Charles S. Peirce

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1. Synechism & Metaphysical Realism

Pragmatism is a step in the general procedure of synechism because the correct formation of hypotheses supposes a correct understanding of the concepts so employed. Both pragmatism and synechism are built upon the bedrock of realism, that position which Peirce tells us he espoused so very early in his career and to which he ever remained faithful through all the vagaries of his speculations. In Part I of this essay we indicated how “scholastic realism” is essentially involved in Peirce’s understanding of the pragmatic maxim. Since the truth of pragmatism essentially requires the truth of synechism, we must consider in some detail the relation between synechism and realism, and to do that we must present a more careful analysis of the issue under debate in the realism-nominalism controversy.

Let us begin by eliminating what is not at stake. It is not a question of just epistemological realism, that is, a question of the existence of a real “external” world. Peirce never considered that to be a genuine problem. It is rather a fact of everyday experience, doubts about which could be easily dispelled unless one is blinded by some irrational scruple about the kind of evidence required or prejudiced by a preconceived theory. In this sort of realism all medieval thinkers were agreed, even the nominalists. It is little more than what common sense requires—to recognize that we cannot

1 “Now whoever cares to know what pragmaticism is should understand that on its metaphysical side it is an attempt to solve the problem: In what way can a general be unaffected by any thought about it? Hence before we treat of the evidences of pragmaticism, it will be needful to weigh the pros and cons of scholastic realism. For pragmaticism could hardly have entered a head that was not already convinced that there are real generals” (5.503).

2 See, e.g. 6.605. Writing in 1891 he says, “Yet be it known that never, during the thirty years in which I have been writing on philosophical questions, have I failed in my allegiance to realistic opinions and to certain Scotistic ideas . . . . ”
think whatever we want and that wishing will not necessarily make it so. Still there are some passages in which Peirce addresses himself to this question, usually when he is expounding his “Critical Common-sensism” (e.g. 5.439) or elucidating the meaning of truth (e.g. 2.153). Thus, for example, in the “Logic of 1873” Peirce writes this very curious passage:

The question is, “Whether corresponding to our thoughts and sensations, and represented in some sense by them, there are realities, which are not only independent of the thought of you, and me, and any number of men, but which are absolutely independent of thought altogether.” The objective final opinion is independent of thoughts of any particular men, but is not independent of thought in general. (7.336)

The passage is curious because on the one hand it declares for epistemological realism, and on the other for objective idealism (cf. 2.153). To understand how the two are compatible we must examine the problem of metaphysical realism and the solution Peirce adopted.

Peirce continually insisted that he held “scholastic realism” as against nominalism in all its forms. Further, he insisted that he opted for one particular style of that realism, namely, that of John Duns Scotus. Exceptionally well acquainted with medieval philosophy, he knew that the great issue of the day concerned the ontological status of “universals” and that even among the realists there were a variety of opinions.

In the days of which I am speaking, the age of Robert of Lincoln, Roger Bacon, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus, the question of nominalism and realism was regarded as definitively and conclusively settled in favor of realism. You know what the question was. It was whether laws and general types are figments of the mind or are real. If this be understood to mean whether there really are any laws and types, it is strictly speaking a question of metaphysics and not of logic. (1.16)

Yet cf. 8.218 ff. where he criticizes Royce for failing to understand the realist position.
But in accord with his general conviction that logic and metaphysics are intimately related, nay, that metaphysics is objectified logic, he says immediately:

But as a first step toward its solution, it is proper to ask whether, granting that our common-sense beliefs are true, the analysis of the meaning of those beliefs shows that, according to those beliefs, laws and types are objective or subjective. This is a question of logic rather than of metaphysics — and as soon as this is answered the reply to the other question immediately follows after. (1.16)

Peirce wrote this in 1903. A few years earlier, in 1898, he formulated the same question in a way which emphasizes its relevance to Peirce’s synechist theory of law.

