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978-0-521-11899-6 - Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism

Paul Forster

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## PEIRCE AND THE THREAT OF NOMINALISM

Charles Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, was a thinker of extraordinary depth and range – he wrote on philosophy, mathematics, psychology, physics, logic, phenomenology, semiotics, religion and ethics – but his writings are difficult and fragmentary. This book provides a clear and comprehensive explanation of Peirce's thought. His philosophy is presented as a systematic response to 'nominalism', the philosophy which he most despised and which he regarded as the underpinning of the dominant philosophical worldview of his time. The book explains Peirce's challenge to nominalism as a theory of meaning and shows its implications for his views of knowledge, truth, the nature of reality and ethics. It will be essential reading both for Peirce scholars and for those new to his work.

PAUL FORSTER is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ottawa. He has published numerous papers and essays and is the co-editor of *The Rule of Reason: The Philosophy of Charles S. Peirce* (1997).

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*To Erin, Emma and Kathryn  
– the loves of my life.*

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## *Preface*

Charles Peirce (1839–1914) never completed a philosophical treatise and his extant writing seems fragmentary. But this is not because he failed to work out detailed connections among the diverse aspects of his thought. He was nothing if not methodical, and his aim from the beginning was to construct a systematic and exact philosophy. Certainly his writings are often programmatic, at times sketchy, but one should not expect short series of papers, critical notices and dictionary entries, which Peirce's published work comprises, and lecture notes, letters and private reflections, which make up the rest of his writings, to substitute for a thorough philosophical work. His manuscripts provide only glimpses of a mind labouring on intricate problems, the content and force of which derive from the grand theoretical design that inspired them.

Peirce's philosophical system defies easy classification, even allowing for the evolution of his thought. Early commentators were no doubt hasty in concluding that he has no consistent philosophical orientation, but they were understandably perplexed by his penchant for confuting time-worn categories. To this day there is no consensus on whether his attraction to naturalism takes precedence over his transcendentalism, whether his commitment to holism trumps his distinction between form and content and whether his version of idealism weakens (for better or worse) his claim to be a robust realist.<sup>1</sup> Peirce's views can be forced into one or another pigeonhole, provided one is willing to discount anomalous

<sup>1</sup> While Goudge (1950) finds in Peirce both the rejection and endorsement of a priori modes of thought about matters of fact, Liszka (1996) thinks Peirce is suspicious of the a priori. Almeder (1980) denies that Peirce accepts the analytic–synthetic distinction, but Rosenthal (1994) thinks this distinction is important to Peirce's thought. Peirce's naturalism is emphasized by Skagestaad (1984) and Almeder among many others, while Peirce's transcendentalism is stressed by Apel (1981), Delaney (1993), Murphey (1993) and Parker (1998). Pape (1997) focuses on Peirce's idealism, while Almeder, Hausman (1993) and Rescher (1978) focus on Peirce's realism. Meanwhile, Altschuler (1980, 1982), Jardine (1986), Misak (1991) and Skagestaad see Peirce as some sort of 'internal' or 'pragmatic realist'.

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texts as the product of unresolved tensions or conceptual confusion. But it is unlikely that Peirce would tolerate imprecision on fundamental questions about the nature and method of philosophy method and implausible to think he was prone to terminological errors. Few philosophers have been as well versed in the etymology of philosophical terms and even fewer have followed him in viewing precise usage as an ethical imperative (2.219–26, 1903). Indeed, he offers his famous pragmatic maxim as a method for resolving disputes arising from the abuse of philosophical terms. Thus, there is every reason to suppose that if Peirce fails to respect familiar philosophical boundaries, he does so deliberately. To understand Peirce's view of his place in the tradition, and his genius for co-opting seemingly irreconcilable doctrines, then, it is best to read him in his own terms and let philosophical labels fall where they may.

To appreciate Peirce's work as a system it helps to consider how the various fields he contributed to were connected in the late nineteenth century. Questions of cosmology, morality, politics and religion were thought to be interrelated and bound up with questions about the foundations of knowledge. The extension of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of human behaviour triggered an intense debate about humanity's place in nature, the nature of moral authority and the Creator's role in the universe. Reconciling the achievements of natural science with moral and spiritual ideas was a dominant concern of the period. Peirce was also pre-occupied with these matters. To recognize his interest in the moral and religious implications of even his technical work is to view his philosophy as he saw it himself: the culmination of nineteenth-century thought.

