

Book Review for *Philosophy*

**Richard Kenneth Atkins, *Peirce and the Conduct of Life: Sentiment and Instinct in Ethics and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. viii + 231 pages.**

Charles S. Peirce, the ingenious founder of pragmatism who later famously rebaptized his philosophy as “pragmaticism”, is usually viewed as the most original American philosopher as well as a rigorous scientific thinker who made fundamental contributions to logic, epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of mathematics, the foundations of scientific methodology, and semiotics, or the general theory of signs. While the other classical American pragmatists, especially William James and John Dewey, are important references not only in the philosophy of science, the theory of inquiry, and related areas of “theoretical philosophy” but also in ethics and the philosophy of religion, Peirce’s influence has been mostly confined to theoretical philosophy. Peirce is only rarely discussed in the field of “practical philosophy”, or when it comes to ethics, politics, and religion – even though we might expect that the one who established pragmatism as a philosophical approach ought to have had something to say about such “practical” matters of human life, too.

In fact, Peirce did have a lot to say. Richard Atkins’s book shows us why Peirce ought to be taken very seriously as an ethical and religious thinker. His interpretation and critical defense of a Peircean approach in these areas is organized around Peirce’s dialogue with James (especially his response to James’s “will to believe” argument) and is also essentially tied up with Peirce’s theory of inquiry and scientific inference. Various central themes of Peirce’s thought are carefully discussed and relatively little known areas are usefully illuminated. The key idea is that we should, according to Peirce, conduct our lives on the basis of our sentiments and instincts rather than on the basis of philosophical theories. This “sentimental conservatism” has important applications in the philosophy of religion, too, because Peirce, on Atkins’s reading, defends the rational acceptability of a “living belief in God”.

The first chapter contrasts Peirce’s sentimental conservatism with what the author calls James’s “rational radicalism” by examining the critical exchanges between the two giants of pragmatism surrounding Peirce’s 1898 Cambridge Lectures, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*. James, who had arranged this lecture opportunity for Peirce, notoriously suggested that Peirce ought to have discussed “topics of vital importance”, inviting the sharp judgment by Peirce on the relevance of philosophical theory to such topics.

Atkins’s methodology in the first chapters illustrates his scholarly approach in general. In an exemplary manner of a careful historian of philosophy, he cites not only Peirce’s and James’s correspondence but

also the drafts Peirce produced when preparing the Cambridge Lectures, as well as eventually the final published lectures. This can be regarded as an “archaeological” method of excavating Peirce’s ideas leading up to their final (albeit occasionally somewhat distorted) formulations in the published writings; clearly, this is an excellent procedure in Peirce scholarship precisely because of the fragmentary and essentially unfinished nature of Peirce’s work. Atkins’s method shows us, among other things, how Peirce’s thought developed into his final, considered view that while “Philosophical science” may indeed “*ultimately* influence Religion and Morality”, it “should be allowed to do so only with secular slowness and the most conservative caution” (p. 23; cf. p. 38).<sup>1</sup> This sentimental conservatism is first articulated (in critical dialogue with the Jamesian view) in chapter 1 and more thoroughly defended in chapter 2.

However, while Atkins is always very careful and scholarly when it comes to interpreting Peirce, I am not entirely convinced by everything he has to say about James. It is not clear, at least not without further qualification, that James would have maintained that “the true theory will be the one that works in the sense of gaining champions” (p. 15; cf. also p. 24). While he did say something to that effect in *The Will to Believe*, such views were certainly reconsidered when he came to formulate his pragmatist view of truth in *Pragmatism* and *The Meaning of Truth* (which, however, fall beyond the scope of Atkins’s study of the differences between Peirce and James). More generally, James may not be as far from Peirce as it might seem, also given his view that the “will to believe” strategy only applies to “live” hypotheses which are “real possibilities” for us (see p. 25); indeed, such formulations might be argued to presuppose a Peircean account of “real generals”.

Furthermore, while Peirce might be superior to James in defending the habitual element of our (ethical and religious but presumably also other) beliefs and practices – something where sentiment and instinct should certainly be allowed to play their role – James might be much more interesting when it comes to showing how existential crises of human life may inevitably lead us to fundamental choices determining who we in fact are and whose sentiments or instincts are at issue in the end. Here one might suggest, pace Atkins, that Jamesian pragmatism prevails, yet also in a critical (Peircean) fallibilist spirit always open to, if necessary, redefining “us” in novel ways. We may grant that Peircean sentimental habituality is crucial to our ethical and religious lives, but in addition to sentiment and instinct we may also occasionally need Jamesian-like sudden conversion, a “will to believe” kind of leap.

From the point of view of a Jamesian pragmatist, therefore, the Peircean relies on a problematic dichotomy between philosophy and life when maintaining that sentimental conservatism is “a bit of advice about how we should conduct our lives while we wait for our philosophical investigations to reach

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<sup>1</sup> This is how Peirce formulates the matter in the first Cambridge Conferences Lecture, “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life”, in Charles S. Peirce, *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 108 (repeatedly quoted by Atkins).

their conclusions in a properly scientific manner” (p. 36; see also p. 80). Insofar as philosophy is to be relevant to life at all, there are situations where we just cannot wait. When Atkins concludes, “Given that the results of our present philosophical inquiries are but provisional from a theoretical point of view, we ought not to trust to our theories and reasonings until those inquiries reach their conclusions in a properly scientific manner” (p. 82), he merely repeats the same philosophy vs. life dualism that Peirce, unlike James, subscribes to. In short, one might have expected a champion of pragmatism to have greater confidence in the relevance of philosophy to life.