Now what was the question of realism and nominalism? I see no objection to defining it as the question of which is the best, the laws or the facts under those laws. It is true that it was not stated in this way. As stated, the question was whether universals, such as the Horse, the Ass, the Zebra, and so forth, were in re or in rerum natura. . . . in using the word law, or regularity, we bring into prominence the kind of universals to which modern science pays most attention. Roughly speaking, the nominalists conceived the general element of cognition to be merely a convenience for understanding this and that fact and to amount to nothing except for cognition, while the realists, still more roughly speaking, looked upon the general, not only as the end and aim of knowledge, but also as the most important element of being. Such was and is the question. (4.1)⁴

⁴ "The facts which the abstract nouns such as hardness, sweetness, etc. are used to express are really and truly so. But there are in the physical universe no existing, that is reacting, things hardness, sweetness. They have their being only in the discourse of our minds with themselves and in our speech to others. Hence they are called entia rationis, or beings of Reason. Some men say they are real, meaning that they serve to express what is really so. Others say that they are not ‘real,’ meaning that there are no such reacting things called hardness, sweetness, etc. The former writers use the word ‘real’ in the precise sense which it was invented to signify; and re-
The question, then, was not whether there is an external world which we can know to some degree, but what is included in that world's reality which enables us to understand it to some degree. Is generality, rationality, lawfulness, Thirdness a real mode of the world's being? If it is not, then the world is not in itself intelligible and does not exhibit any structure. It does not reveal itself to man upon diligent investigation, but rather presents itself as a mad puzzle into which man must introduce order from without, as it were. If it is a real mode, then scientific inquiry seeks to discover the world's order and rationality by careful attention to correct reasoning and by docility to experience, the world's own great revealer and teacher. If the nominalists are right, then we do not strictly speaking know the world or anything about it. We may encounter it in brutal shock, but that encounter does not reveal anything about what is encountered. It might be thought that on the nominalistic view one might be able to say that he knows that there is an external world "out there" but it would remain opaque as to what it is. It would be unknown and unknowable in this sense, and it would be a short step indeed to denying even knowledge of the that. Whatever is known is categorized and generalized. It is set in relation to other things, objects, and experiences. And if it is known, it must warrant such generalization. To do that, Peirce argues, it must have a real mode of generality as part of its structure and being. To be actually known implies to be knowable, while to be does not in any way imply to be actually known. In another place, discussing the weak evasive tactics of the conceptualists (the fainthearted nominalists), Peirce formulates the issue once again in a way which clearly brings out the point.

The question was whether all properties, laws of nature, and predicates of more than an actually existent subject are, without exception, mere figments or not. The conceptualists seek to wedge in a third position. . . . They say, "Those universals are real, indeed; but they are only real thoughts."

member this: To use a precise word in a wrong sense is a sin, because it tends to make human thought, which is the only really valuable ingredient of human nature, to be confused. The latter writers are apt to think that it is only what actually has happened that is true, while in fact what would surely happen under described circumstances is as true and more important, because it guides our conduct more directly" (Peirce Papers, #48, p. 11).
The great realists had brought out all the truth there is in that much more distinctly long before modern conceptualism appeared in the world. They showed that the general is not capable of full actualization in the world of action and reaction but is of the nature of what is thought, but that our thinking only apprehends and does not create thought, and that that thought may and does as much govern outward things as it does our thinking. . . .

The conceptualist doctrine is an undisputed truism about thinking, while the question between nominalists and realists relates to thoughts, that is, to the objects which thinking enables us to know. (1.27)

Peirce was not content merely to declare for “scholastic realism” in general. He is very careful to specify the particular brand he chose. Peirce claims Scotus as his inspiration, and this insistence is not without great significance in understanding his synechistic version of metaphysical realism (cf. e.g. 1.6, 4.50, 5.77, n. 1, 5.312, etc.). Thomism and Scotism are the two great rivals among the scholastic realisms. Both schools were equally antagonistic to nominalism on the one hand and to platonizing or “extreme” realism on the other. In common they held that all concrete existents are singular, while our knowledge of them is in terms of universal concepts. But since our knowledge is objective, there must be some sort of ground in the singular for the universal. Both schools agreed in a general way that the fundamentum universalitatis had to be something really and objectively common (natura communis) to all individuals of which the universal is predicable. This was the logical aspect of the problem. The distinction often used to express this position is between that which a universal concept represents (id quod conceptus representat) that is, the common nature, and the way in which (modus quo) that content is real in the concrete singular of which it is objectively predicated and in the intelligence which so predicates it. Thus far, Scotists and Thomists agree. But as to the question of the ontological status of that natura communis and to that of how such a nature is individuated, they part company. 5 While Aquinas held for a unique

