

BOOK REVIEW

RICHARD KENNETH ATKINS. *PEIRCE AND THE CONDUCT OF LIFE: SENTIMENT AND INSTINCT IN ETHICS AND RELIGION*

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This is an informed, insightful, erudite, and admirable book. It is moreover clearly written and, especially at the level of detail (if not that of rationale), carefully argued. It aims at filling a gap in the scholarship and, in fundamental respects, this study succeeds in no small measure in accomplishing this aim. In Richard Atkins, Charles Peirce has a staunch advocate and able defender, if not always a tough enough co-inquirer on interlocutor. On topic after topic, he does however recall the most serious objections of especially recent commentators and critics, then responds to them in a judicious, thoughtful manner. He goes as far as his intellectual conscience allows him in defending Peirce and, as it turns out, this is a considerable distance, with very few concessions.

The task of a reviewer encompasses that of conveying a sense of the structure of a work and the quality of scholarship. Allow me to offer a quick sketch of this structure and then a more detailed assessment of the scholarship.

An Introduction admirably provides the reader with a map of the journey to be undertaken in this study. It is however unfortunate that Atkins concludes his Introduction by so one-sidedly stressing the undeniable flaws in Peirce's moral character (p. 5). Peirce was in later years a tragic figure. There is evident, in his commitment to inquiry, a nobility of character as noteworthy as his undeniable flaws and shortcomings. Atkins's rhetorical strategy is to draw a sharp distinction between Peirce's moral character and his practical philosophy. The vices of the former do not preclude the virtues of the latter. One wonders however if this is too

facile or at least too quick. Is it altogether justified to let a pragmatist off the hook in this regard? Even so, Atkins's strategy is certainly reasonable. Another issue evident at the outset is that the author is not careful enough in distinguishing ethics as a normative science (and, hence, as a strictly *theoretical* undertaking, the conclusions of which "are far off in the future" [Atkins, 5]), on the one hand, and ethics as *Sittlichkeit* (the embodied mores of an historical community), on the other. As a result, this study courts the fallacy of equivocation (when the author is referring to Peirce's "practical philosophy," is he concerned with the normative science of ethics or rather some historically determinate form of morals?). For those who are knowledgeable of Peirce, this does not pose a thorny problem; they can rather easily identify the sense in which *ethics* is being used and make the appropriate qualifications themselves. For those who are interested in ethics, but unfamiliar with Peirce, this is a much more serious problem. Finally, the Introduction would have been the place to define three pivotal terms: sentiment, instinct, and (I would add) reason (or reason *and* reasonableness). The extent to which human rationality is itself instinctual and, beyond this, "sentimental" (i.e., a function of sentiments) needed to be noted at the outset. Closely connected to this, the degree to which human instincts are alterable and in particular our moral sentiments are traditional (habitual "feelings" possibly tracing their roots to innate tendencies but unquestionably deriving their form from shared practices and enveloping traditions) also need to be stressed in the Introduction or early in the Chapter. If we are to become clear about Peirce's singular contribution to practical philosophy, we ought to make his clears (specifically, his conception of instinct, sentiment, and reason) clear.

In the opening chapter, the author contrasts James's rational radicalism with Peirce's sentimental conservatism. This will not doubt seem to be an odd and even misleading characterization of James. On the surface, his will (or right to believe) is a defense of our passionate nature, not our individual rationality. This

suggests that, at least, the figure of James is not in as sharp focus as he needs to be for an accurate contrast between the author of *The Will to Believe* and that of "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life." An alternative way of reading the differences between Peirce and James regarding ethics is that they constitute a family quarrel. What we have is a clash between two forms of sentimentalism, not a conflict between sentimental conservatism and *rational* radicalism. James in *The Will to Believe* no less than Peirce in "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" is engaged in a critique of moral *reason*, when reason apart from the passions presumes the authority and simply capacity to guide conduct. There is no necessity either to make reason the slave of the passions or the passions the enemy of autonomy. The pragmatists, including James, were steering a middle course between the Humean denigration of reason and the Kantian deprecation of emotion. Reading "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life" as "an oblique criticism of James's philosophical views as found in *The Will to Believe*" is illuminating. The opening chapter makes a convincing case for this hermeneutic approach, even if it fails to show compellingly that this is the best way to read Peirce's text.