In setting Peirce's work in this context I use as a foil the view he despised most – the view he loosely called 'nominalism'. Peirce sees nominalism as the core of the worldview most often associated with late nineteenth-century scientific thought. It is a philosophy derived from associationist psychology, foundationalist epistemology, the principles of mechanics and evolutionary biology, with broad implications for human life and culture. Exploring the contrast between the views Peirce defends and the nominalism he despises reveals a great deal about his reaction to the debates of his time and his place in philosophy. It also makes clear how integrated and rigorous his thought is.

My discussion of Peirce's philosophy aspires to thoroughness, but it is not exhaustive. His view of nominalism shifted as his ideas evolved, and, while mindful of these changes, I do not examine them here. It has proved enough to explain Peirce's work from a perspective that has not been sufficiently appreciated. Nor do I consider the significance of Peirce's

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thought for the tradition of post-Kantian idealism. This subject merits independent treatment and by someone better qualified than me. The work of other Peirce scholars is not examined. Departures from received wisdom will be obvious to experts, while other readers will appreciate being spared the details of labyrinthine scholarly debate. Finally, I do not discuss Peirce's doctrine of categories or his semiotics much. My interpretation of Peirce sheds light on his understanding of the categories and their importance for his thought and it also draws heavily on his account of symbols, but an adequate treatment of both of these topics requires a far lengthier discussion than can be provided here.

Throughout, my concern is with getting Peirce right rather than with making him be right. There is no denying that his ideas have proved fruitful in contemporary philosophy. My aim, however, is to give an account of his thought as he saw it. I explain his views – those that have found favour and those that have not – in terms of their technical foundations, all the while keeping in mind the integrity of his philosophical system. I do this not merely for reasons of historical accuracy but also because proper understanding of his views is crucial to any assessment of their enduring significance. Peirce is a deep and rigorous thinker, and the better his work as a whole is understood the harder it is to discern where his insight stops and his confusions begin.

If this book succeeds in presenting something of the richness of Peirce's thought in a way that is accessible to the general philosophical reader, it is largely due to the help I received in writing it. I owe a huge debt to the Peirce Edition Project and its benefactors for producing a critical edition of Peirce's writings of unsurpassed quality. I am also beholden to the community of Peirce scholars for insights too numerous to catalogue. I have benefited immeasurably from conversations about this, and other, work with Stéphane Bastien, Lynne Cohen, Vincent Colapietro, Shannon Dea, Burton Dreben, Nadine Faulkner, Jérôme Havenel, Nathan Houser, François Latraverse, Angus Kerr Lawson, Erin McCarthy, Mark Migotti, Margaret Morrison, Andrew Reynolds, David Savan, André de Tienne and students in various seminars devoted to Peirce I have given at the University of Ottawa. Glenn Tiller carefully scrutinized the final manuscript. Andrew Lugg read more drafts of this book than I care to count and held my feet to the fire at every turn. I could not ask for a better, more helpful critic, colleague or friend than he has been. Finally, this book would not have been finished without the love and support of Erin McCarthy and our daughters, Kathryn and Emma. They are an unfailing source of inspiration and unmitigated joy.



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## Abbreviations

The following conventions for references to Peirce's work are used:

References to *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition* (Peirce 1982–94) cite the volume number, the page and the year the passage was written – e.g. W2: 466, 1871.

References to *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Peirce 1935–58) cite the volume and paragraph number and the year the passage was written – e.g. 2.219, 1903.

References to *The New Elements of Mathematics by Charles S. Peirce* (Peirce 1976) are of the form NEM volume number: page number, the year the passage was written – e.g. NEM 3: 903, 1904.

References to *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Peirce 1992, 1998) are of the form EP volume number: page, the year the passage was written – e.g. EP 1: 41, 1868.

References to *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism* (Peirce 1997) are of the form P: page number, the year the passage was written – e.g. P: 123, 1903.

References to *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conference Lectures of 1898* (Peirce 1992) are of the form RLT: page, the year the passage was written – e.g. RLT: 93, 1898.

References to *Semiotics and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Lady Victoria Welby* (Peirce 1977) are of the form SS: page number and the year the passage was written – e.g. SS: 115, 1909.

References to *Historical Perspectives in Peirce's Logic of Science* (Peirce 1985) are of the form HP volume: page, the year the passage was written – e.g. HP 2: 901, 1901.

Undated manuscripts are marked 'nd' in place of the year.