5 Cf. 5.107; Peirce recognized that the relation of law to “a blind reacting thing” (of Thirdness to Secondness) involved “the great problem of
substantial form accounting for the unity of the species and for signate matter (materia quantitate signata) as its individuating principle, Scotus thought that there were a plurality of forms ingredient in any individual (one to account for each essential property of the species to which it belonged, as, for example, in a man, a form of bodiness, a form of life, a form of mixture, etc.) and that these forms were made concrete, singular and actual by haecceity or “thisness,” itself not another form, but an entitative perfection effecting the passage from specific unity to individual unity. Thus in Scotus’ view the concrete individual in a species is made up of a common nature in virtue of which it is a member of the species and haecceity in virtue of which it is this individual. The common nature itself is made up of a plurality of forms, each corresponding to a note (essential or accidental) in that nature’s description. These forms are not really distinct from one another, nor are they merely rationally distinct in the sense of being mere fictions, but rather between them is a formal distinction. The same is true of the relation between common nature and haecceity. As Scotus sometimes puts it, the formal distinction is between realitas et realitas, but not between res et res.

It is instructive to notice that the most frequent criticism of Scotism by Thomists is that it tends toward, if it is not really, a form of extreme realism. The Thomists criticize haecceitas as a mere deus ex machina to escape making the individual a mere bundle of concrete universals (platonizing), not to mention the fact that despite the Scotists’ protestations it looks very much like another formality, if not the airiest of abstractions. Again the formalities, according to the

the principle of individuation which the scholastic doctors after a century of the closest possible analysis were obliged to confess was quite incomprehensible to them.”

6 E. Bettoni, O.F.M., Duns Scotus: The Basic Principles of his Philosophy, trans. by B. Bonansea, O.F.M. (Washington, D.C.: Cath. U. of Amer. Press, 1961), p. 61, sums up the notion of haecceity as follows: “In other words, the haecceity is not just a perfection added to the form and within the form, but a new mode of being that affects matter, form, and the composite, i.e., the whole common nature, which is thereby contracted and forced to come out of that sort of indetermination which is proper to the specific nature. It is on the plane of act, and therefore a real principle, without being a formal element.”
Thomists, are either really or only rationally distinct. They do not see that any halfway house is possible. If they are only rationally distinct then Scotism has not answered the nominalist position, while if they are really distinct, then the realism is extreme. And yet, Peirce criticizes Scotus for not having been an extreme enough realist and, therefore, accuses him of having to a degree fallen into nominalism (cf. e.g. 1.560, 6.175, 8.11). Thus he says of himself, “I should call myself an Aristotelian of the scholastic wing, approaching Scotism, but going much farther in the direction of scholastic realism” (5.77, n. 1) and “I am myself a scholastic realist of a somewhat extreme stripe” (5.470). Peirce, therefore, opts for extreme realism—that type of realism which Scotism would be without the theory of individuation. And Peirce does in places insist that such a theory must be abandoned. Nor does Peirce seem to think that this extreme realism would leave him open to the charge of reifying universals. He feels that his new logic of relatives allows him to escape this sort of error. Thus, he prefers to phrase his realism in terms of the objective reality of laws rather than in terms of universals (see 4.1). Laws are formulations of relations, not “things.” So all properties are in the end laws expressed in subjunctive conditionals (see e.g. 5.545). It is hardly necessary to point out that this sort of position is not without very serious difficulties especially in regard to the status of the concrete, singular individual. And while a logic of relatives may escape the charge of platonizing in the grand old style, it may not be so successful in escaping latter-day platonizing à la Hegel (despite Peirce’s many protests to the contrary).