Chapter Two offers "A Defense of Peirce's Sentimental Conservatism." The section entitled "Peirce on the Instincts" (55ff.) is especially good, since it is one of those places where Atkins draws attention to parts of Peirce too often ignored. Chapter Three ("Heeding the Call of One's Savior") turns from ethics to the philosophy of religion. The transition from the previous chapter could have been made much more smoothly than the author accomplishes and here is one of the places where the unity of the work is less than evident (Is this book a survey of Peirce's detached ideas on morally important topics or is it a unified study of what is itself an integrated position on the wide range of practical concerns?). We encounter as the heart of this chapter the author's heroic effort to offer a charitable reading of Peirce's "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." He

tries to respond to Christopher Hookway, Manley Thompson, and Dennis Rohatyn's criticisms of this essay. Chapter 4 is entitled "On Becoming Welded into the Universal Continuum." This title is one of the few places where the author's rhetorical skills completely abandon him. While descriptive of the content of the chapter, in an expression drawn directly from Peirce's writings, other expressions to be garnered from those texts would have been less clunky. The content of this chapter however more than makes up for this title. It offers an overview of Peirce's "esthetics" (i.e., his normative science of the ultimate end governing human conduct). Here, however, is one of the places where the crucial distinction between a normative science (in this case, esthetics in Peirce's sense rather than ethics), on the one hand, and the practical matter of self-cultivation, including self-habituation (in other words, cultivating the virtues of that form of character worthy of emulation), on the other. Chapter 5 takes up the topic of "Self-Control and Moral Responsibility." It includes a very good account of Peirce's critique of psychological hedonism. The book concludes with an attempt to portray Peirce as an ethical theorist who "eschew[ed] highly theoretical approaches to practical ethics" (211). It offers a very suggestive reading of Peirce's contribution to ethics, but is hardly as compelling or superlative as the author contends. The author has hit upon a hypothesis and, without considering carefully enough alternative hypotheses, he is off and running in the direction of showing why this is *the* way to read Peirce on this topic. It is hardly Peircean to proceed in this fashion. A more responsible approach demands a more patient, judicious if preliminary consideration of alternative readings. This chapter and hence the book (since there is no Epilogue or Afterword) concludes with a quotation from Peirce: "the essence of conservatism [is] to refuse to push any practical principle to its extreme limits – including the principle of conservatism itself." (219). The *history* of conservatism however has been one of extremism, if often in direct reaction against

extremist measures, movements, or policies. When it has not, it has often been a justification for quietism (32, note 8). It is certainly reasonable to stress that Peirce is skeptical of allowing highly theoretical conclusions *directly* to influence our practical conduct, while admitting that insights born of theory ought with “secular slowness” (38) and thus indirectly be allowed to inform conduct. In fact, this is not a case of allowance: such insights are, in Peirce’s judgments, destined to transfigure the sentiments constitutive of the deeper parts of the human psyche. A recently announced scientific discovery concerns cannibalism. The researches allege that among *Homo sapiens* eating conspecifics has been historically much wider than most people realize and, more broadly, such a practice is found in a number of species. It is one thing to throw out one’s scientific “belief” about this matter, quite another immediately to change one’s eating habits! But the unshakeable confidence in the beneficent outcomes of “the long run” might look differently to a Northerner who has been born into privilege and a Southerner who has been born into slavery. What James got and Peirce missed was what in later decades would be called “the fierce urgency of now.” The random quote that “there may be some circumstances under which a sentimental conservative would ‘advocate radical reforms’” (38) was hardly the kind of thing that would provide solace to Zina, Peirce’s first wife, in her efforts to win equality for women. He thought the efforts of such women misguided. Given Benjamin Peirce’s acceptance of slavery, and given what appears to be Charles’s less than fully enlightened view on this definitive issue, his practical decisions and attitudes might intimate the philosophical limitations of occlusions of his sentimental conservatism. While aware of such matters, Atkins hardly gives them the weight they deserve. But this is an uncharacteristic blind spot. For the most part, he displays an admirable moral sensitivity as an interpreter and defender of Peirce.

In each one of the chapters, Atkins is strongly disposed to offer a vigorous, spirited defense of even Peirce’s most implausible, because least pragmatic, positions (most notably, Peirce’s sentimental conservatism). To return briefly to a point just made, there is a tendency to make his task too easy, by skirting obvious yet important objections. In a manuscript, Peirce wrote:

If they [i.e., my readers] were to come to know me better they might learn to think me ultra-conservative. I am, for example, an old-fashioned christian, a believer in the efficacy of prayer, an opponent of female suffrage and of universal male suffrage, in favor of letting business-methods develop without the interference of law, a disbeliever in democracy, etc. (Unpublished Manuscript 645)

Is it adequate to draw a sharp distinction between these historically situated judgments and Peirce’s unabashedly “conservative” orientation, as though he was mistaken in the former while being enlightened in the latter? Heidegger cannot be simply dismissed as a Nazi. But, then, one can exonerate him too quickly and completely by drawing a sharp distinction between the life and thought of this philosopher. Analogously, Peirce cannot simply be dismissed as a misogynist or racist. But, then, it serves neither him nor his contemporaries (in particular, those who got it, i.e., those who were on the right side of history) to let him off the hook too easily.

