I

Pragmatism &
the Normative Sciences
Introduction

If one were asked to justify beginning a study of Peirce's pragmatism with a consideration of the normative sciences, perhaps the most simple and effective reply would be to point out that this is the way Peirce himself chose to expound pragmatism in his Harvard lectures of 1903. The first lecture was entitled "Pragmatism: The Normative Sciences." But why did Peirce elect to begin thus? Was it merely that he had to start somewhere, or did he think that the normative sciences in some way furnished the key to all that was to follow?

Although Peirce came to recognize the nature and role of the normative sciences only late in his career, still he was convinced that his own account of the hierarchical dependence of logic on ethics and of ethics on esthetics was a discovery of fundamental importance for a correct understanding of his system, and one which distinguished his "pragmaticism" from other less correct interpretations of his own famous maxim. It would be a basic mistake to think that because Peirce's exposition of that role was short and unsatisfactory, it is not an integral part of what he conceived to be his "architectonic" system. It would perhaps be more correct to say that Peirce's realization of the place of these sciences put in his hands the capstone which unified all that he had been trying to do more or less successfully for some forty years. At least Peirce himself seems to have looked at it in this way.¹

In a letter to William James, dated November 25, 1902, Peirce remarks that many philosophers who call themselves pragmatists "miss the very point of it," and he tells us why:

But I seem to myself to be the sole depositary at present of the completely developed system, which all hangs together

¹ Peirce was very conscious of his own development as a philosopher. He constantly refers to what he read and by whom he was influenced. He continually returned to what he had written to annotate and correct his opinions. Therefore, the most reliable and fruitful source for an appreciation of what he is trying to do is Peirce's remarks about himself.
and cannot receive any proper presentation in fragments. My own view in 1877 was crude. Even when I gave my Cambridge lectures I had not really got to the bottom of it or seen the unity of the whole thing. It was not until after that that I obtained the proof that logic must be founded on ethics, of which it is a higher development. Even then, I was for some time so stupid as not to see that ethics rests in the same manner on a foundation of esthetics—by which, it is needless to say, I don’t mean milk and water and sugar. (8.255)

Other pragmatic positions, then, are only fragmentary. They lack the unity provided by a theory of the normative sciences, and this deficiency has led those positions into error—the error of making action the be-all and the end-all of thought. If other pragmatists had a correct view of the normative sciences, they would see how they are connected with Peirce’s categories.

But cf. 5.494 (ca. 1906) where Peirce sketches the differences between himself and James, Schiller, and Papini in a less polemical way.

"It [calculation of probabilities] goes to show that the practical consequences are much, but not that they are all the meaning of a concept. A new argument must supplement the above. All the more active functions of animals are adaptive characters calculated to insure the continuance of the stock. Can there be the slightest hesitation in saying, then, that the human intellect is implanted in man, either by a creator or by a quasi-intentional effect of the struggle for existence, virtually in order, and solely in order, to insure the continuance of mankind? But how can it have such effect except by regulating human conduct? Shall we not conclude then that the conduct of men is the sole purpose and sense of thinking, and that if it be asked why should the human stock be continued, the only answer is that that is among the inscrutable purposes of God or the virtual purposes of nature which for the present remain secrets to us?

"So it would seem. But this conclusion is too vastly far-reaching to be admitted without further examination. Man seems to himself to have some glimmer of co-understanding with God, or with Nature. The fact that he has been able in some degree to predict how Nature will act, to formulate general 'laws' to which future events conform, seems to furnish inductive proof that man really penetrates in some measure the ideas that govern creation. Now man cannot believe that creation has not some ideal purpose. If so, it is not mere action, but the development of an idea which is the purpose of thought; and so a doubt is cast upon the ultra pragmatic notion that action is the sole end and purpose of thought.” (8.211–212, letter to Mario Calderoni, ca. 1905.)
These three normative sciences correspond to my three categories, which in their psychological aspect, appear as Feeling, Reaction, Thought. I have advanced my understanding of these categories much since Cambridge days; and can now put them in a much clearer light and more convincingly. The true nature of pragmatism cannot be understood without them. It does not, as I seem to have thought at first, take Reaction as the be-all, but it takes the end-all as the be-all, and the End is something that gives its sanction to action. It is of the third category. (8.256)

