Kant’s pragmatism and esthetic judgments

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1. Introduction

I’ll refrain from beginning with any major statements concerning Kant and pragmatism. Instead, I’ll simply mention two questions which, while often discussed in passing in the vast literature on pragmatism, I continue to find vexing. The first concerns the very notion of pragmatism. Why did Peirce insist on naming his logical doctrine with a Kantian word? The second issue concerns the somewhat curious resurgence of Kantian concepts in Peirce’s later writings on pragmatism, especially his discussions of ends, purposes and normative science. While the following is unfortunately rife with lengthy quotations, I hope that by the end you share my view that these are not questions of mere historical interest but point towards some of the most central affinities and differences between Kant’s critical philosophy and (Peirce’s) pragmatism.

2. Pragmatism and practical reason

We know that the word pragmatism is derived from Kant’s use of the term pragmatisch, and there are also a few passages where Peirce elucidates the derivation of his early coinage:

[...] for one who had learned philosophy out of Kant […], praktisch and pragmatisch were as far apart as the two poles, the former belonging in a region of thought where no mind of the experimentalist type can ever make sure of solid ground under his feet, the latter expressing relation to some definite human purpose. (CP 5.412)
Commenting on this passage, Marcus Willaschek (2015) suggests that Peirce overstates his case. For Kant, *pure* practical laws and pragmatic maxims of conduct both belong to the realm of practical imperatives and not quite as far apart as Peirce's language suggests. But to be fair, the relevant passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a good bit more complicated. It is worth quoting in full:

Everything is practical that is possible through freedom. But if the conditions for the exercise of our free choice are empirical, then in that case reason can have none but a regulative use, and can only serve to produce the unity of empirical laws, as, e.g., in the doctrine of prudence the unification of all ends that are given to us by our inclinations into the single end of happiness and the harmony of the means for attaining that end constitute the entire business of reason, which can therefore provide none but pragmatic laws of free conduct for reaching the ends recommended to us by the senses, and therefore can provide no pure laws that are determined completely a priori. Pure practical laws, on the contrary, whose end is given by reason completely a priori, and which do not command under empirical conditions but absolutely, would be products of pure reason. Of this sort, however, are the moral laws; thus these alone belong to the practical use of reason and permit a canon. (A800/B828)

Kant’s view must be (as Willaschek proposes) that pragmatic and “pure” practical laws are to be understood as two, contrasting products of the (same) practical reason. But one does get the impression that Kant is wavering between two notions of practical and, accordingly, practical reason. By the end of the passage, Kant appears to limit the issue of practical reason to its pure, *a priori* products. Moreover, the “unity of empirical laws” – which, we might assume, is an example of the regulative use of theoretical reason – is listed as the very basis of reason’s pragmatic issue. If the pragmatic precepts of reason
include the products of *theoretical* reason, the idea certainly suggests itself that practical reason is strictly speaking limited to the issuing of moral laws.

This appearance of a confusion is readily explained by the fact that exactly such a sweeping connection between theoretical and practical judgments (and reason) is precisely Kant's intent. This is perhaps most explicit in the First Introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where Kant writes:

[...]

Moral propositions aside, Kant maintains that the difference between practical and theoretical propositions is not one of content but of presentation. *Pragmatic* use of reason, then, is theoretical reason under a different guise. This is where pragmatism’s debt to Kant is at its most evident. Pragmatism, Peirce maintains, is just such a sweeping account of the connection of theoretical and practical judgments, the principle that the meaning (or, to be more specific, an important aspect of meaning) of *theoretical* judgments is a *practical maxim* (or a set of such maxims):

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a

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1 The “First Introduction”, or Kant's first draft of an introduction to the third *Critique*, was included in editions of that volume only in the early 1900s. It is unlikely that this text was available to Peirce (although I haven't had the opportunity to confirm this).
corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood. (CP 5.18, 1903)

Peirce, then, takes up Kant’s notion of the translatability of theoretical and practical judgments and turns that notion into a principled test of the meaning (and meaningfulness) of theoretical judgments. Here pragmatism is perfectly Kantian in its central claim. To wit, Peirce took Kant’s contention concerning the connection between theoretical and practical judgments and turned that theoretical judgment into a practical maxim of logic (as in his “consider what practical effects…”).

