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Book Review | *From Realism to 'Realicism': The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce*

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***From Realism to 'Realicism': The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce.* By Rosa Maria Perez-Teran Mayorga. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., Lexington Books, 2007. x-xii + 189 pages, \$80.00 (hbk), ISBN 0-7391-1557-X**

This book “proposes to trace the development of Peirce’s realism from its early roots in scholastic realism, to its eventual revision and consequent rift with Scotus’s position, which I call Peirce’s ‘realicism’” (1.) Thus, from this statement on the first page and from the title of the book, one becomes aware of author Maria Perez-Teran Mayorga’s intention to outline the American pragmatist C.S. Peirce’s metaphysical realism, and then distinguish that realism from the realism of medieval philosopher John Duns Scotus—the term “realicism” designating the difference between these two philosophers’ positions. A foremost task in Mayorga’s analysis is to discuss the reality status of universals, a central concern for the medieval schoolmen and for Peirce. Few have taken undertaken such a task, and Mayorga stands next to just one other scholar who has written a book like hers: John Boler and his 1963 seminal work, *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism*. Mayorga’s text extends and develops the conversation regarding Peirce and realism by discussing his metaphysics vis-à-vis the historical development of the idea of universals (in Chapter One), by explicating at length Scotus’s position about universals and how that position relates to Peirce’s brand of realism (Chapter Two), and by locating the realist elements in Peirce’s metaphysics in light of Scholastic philosophy as a whole (Chapter Three.) The conclusion draws these chapters together and recasts the major arguments of the book, as well as articulates how exactly the author brought together and clarified the relationship between Scotus’s and Peirce’s brand of realism. All in all, this book would be of interest for those who are interested in Peirce studies, medieval philosophy, and the realist anti-realist debate as it discusses Peirce’s metaphysics and medieval philosophies of realism and nominalism.

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Chapter One, “The Problem of Universals: Back to the Past,” sets out to acquaint the reader with the problems and figures associated with the realist and nominalist debate. While discussing the debate Mayorga focuses upon “the problem of universals,” which may be stated as follows, “First, what kind of thing is this concept? Is it in my mind, or is it something outside my mind that I somehow ‘tie’ into?” (7.) At issue is the ontological status of universals. Nominalists believe that only particulars are real, whereas realists affirm a mind independent status and reality for universals. The difficulty is that individual sounds and examples, that is, particulars, somehow refer to something general or universal. Mayorga, herself a realist, argues that while the reference to a general or universal might be problematic, knowledge in general must be possible, “for it seems that even though the things we encounter in the world are particular...in order to make any knowledge claims about them, we have to think in general terms, that is, in terms of universals” (8.) The ancient Greeks and medieval schoolmen, Mayorga explains, shared the view that not only particulars, but also universals, are real and they attempted to solve “the problem of universals.” Plato, Aristotle, Porphyry, Boethius, and Avicenna are all discussed in detail with respect to how each tried to solve the problem. One philosopher in this list, Avicenna, stood out to me as I read this chapter. Mayorga eloquently explains how Avicenna’s arguments lead his reader to consider how nature “in itself” is neither absolutely particular nor absolutely universal. As Mayorga puts it, “Avicenna claims that the nature-in-itself or the nature considered ‘absolutely,’ as Scotus will refer to it, or *per se*, is neither one nor many, neither particular nor universal” (34.) According to Avicenna, nature itself (not just our way of conceiving it) is “neutral” and “indifferent,” it has no “numerical unity” so it is not singular or individual nor is it a general or universal. However, nature does afford itself to the division of particularity and the abstraction of generality. Of course, the question follows, then, what is nature after all if its not itself a particular or general? The answer is that nature is not a “thing” but rather an *availability for things* to be in their respective state of being, particular or general. Again, Avicenna denies particularity and universality to nature-in-itself, but these modes do have a certain kind of being abstracted by human minds. He argued that nature’s own “essence” is prior to being in particulars and being in the mind, as Mayorga explains. This seems to be a moderate realist position.

In Chapter Two, “Duns Scotus,” Mayorga clarifies how Scotus’s position, like Avicenna’s, maintains that universals are real, yet depend on the human intellect for abstraction. Each particular or individual thing contains its respective universal (a view influenced by the metaphysics of Aristotle) but that universal does not fully exist until it is abstracted by a human mind, when the general becomes “a numerically one universal that applies to many” (49.) Thus Scotus’s realism is separated from nominalism “by a hair” (that the human mind *creates* universals, rather than picks them out in things themselves would be nominalism.) Interestingly, we also find that for Scotus, “the complete universal is singular [particular] because it exists in a single intellect” (49.) So particular things contain universals without contradiction as

universals take on their real general status once abstracted in a human mind. That generality is dependent upon the human mind and takes its shape dependent upon abstraction is remarkably close to how Peirce would come to see the status of universals in his evolutionary metaphysics. Peirce believed in the reality of generals—but generals always embodied and informed by human observers in their respective contexts. One might say that in this way these universals could be called “objectively relative.” The embodiment of generals is determined by the various modes of being (particular, general, and the availability for particularity and generality)—and Peirce outlined the features of those modes in his categories of experience. For Scotus, the “intrinsic modes” of particular things “are the way in which beings are differentiated” and hence help constitute how generality takes its shape (50.)