Just how the normative sciences are connected with the categories we will have to examine in some detail. For the present, however, let us just note the fact, and Peirce's insistence thereon. It was only when Peirce became aware of the connection that he fully realized how crude his first presentation of the pragmatic maxim was. In the 1878 papers ("How to Make Our Ideas Clear" and "The Fixation of Belief") he seemed to identify meaning with action-reaction because he had not yet seen that action-reaction is to be understood only in terms of purpose and that purpose is essentially thought. Thought may well involve action, but it cannot be identical with it since Secondness and Thirdness are irreducible. The acknowledgment of the role of ends in action is the insight into the role of the normative sciences, and this acknowledgment brought about Peirce's successive attempts to formulate the pragmatic maxim in a more sophisticated and adequate way. Meaning is the rational purport of a concept—

4 "Action is second, but conduct is third. Law as an active force is second, but order and legislation are third." (1.337, from an early fragment, ca. 1875, antedating the first published formulation of the pragmatic maxim. The distinction between action and conduct is essential to what follows.)

5 Cf. 5.403 for the famous application of the maxim to the concept "hard" where Peirce went so far as to say that there would be no falsity in saying of a diamond that it was soft until someone tried to scratch it. But cf. 5.453 and 457 where Peirce changed his view (1905).

6 Cf. 1.322–323; Peirce takes up the objection that law is essential to the notion of one thing acting upon another. Tychism develops the distinction.

7 "In general, we may say that meanings are inexhaustible. We are too apt to think that what one means to do and the meaning of a word are quite unrelated meanings of the word 'meaning,' or that they are only con-
it is essentially a Third and not a Second even though a Second may be involved in its recognition.

Peirce goes on to explain to James how the correct and systematic understanding of pragmatism involves synechism, that is, the doctrine of law in the cosmos.

Only one must not take a nominalistic view of Thought as if it were something that a man had in his consciousness. Consciousness may mean any one of the three categories. But if it is to mean Thought it is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us. . . .

This then leads to synechism, which is the keystone of the arch. (8.256, 257)

The line of thought begins to become clearer: all action supposes ends, but ends are in the mode of being of thought because they are general. Thought, however, is not merely in consciousness but pervades everything so that consciousness is rather in thought. Generals, then, are real and so authentic pragmatism is realistic. Elsewhere (in the Pragmatism Lectures of 1903) Peirce explicitly suggests that the normative sciences get us “upon the trail of the secret of pragmatism” (5.129). Consequently, we may say that for Peirce the categories, the normative sciences, pragmatism, synechism, and “scholastic realism” are of a piece.8

connected by both referring to some actual operation of the mind. Professor Royce especially in his great work The World and the Individual has done much to break up this mistake. In truth the only difference is that when a person means to do anything he is in some state in consequence of which the brute reactions between things will be moulded [in] to conformity of the form to which the man’s mind is itself moulded, while the meaning of a word really lies in the way in which it might, in a proper position in a proposition believed, tend to mould the conduct of a person into conformity to that to which it is itself moulded. Not only will meaning always, more or less, in the long run, mould reactions to itself, but it is only in doing so that its own being consists. For this reason I call this element of the phenomenon or object of thought the element of Thirdness. It is that which is what it is by virtue of imparting a quality to reactions in the future” (1.343).

8 In a letter to Dewey, dated June 9, 1904, concerning a review of his Studies in Logic about to appear in the September issue of The Nation, Peirce deplores the way Dewey turns logic into a “natural history,” instead of pursuing it as a normative science “which in my judgment is the greatest need of our age” (8.239).
The conclusion one must draw is that despite the relatively short time Peirce spent working out his conception of normative science, despite his many hesitations as to what ought to be included under that rubric, and despite the promissory character of the development which he left us, he had seen where and how the notion not only fitted into his view of philosophy, but he had also in some way united the whole thing, moulding his earlier attempts at formulating the pragmatic maxim into a comprehensive and highly subtle analysis of meaning.