The extreme metaphysical realism which puts universality for-

7 “Even Duns Scotus is too nominalistic when he says that universals are contracted to the mode of individuality in singulars, meaning, as he does, by singulars, ordinary existing things. The pragmaticist cannot admit that. I myself went too far in the direction of nominalism when I said that it was a mere question of convenience of speech whether we say that a diamond is hard when it is not pressed upon. I now say that experiment will prove that the diamond is hard, as a positive fact. That is, it is a real fact that it would resist pressure, which amounts to extreme scholastic realism.” (8.208, from a letter to Mario Calderoni, Italian pragmatist, ca. 1905)


mally (not just *radicaliter*) in things themselves and not in the mind of the knower, avoided by Scotus through his doctrine of formal distinction and *haecceity*, is defended by Peirce. That is why he can call his doctrine *objective idealism*. It is a form of idealism because of the close affinity he posits between knower and object known; it is objective because he recognizes that it is the object known which governs our knowledge and not vice versa, that is, the object known has such and such characteristics independent of any particular person’s knowledge, though not independent of thought in general. But objective idealism, interpreted in terms of the synechistic principle of investigation, leads to a form of *monism* or what Peirce preferred to call *neutralism* (6.24). Synechism requires that reality be looked upon as continuous, or as Leibniz says “*natura non facit saltus*.” The only differences in nature, therefore, are those of degree and not of kind. As we shall see more clearly in our discussion of law and determinism, Peirce rejects mechanistic monism as a false theory. Accordingly, “the one intelligible theory of the universe is that of objective idealism, that matter is effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws” (6.25).

It is not unusual, then, that Peirce should criticize the scholastics for their “matter-of-fact” dualism. It was because of this dualistic position that their formulation of the realist-nominalist controversy in terms of universals rather than in terms of laws is not altogether satisfactory. It was their dualistic assumption which led to a variety of answers to the problem (rather than a simple yes or no) and to its division into various parts (4.1). The belief that mind and matter are two ultimate and irreducible ingredients of reality caused the scholastics to exaggerate, in Peirce’s view, the opposition between universals and individuals and so for some of them to regard the one or the other as “more real.” Again, this belief raised the perplexing question of how matter can act on mind and of how the concrete can be transformed into the universal. To answer this sort of problem required a breaking down of the question into logical, psychological, and metaphysical questions, the first dealing with predication, the second with the origin of ideas, and the third with the ground of objectivity. The scholastic theory of abstraction as a psychological process by which the

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10 Cf. e.g. 6.25, 6.158, 6.339, 5.310, 8.151. In 5.121 Peirce identifies “reality” with regularity or active law which is Thirdness.
mind sorted out the intelligible structure of sense data through the action of the agent intellect was designed especially to bridge the gap between mind and matter. This, of course, Peirce's idealism could dispense with. Thus, when he talks of precise abstraction, he is not concerned with a psychological process but with a type of logical distinction between concepts. We have already remarked that metaphysics is for him only objectified logic. And so the problems which were distinct for the scholastics are for Peirce really only one because in virtue of his extreme realism he applied without qualification the principle: whatever is needed to explicate reality must be granted a place within reality.\textsuperscript{11} (1.351).

It is not possible here to present in any complete way the arguments which Peirce adduces for his metaphysical realism. Such a presentation would require a detailed study of his theory of inquiry, philosophy of logic, and entire metaphysics. Of course, as we proceed, certain of Peirce's reasons will be analyzed, but for the moment we would content ourselves with a brief sketch of some of the more important arguments, positive and negative. The strongest positive argument in favor of realism is that the very enterprise of science requires it (cf. e.g. 1.351, 7.186). Thus, Peirce more than once refers to the work of his friend Dr. F. E. Abbot, \textit{Scientific Theism}, as having convinced him that "science has always been at heart realistic, and always must be so" (1.20, 5.12, 5.423). Basically this is so because science necessarily makes \textit{predictions} which in the majority of cases are fulfilled in the event (cf. e.g. 1.26, 1.343, 5.96, 8.212, etc.). A prediction is essentially general and as such can never be completely fulfilled. It says what would be the case whenever certain conditions are fulfilled. No series of actual cases, however long, will exhaust the prediction. But when a prediction shows a definite tendency to be fulfilled, that decided tendency can only be due to the fact that the future events are governed by a law, not by sheer chance.