Whatever it flaws, this study unquestionably fills a gap in the literature on Peirce, though perhaps not as large a gap as the author imagines. But it is arguably not as deep a book as either the thinker or the topic deserves. In suggesting this, I am should not be taken to be implying that *Peirce and the Conduct of Life* is superficial. It is indeed anything but superficial. Even so, this thinker on this topic call for an even deeper engagement than Richard Kenneth Atkins accords them.

This is possibly related to the point regarding the size of the gap he is trying to fill. Some names are notable by their absence, above all, John E. Smith, Peter Ochs,

Vincent Potter beyond his 2967 book, Irwin Lieb, and others. The failure to reach a more desirable depth might be, in part, a function of not having engaged a wide enough range of scholarly commentators, especially ones of the stature of Smith and Potter. But this critical note or, better, hermeneutic reservation ought not to resound to the point of rendering inaudible what most deserves to be sounded at the outside: this is quite a good study of an elusive genius whose varied contributions to philosophical discourse are still not fully appreciated, even by those who are deeply sympathetic to, and intimately conversant with, countless pages of his monumental *oeuvre*. It is such a good primarily because it so painstakingly shows how Peirce's singular contributions to "practical philosophy" deserve careful consideration. Even if his main philosophical strengths are most evident in his work on phenomenology, logic, semeiotic, metaphysics, and other highly technical fields, his discussions of ethics and religion are worthy of a much more detailed, comprehensive, charitable, and ultimately critical treatment than these discussions have yet received. About this, Atkins is unquestionably right. He convinces us – at least, he convinces this reader – not by what he says at the outset in framing this project (Peirce *did* have a practical philosophy, it differed dramatically from the practical philosophy so memorably formulated and forcefully defended by William James, and Peirce's contribution to this field merits our attention). He is convincing by showing in detail just how nuanced, considerate, and (despite the unmistakable respects in which it cuts against the grain of contemporary fashions) reasonable.

I wish however that the influence of Max H. Fisch (another name absent from the Bibliography of this book) was greater upon the generation of scholars represented here by Richard Atkins. Fisch would have read the draft of this book and, if I may be so presumptuous, would have advised the author to go back and begin anew by collating all of the relevant writings by Peirce on practical philosophy. There would

of course be no necessity for the author to engage in the Herculean task of reconstructing Peirce's practical philosophy from all of these collated writings. But the focus on, say, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things* (1898) could in light of such a survey be better appreciated. Just what *are* the relevant writings regarding the topics in which the author is interested? A sense of context no less than a sense of chronology is aided by collation and dating. As it stands, however, Atkins at the outset jumps into a specific text with both feet and begins swimming energetically to his conclusion. Even more surprisingly, he concludes by a suggestive attempt to fold Peirce into the casuistic turn in contemporary ethics. This seems promising. But there is, again, no consideration of alternatives. At the conclusion of the opening chapter, he insists: "Peirce's 1898 lecture 'Philosophy and the Conduct of Life' is best read as an oblique criticism of James's philosophical views as found in *The Will to Believe*" (32). My sense however is that a much more complicated story needs to be told about both this specific text and the general project (practical philosophy) to which it makes such a significant contribution. James is no doubt important in this connection. But the exclusive focus on give for the purpose of illuminating Peirce's position seems unduly narrow. Fast forward to the conclusion. In the conclusion of the concluding chapter, the author of the book under review asserts boldly: Peirce would eschew would today are identified by their critics as "highly theoretical approaches to practical ethics" (219). He would endorse casuistry. Perhaps. But what Atkins and so many other Peirce scholars miss – more fairly stated, what they appear to miss in my judgment – is the depth to which Peirce was indebted to Aristotle specifically and ancient Greek thought more generally (Fisch 1986, ___). The relevance of suggesting this here is that, for some of us, Peirce appears fall in the tradition of virtue ethics. Alasdair MacIntyre, another unabashed conservative and anti-rationalist, is another name not appearing in the Index or Bibliography of this book, though Peirce is as