There’s a further complication, however. The “doctrine of prudence” distinguished in the first *Critique* as providing pragmatic laws of free conduct is an example of the empirical (or “regulative”) use of practical reason, but not all of that use. In the *Groundwork*, Kant further distinguishes between *technical* and *pragmatic* imperatives among hypothetical imperatives (G 414–7). While technical imperatives concern the attainment of this or that possible end, pragmatic imperatives assume the end of happiness. This distinction is relevant for Kant because he considers happiness to be a subjectively necessary end, which can thus be presumed to be an actual (as opposed to a merely possible) goal of any agent.

However, as Kant notes, the goal of happiness is itself an indeterminate concept. Happiness itself admits of a simple definition: it is “the condition of a rational being in the world, in whose whole existence everything goes according to his wish and will” (CPrR 129). But a man “can never say, determinately and in a way that is harmonious with himself, what he really wishes and wills” (G 418). Consequently, it now appears that there is a crucial difference between what Kant calls pragmatic imperatives and the kind of practical maxims which Peirce proposes we use to elucidate the meaning of

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2 It is a nice question to ask whether we have any examples of pragmatic imperatives: if happiness cannot be determined, are there any general rules of “prudence” to be given? Kant’s answer, if there is one, is likely contained in his lectures on *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. These lectures contain little by way of simple precepts for happiness, but considerations of various aspects of human nature and their implications within the that pursuit, somewhat to the dismay of Kant’s contemporary commentators (see *).
theoretical judgments. As we saw, the practical maxims Peirce has in mind must have a “relation to some definite human purpose”, while Kant's pragmatic imperatives do not express a relation to a definite human purpose, as the purpose of happiness is deemed hopelessly indeterminable. And so it appears that Peirce’s pragmatism is concerned with technical (rather than pragmatic) imperatives, in Kant’s sense.

The remainder of this talk can be understood as an argument to the effect that things are, again, not quite as simple. Rather, Peirce's late account of the development of purposes reintroduces an element of indeterminacy of purpose to his pragmatism. Moreover, as I will argue (albeit too briefly), Kant's views on purpose in the third Critique already includes the key elements of Peirce's later account of the grounds of that development in esthetic judgments.

3. Purposes and pragmatism

Peirce often emphasizes that the conceivable practical effects that pragmatism pertains to are consequences for deliberate or self-controlled conduct, not “action” in the (mechanical) sense of happening. By the early 1900s, Peirce realized that, to make good on the promises of pragmatism, he owes an account of deliberate conduct, more specifically of the ends or purposes that we may deliberately adopt in such conduct: this is the main question of the normative science of ethics. Moreover, such normative inquiry was helpful in defending pragmatism, which, being a logical maxim of its own right, presupposes a notion of the logical “goodness” that the maxim is designed to attain: an inquiry into this question falls within the purview of the normative science of logic, which investigates the ends of reasoning (or inference) we may deliberately adopt.

Ultimately, all normative science relies on what Peirce called esthetics, the inquiry into what is admirable in itself (for which Peirce used the Kantian term summum bonum):
[...] an ultimate end of action deliberately adopted, [...], must be a state of things that reasonably recommends itself in itself aside from any ulterior consideration. It must be an admirable ideal, having the only kind of goodness that such an ideal can have, namely, esthetic goodness. From this point of view the morally good appears as a particular species of the esthetically good. (EP 2:201)

Deliberate conduct presupposes an ultimate end, even if our idea of that purpose is very vague and indeterminate. Such indeterminacy of ultimate ends brings Peirce’s pragmatism a notch closer to Kant’s conception of pragmatic imperatives, but with an obvious and crucial difference. The ultimate end of deliberate action is, as Peirce’s language suggests, a moral end, as opposed to the “pragmatic” end of happiness. That is, our moral end just is the ultimate end we have deliberately adopted. Indeed, Peirce tends to argue that happiness, understood as some form of maximal gratification of one’s desires, cannot be consistently adopted as one’s ultimate purpose. Moreover, even if that was possible, Kant’s presupposition that the pursuit of happiness is a “natural necessity” is based on a fallacy which Peirce often sets out to refute. Namely, even if our desires supply us with our various ends of action, it does not follow that we further desire the satisfaction of all our desires. At the very least, then, happiness is not a necessary end of deliberate action.