Atkins’s chapter 3 is, however, one of the best investigations of Peirce’s philosophy of religion available in scholarly literature. The author shows convincingly that Peirce’s rather obscure late piece, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (1908), argues for the “rational acceptability of a living belief in God”, instead of arguing directly for the reality of God (p. 85). Thus, it is wrong to read Peirce’s argument as an attempt to prove the reality of God (p. 87). The way we arrive at a belief in God is, according to Peirce and Atkins, abductive; our “musings” may produce a “living belief”, and the “neglected argument” seeks to show that such an abductively formed instinctive belief in the reality of God may rationally be trusted (pp. 94-95). Abduction only “suggests the hypothesis” that God is real (p. 95). Atkins succeeds in demonstrating how Peirce’s account of religion and theism is intimately connected with his theory of abductive inference, which must be correctly understood not as an inference to the best explanation but only as a tentative inference suggesting plausible explanatory hypotheses (p. 100).

After having carefully analyzed Peirce’s views on abduction, Atkins offers a detailed reading of the “Neglected Argument” essay, plausibly dividing it into three parts: the “humble argument”, the “neglected argument”, and the final “scientific argument”. This analysis is crucial for our understanding of how Peirce saw sentiment and instinct as crucial not only for ethical but also for religious life. The upshot is that it may be rationally acceptable for us to (continue to) believe in God’s reality even if that hypotheses has not been demonstrated (see especially p. 137). It might be pointed out, however, that this need not be fundamentally at odds with James’s “will to believe” strategy, which may also be applicable to living beliefs (live hypotheses) we actually do hold (rather than just to hypotheses to be adopted) without sufficient evidence.

While I am convinced by Atkins’s explication of the neglected argument, I am not entirely happy with his treatment of the final topic of the chapter, the problem of evil (pp. 133-136). He prefers – again apparently for Peircean reasons – the strategy of “exculpation” to that of “excuse”, suggesting that, “given the information we have, we are not in the proper epistemic position to issue a verdict on whether God is blameworthy for permitting evil and suffering to exist and so we are at liberty to deny that God is to be blamed for the evil and suffering in the world” (p. 134). It seems to me, as well as to many other

antitheodist philosophers of religion, that this is a non sequitur. It could still be argued to be insulting to the victims of evil and horrible gratuitous suffering to maintain that we might “*hold for now* that God is blameless, that God has some reason for permitting evil and suffering, however inscrutable that reason may be to us now” (p. 135).

Insofar as Peircean philosophy of religion based on sentiment and instinct leads us to such an exculpation approach to the problem of evil comparable to what is today discussed under the rubric of “skeptical theism” – and one can easily see it tends to do so – I think this might provide us with one additional reason for *rejecting* the Peircean position, possibly in favor of a Jamesian one. From James’s point of view, any theodist attempt to speculate about God’s possible reasons for allowing evil and suffering is morally problematic. While Atkins’s examination of the problem of evil remains brief (and, unlike his general defense of Peirce’s sentimental conservatism, ignores James’s contribution to the matter), this might in fact be one of the most important divisions between the Peircean and the Jamesian perspectives. Jamesian antitheodists taking seriously the meaninglessness of suffering would presumably challenge Peirce’s theodist belief that “God is loving the world into greater and greater degrees of perfection” (p. 161; see also p. 162).<sup>2</sup>

On my reading, the first three chapters are really the core of Atkins’s volume. Together they offer a compelling case for a sentimentalist reading of Peirce, highly relevant to both ethics and the philosophy of religion (though not unproblematic in either area). The three remaining chapters elaborate on important related matters supplementing our picture of Peirce’s philosophy in general: Peirce’s “esthetics” (spelled without the “a”) as the study of the admirable and unadmirable, examined in comparison to Kant’s Third Critique (chapter 4);<sup>3</sup> self-control, freedom, moral responsibility, and the question of divine foreknowledge (chapter 5); and, finally, a casuistic approach to practical ethics (chapter 6). All these latter chapters offer balanced readings of Peirce regarding highly significant philosophical applications of his sentimentalism.

Atkins’s book is to be recommended to anyone seriously trying to understand Peirce’s philosophy as a whole – that is, not only his theoretical philosophy, or semiotics, but his views on ethical life and religion as well. Atkins’s work suffers from a typical problem of some Peirce scholarship, namely, the tendency to overlook the original insights of William James, who might not just have misunderstood Peirce but may have had good reasons not to follow him into favoring sentiment and instinct over pragmatic

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<sup>2</sup> I cannot here deal with antitheodist argumentation in general. A broadly Jamesian approach to antitheodicy is defended in Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); and Sari Kivistö and Sami Pihlström, *Kantian Antitheodicy: Philosophical and Literary Varieties* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Here it might be suggested that Atkins, who is generally extremely well familiar with both his primary and secondary sources, ignores a relevant piece of scholarship, i.e., Jennifer A. McMahon, *Art and Ethics in a Material World: Kant’s Pragmatist Legacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

existential choice. Peirce's sentimentalism must certainly be taken seriously, but in my view Atkins's defense of Peirce falls short of conclusively demonstrating its superiority to James's "will to believe".

**Sami Pihlström**

University of Helsinki, Finland

[sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi](mailto:sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi)