holistic dimensions of human existence.

In the pragmatic ethics of Charles Sanders Peirce human conduct is continuously defined by its inseparable connectivity to otherness and is qualified by a deliberately cultivated and rationally controlled sensibility to otherness making him/her capable of discerning the intrinsically admirable here and now. Hence Peircean pragmatic ethics with all its nuances and deep affinity to the holistic dimensions of reality could be considered as one of the most effective solution to the many sweltering problems of the modern world.