But, then, what is the ultimate end? How are we to discover what is admirable in itself? As Peirce’s formulations of the normative science of esthetics are rather vague, we are better off consulting his elucidations of the practical development of ends (or purposes). In the central pragmatist manuscript MS 318, Peirce describes this development as occurring in light of either outer experimentation or in what Peirce calls the “inner realm” – that is, imagination. However, purposes are not devised against observations but, rather, their development is based on feelings, which lead to efforts in

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3 For example: “[I]t is so far from being true that every desire necessarily desires its own gratification, that, on the contrary, it is impossible that a desire should desire its own gratification” (EP 2:245).
reproducing the sources of such feelings by way of similar conduct; in turn, such efforts, by way of reiteration, produce habits of action (see EP 2.412). There is no room to make good on this account here; however, as I have argued elsewhere, this development of purposes occurs against further purposes, but may also yield completely novel purposes not dependent on ends already adopted (cf. Rydenfelt 2017). That is, experience (feeling) can suggest new purposes without presupposing yet further purposes which the adoption of the former purposes is understood to serve. This is the basis on which the possibility of an *a posteriori* normative inquiry ultimately rests.

4. Esthetics and the development of purposes

The connection between feeling and purpose is, of course, a recurring theme in Kant’s writings. Indeed, Kant seems to provide not one but two somewhat differing accounts of this connection. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that feelings cannot act as a basis for objectively necessary moral laws:

>S]uppose that finite rational beings did think thoroughly alike also in regard to what they had to assume as objects of their feelings of gratification and pain, and likewise even in regard to the means they have to employ in order to attain the former objects and keep the others away. Even then they definitely could not pass off the principle of self-love as a practical law, because this agreement itself would still be only contingent. The determining basis would still be only subjectively valid and merely empirical and would not have that necessity which is thought in every law. (CPrR 26)

Here Kant explains why (what he calls) pragmatic imperatives cannot be turned into universal moral laws. If a universal agreement in feelings and, consequently, the ends of action were achievable, it would nevertheless be a merely subjectively valid “determining basis” for pragmatic imperatives.
Even leaving aside the reference to the “principle of self-love” already criticized, much could be said about the complications of this stance. For one thing, here as elsewhere Kant simply assumes that we cannot show the validity of a judgment concerning what is necessary by inductive means without having first provided an *a priori* ground for such a feat. Peirce criticized Kant on exactly this score, holding that Kant is guilty of a fallacious inference from the fact that (in a certain sense) “universal and necessary propositions are not given in experience” to the conclusion that such propositions are not inferable from experience without an *a priori* basis (CP 5.223 fn).

But these issues are somewhat beside the point here, as it is the second account, in the third *Critique*, that turns out to be of more interest. Here Kant comes close to providing just such an *a priori* basis for a particular type of judgment funded by a feeling: judgments of taste. The detection of these judgments amounts to an innovation in the course of the critical project, as they are neither pragmatic nor practical, in Kant’s sense. Judgments of beauty (to which I’ll be limiting my discussion here), for instance, are based on a feeling and do not entail subsuming the object under a concept. (Beauty is not a theoretical concept, as it does not suggest any practical precept; here we can witness Kant’s pragmatism at work.) For this reason, such judgments cannot be objectively valid. Nevertheless, as we know, Kant argues that they are *subjectively* universally valid: a judgment of beauty entails that any agent ought to make the same judgment. This view of judgments of beauty is the second account of the connection between feeling and purpose referred to above. This time Kant connects the feeling involved in a judgment of beauty with a specific type of purposiveness which he argues is the ground of the judgment: purposiveness without a purpose. The object of the aesthetic judgment is held to have subjective purposiveness without reference to any antecedent purpose or inclination by the judging agent. This purposiveness Kant then attributes to the interplay between imagination and understanding, an interplay that we can expect to occur in any agent capable of judging in the first place.
Before turning to some problems of this account and their possible pragmatist resolution, a couple of remarks on how Kant’s discussion can inform Peirce’s pragmatist account of the development of purpose are in order. It is easy to see that Peirce’s account is heavily indebted to Kant’s account of aesthetic judgments (especially judgments of beauty): it is no coincidence that Peirce named the inquiry into what is admirable in itself *esthetics*. Kant’s account of purposiveness without a purpose provides Peirce’s esthetics with a notion of how purposes may suggest themselves “without ulterior purpose”. From this point of view, Peirce takes various elements of Kant’s conception of judgments of beauty and places them at the very foundation of normative science.