arguably as close to him as he is to such contemporary ethicists as Albert Jonsen, Stephen Toulmin, Tom Beauchamp, and James Childress. I certainly might be wrong about this characterization of Peirce. But even simply a provisional consideration of this plausible interpretation of Peirce's ethical stance is missing here. Again, the author jumps into the swiftly running current of a contemporary stream and manages to manage the current in an extremely adept manner. It is hardly unreasonable to ask, however, why this stream? Certainly some reasons are given and they have force. But one way of reading virtue theory is that human beings are social animals who are initiated into distinctive forms of human life. The legitimate function of moral theories, in the judgment of such theorists, is not to deduce the goodness of an action, or the nobility of a form of character, or the necessity of certain kinds of community, from a set of principles or, even more implausibly, a singly highly, abstract principle.

It is not at all clear to me that Peirce did not espouse a traditional conception of the divine being. Atkins however confidently claims, "Peirce's conception of God is not the traditional conception of the monotheistic religions, an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity" (85). The main reason appears to be that "Peirce regards the idea of God to be vague" (ibid), but traditional theologians held a much more determinate idea of the divine being. It might be the case that, in order to defend the traditional understanding of God, nothing more than an invincibly vague conception of that Reality is either possible or needed. Those within the various traditions of the monotheistic religions – more precisely, some within these traditions – appear strenuously to argue for a *via negativa* that is very close to Peirce's emphasis on vagueness.

Of far greater importance, however, the topics of fallenness and *ecclesia* are virtually ignored. The author argues as though religion was first and foremost assent to a cluster of propositions. But religion is for Peirce principally not only a personal way of life but also a

communal form of life. The parallels to and, more tellingly, the divergences from the community of inquirers need to be explored more deeply than Smith, Potter, Raposa, Ochs, Anderson, or anyone has yet done.

What Atkins appears to fail to appreciate is that Peirce's unblinking assessment of the seemingly inherent propensity of the human animal is closely linked to his sentimental conservatism. Why would it be unwise to place too much trust in our individual rationality? Such reason becomes increasingly unreliable the closer it touches upon urgent affairs in which personal stakes are high (in James's expression, "vitaly important topics"). Part of the answer is that Peirce had a profound sense of human fallenness. He was suspicious of reason because it so readily serves as an instrument of rationalization. "Men many times fancy themselves," Peirce astutely observed, "that act from reason when, in point of fact, the reasons they attribute to themselves are nothing but excuses which unconscious instinct invents to satisfy the teasing 'whys' of the ego. The extent of this self-delusion is such as to render philosophical rationalism a farce" (Peirce, *Collected Papers*, volume 1, para. 631 [CP 1.631]).

It can only sound slighting to suggest that *Peirce and the Conduct of Life* is based on too thin a selection of Peirce's writings and, of equal importance, not sufficiently deep an engagement with this thinker on these topics, especially as Peirce self-consciously took up these topics. He did so as an avowed Christian. He was far more than James committed to conserving the truth not of religion in general but of Christianity in particular (at times however, of a Buddhisto-Christian orientation). The logical sentiments of faith, hope, and love were before being christened such by Peirce of course theological virtues. As such they were divine gifts. As envisioned by Peirce, the life of religion is that of an individual in a community of worship wherein the practices of prayer, meditation, and musement play an indispensable role. It has far less to do with assenting to propositions than with forming one's character (as we so

tellingly say) *in light of* an exemplar whose own life is a singular revelation of the divine being. Such a character is known first and foremost by its fruits. More accurately, the transformation of one's character is itself the fruit of having heeded the call of the divine. To make Peirce palatable to contemporary taste – to dress him up, for example, as a casuist – is, I do not doubt, not without justification. How else can we win for him a hearing? But it is at least as imperative to attain an interior understanding of even his seemingly most implausible positions. The dangers of Peirce's sentimental conservatism are clearly evident in his emphatic contrariness ("I am ... an opponent of female suffrage and of universal male suffrage ..."). The strengths of it have been made evident by T. L. Short and, now, more recently by Richard Kenneth Atkins.

One of the principal tasks of Peirce scholars is simply to make his thought available, but especially to make it available in its full force and most salient details. *Peirce and the Conduct of Life* takes more than a few instructive strides in this desired direction. I found it this book to be one with which I was prompted to argue, at more than a few critical moments. But, when I did, I found it was a book from which I learned, even in those instances where my reservations or doubts were strengthened by this critical engagement. Some books are not worth arguing with. Others truly are – and this is clearly one such work.