If a pair of dice turns up sixes five times running, that is a

\textsuperscript{11} Cf. W. Reese, "Philosophic Realism: A Study in the Modality of Being," \textit{Studies}, Wiener and Young, p. 225. One such qualification which scholastics would certainly make is a distinction between cause and sufficient reason.
mere uniformity. The dice might happen fortuitously to turn up sixes a thousand times running. But that would not afford the slightest security for a prediction that they would turn up sixes the next time. (1.26)

The case of the pair of dice is not at all the same as the case of a stone in my hand of which I predict that it will fall if I let it go. In that case, says Peirce, I know that it will act according to the law of gravitation (5.96). What affords us a safe basis for prediction must be the fact that the future events conform to a general rule.

“Oh,” but say the nominalists, “this general rule is nothing but a mere word or couple of words!” I reply, “Nobody ever dreamed of denying that what is general is of the nature of a general sign; but the question is whether future events will conform to it or not. If they will, your adjective ‘mere’ seems to be ill-placed.” (1.26)

A rule to which future events show a decided tendency to conform is an important element in the happening of those events.

... the fact that I know that this stone will fall to the floor when I let it go, as you all must confess, if you are not blinded by theory, that I do know ... is the proof that the formula, or uniformity, as furnishing a safe basis for prediction, is, or if you like it better, corresponds to, a reality. (5.96)

Peirce also offers a number of negative arguments in support of realism, that is, he reduces certain nominalistic positions to absurdity or exposes certain errors to which they lead. Thus, for example, he shows the absurd inconsistency of the following nominalistic positions: that qualities are not real except insofar as they are actually perceived (1.422); that percepts are not subject to certain general laws (2.149); that possibles are not real but only a function of our ignorance as to whether a given supposition can be made (6.367–368); that there are no real connections between individual things (5.48–49). Again, by way of example, Peirce argues that nominalism is responsible for that widespread misunderstanding of inductive argumentation which makes it impossible to justify, and ought to lead to an outright denial
of its validity (6.99–100). A nominalistic view gave rise to the mecha-

nomistic error (6.93, 6.274) and continues to set up roadblocks in the

path of inquiry (6.273). Peirce could hardly have been more severe

in his condemnation of what he considered to be the source of just

about every philosophical mistake ever made. There is no doubt but

that he was convinced that any sound philosophy must adopt meta-

physical realism, and indeed of an extreme type.13

If Peirce made synechism the metaphysical basis for pragmat-

icism, he also made realism the basis for synechism. Synechism as-

sured that his metaphysics must be monistic; extreme metaphysical

realism assured that it must be idealistic; epistemological realism

assured that it must be objective. There is still a fourth element to be

explored, tychism, which assures that it must be evolutionist. But now

we must consider in a more systematic way precisely what Peirce un-

derstood by “law.”

12 Peirce is criticizing John Stuart Mill’s claim (System of Logic) that

the validity of induction depends upon “uniformity.” According to Peirce,

Mill uses the word in order to avoid talking about “law” which would imply

the reality of a general. Mill could not admit this, Peirce says, because of

his strong nominalistic prejudice. The substitution of “uniformity” for “law,”

therefore, implies “that the facts are, in themselves, entirely disconnected,

and that it is the mind alone which unites them” (6.99). In Peirce’s view

this position raises insuperable obstacles to showing the validity of inductive

reasoning. Mill seems to have recognized the difficulty and so had recourse

to the notion of “uniformity of nature” which he says means that if all the

circumstances attending two phenomena are the same, they will be alike.

Peirce argues that this statement taken literally is meaningless “since no two

phenomena ever can happen in circumstances precisely alike, nor are two

phenomena precisely alike” (6.100). If the statement is modified to give it

some meaning, then (1) either it becomes grossly false, (2) or a purely

gratuitous assertion, (3) or “a quasi subjective truth, not lending any colour

of validity to induction proper.” Peirce goes on to develop each of these

alternatives. Finally, in 6.101 Peirce lists several senses in which nature may

reasonably be said to be uniform and outlines his own position.

13 See 8.145 ff., for a strong criticism of Karl Pearson’s Grammar of

Science.