What is more, Kant’s distinction between pragmatic (and technical) judgments and aesthetic judgments helps us detect the peculiar nature of esthetic judgment. This point can be made by drawing from the maxim of pragmatism itself. As we saw, Peirce’s pragmatism maintains that all theoretical judgments can be translated into practical imperatives. But does the opposite hold; that is, can all practical imperatives be translated into theoretical judgments? It appears that esthetic judgments cannot be so translated (even though, of course, such judgments may be expressed in an indicative form). Such judgments do not recommend courses of action based on more or less definite ends deliberately adopted; rather, they simply recommend an end to be adopted. Esthetic judgments are not pragmatic in Peirce’s sense.

There are, of course, also a number of salient differences between Kant’s and Peirce’s views of judgments of beauty. It may be instructive to consider these differences by way of noting some of the problems which Kant’s account faces but Peirce’s manages to avoid. Consistently with the aims of his critical project, Kant argues that the grounds of a judgment of beauty ultimately rest fully within the operation of imagination and understanding.

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4 Kant, of course, should answer this question in the negative: while the *a priori* moral law may perhaps be cast in indicative form, it does not entail any (theoretical) statement of the way the world is.
But this results in two central problems with Kant’s account. The first is the famous objection usually put in the form of a dilemma: either every judgment entails the free interplay of the “faculties”, and consequently everything is (judged) beautiful, or else judgments of beauty cannot be necessarily valid even in the subjective sense, unless some further grounds for such validity are provided (Guyer 1979; Allison 2001, 182 ff.). Another problem concerns the proper place of the feeling that Kant argues is involved in a judgment of beauty. Contrary to what one might initially expect, this feeling, Kant emphasizes, is merely the side product of the free interplay of imagination and understanding – that is, the product of the aesthetic judgment itself, rather than the ground of that judgment in experience (CPJ 218). Both these problems could, I think, be cast even more poignantly by pointing out that, as judgments of beauty do not depend on the nature of the object judged in the least, there appears to be no factor to determine when exactly the free interplay of imagination takes (or should take) place. Why should this interplay occur consistently when faced by the same object even for the same judging subject?

I can’t consider the various solutions to these issues proposed by Kant scholars here. Instead, I will briefly point out how the Peircean approach manages to evade such concerns. In Peirce’s view, judgments of the admirable in itself (as well as the aesthetic judgments underwriting the development of purposes more generally) are based on feelings which, in turn, are ultimately due to the nature of the objects themselves. For Peirce, then, esthetical inquiry can shed light on the admirableness of an object itself (which, however, in light of the distinction between pragmatic and esthetic judgments, should not be understood as some particular property of the object). More precisely, as I have argued elsewhere, drawing from Peirce’s semiotics (especially as developed by T. L. Short (2008)), feelings (understood as emotional interpretants) can be more or less appropriate responses to various signs with respect to different goals, including cognitive purposes (cf. Rydenfelt 2016). Whether or not an emotional interpretant is a fitting response ultimately depends on the object of the sign that it is an interpretant of. This is why the central problem of Kant’s judgments of beauty does not return to haunt
Peirce’s esthetics. A feeling (emotional interpretant) underwrites an esthetic judgment (rather than vice versa); moreover, that interpretant, when appropriate, reveals something about the sign’s object.⁵

5. Conclusion

Time for a couple of sweeping statements. At least Kant and Peirce (as well as the other pragmatists of his time) are responding to the same challenge. The success of empirical science has somehow placed us in the curious position where we have begun to view a great number of issues, such as questions of the good and the beautiful, as expressions of mere personal or social taste. Opposing this tendency – in its “subjective”, romanticist as well as more “objective”, reductivist guises – both Kant and the pragmatists tried to show that such judgments can be subjected to (one or another form of) rational criticism. But the context is different. Kant’s critical project is perhaps best viewed as the pinnacle of the Enlightenment’s reliance on Reason – reliance so deep that it is Reason that is presumed to be able to provide its own critique. But redeeming the good and the beautiful by defining the limits of knowledge comes at the expense of further deepening the divide between scientific and normative questions (also in its various contemporary variations). Peirce and the other pragmatists of his time, witnessing the many triumphs of the scientific method, suggested instead that questions of goodness and beauty are amenable to a rational criticism that is by its nature scientific. This softening of what still appears to remain the hardest dichotomy of philosophy is a pragmatist project which, as I hope the preceding goes to show, is quite antithetical to but not without its debts to Kant’s critical endeavour.

⁵ In a non-Kantian sense, then, esthetic judgments can be objectively valid – but not in a Kantian sense, as a judgment aspiring to such objectivity would involve the application of a concept on the object (and, hence, the judgment would be either technical/pragmatic or moral).