In Chapter Three, “Charles Peirce,” Mayorga claims that “in order to understand Peirce properly one must try to understand his scholastic realism...[and] many commentators are not truly aware of the specific claims that Scotus made and with which (for the most part) Peirce so enthusiastically agreed” (71.) After a brief review of the various realist positions ranging from Plato to Scotus, Mayorga sets out Peirce’s quotes that praise Scotus’s work, yet in the end she notes how Peirce chided Scotus for not taking realism far enough in establishing the kind of developmental reality that generals must possess. For Peirce, generality was, itself, a mode of being that he called “Thirdness,” in contradistinction to the mode of being that is possibility (called “Firstness”) and the mode of being that is actuality (called “Secondness.”) Thirdness-generality represents the tentative synthesis of the other two categories of being and is always on its way to further development. Here the reader may notice that Peirce is not only a realist when it comes to universals, he is articulating an evolutionary metaphysics as well that is similar to Hegel, Schelling, and the German idealists. Given his categorical theory, Peirce’s philosophy is also similar to the category theories of Aristotle and Kant. “Realicism,” to this reader, is a shorthand term for Peirce’s phenomenological revision of, and eventual rift with, Scotesian realism, and it is also a term indicating Peirce’s unique philosophy of categorical theory and evolutionary metaphysics.

So far as metaphysics is concerned, Mayorga elaborates how Peirce associated nominalism with materialism. Ideal essences, or a substantial reality for universals existing completely and absolutely separate from a material realm, would have no part in such a theory. On the other hand, Peirce stated that idealism’s penchant for universals which subsist in another realm of thought, and which are accessible only through intuition or special revelation (recollection, for example, in Plato’s account of knowledge) is untenable as well. While Peirce, like Scotus, in his metaphysics appears to have placed ideality—and universals or generals—within the particular objects of a physical universe, he did not exclude generality’s own nature (Thirdness) and he did not subsume that nature to Secondness. Each requires the other and is enhanced by the other, and Peirce saves himself from idealistic dogmatism and materialistic skepticism

alike. Mayorga puts it this way, “Materialism without idealism is blind, idealism without materialism is void” (78.)

Strict nominalism obviously has undesirable consequences for Peirce: it is a position that denies knowledge. However, Peirce would deny that universals and generality are *unaffected* by the categories of Secondness (actuality) and Firstness (possibility), given his evolutionary view of the universe. In short this means that universals are first, always embodied in particulars, and on this point he is in full agreement with Scotus. Second, this means that universals are abstracted by the human mind from those particular things during the process of inquiry—another point that seems to be in agreement with Scotus. And third, universals appear to change over time, and we know this due to the fact that the mind directly accesses these universals via the phenomenological method, that is, by reflecting upon the ways in which universals are abstracted from within first-person conscious experience. From this experience one can account for changes in generality. To say that universals appear to “change” during an evolutionary course might appear strange. A universal, by its very definition, requires closure in the sense that it is a definition under which all particular things of a corresponding type must apply. Peirce thought, however, to claim that the truth of a universal could only hold *indefinitely* in a state of affairs where there can possibly be no further abstraction—a state of affairs where generality has developed into a final and completed state subsuming all relevant particulars, an ultimate form of generality, as it were. He titled this final state of affairs, “the ideal state of complete information.”

Mayorga stops short of discussing what this ideal state of complete information would look like. For Peirce, the ideal state of complete information functions like an epistemological regulative ideal, in the Kantian sense. In the metaphysical sense, it functions much like Schelling’s Absolute—a modified form of Hegel’s Absolute Mind that does unfold throughout cosmic history yet does not necessarily end in any necessitated completion because real *chance* (found in Firstness-possibility, also represented by spontaneity and freedom) always survives among the various categories of being. Mayorga’s section “The Real, the True, and Reality” does clarify Peirce’s realism, idealism, and “pragmaticism” (Peirce’s term for pragmatism, changed to “keep it safe from kidnappers”) as well as those terms relationship to the ideal state of complete information and potential end of all inquiry. Possibility’s relationship to generality, as Peirce understood it, shall always figure in the universe, and his metaphysics ultimately preserves the freedom of inquiry in an unfolding cosmos. Mayorga writes, “Peirce does not assert that there will be an exact point in time when inquiry will end. We can never be completely certain that we have achieved ultimate knowledge” (99.)

The conclusion of this book does a nice job of telling the differences between the various realisms discussed throughout the three previous chapters—and Mayorga admits that Peirce’s realism is an idealistic one, an idealism that sees “the real”

ultimately as part of human cognition, but not necessarily created by that cognition, from scratch. So yes, in the end we see that Peirce is a realist of the Scholastic stripe; but he is a “realistic” to be more accurate—because for him, the world itself is real yet interlocked with the human mind. For him, reality is of a mental nature not necessarily entirely dependent upon human minds, but requiring human minds for the full abstraction of its latent universals. That is, what is “knowable” in nature necessarily has a mind “relatedness” in it, and requires a mind for the activation of its full being. This being changes over time and tends toward states that can be known in the future, but a future state where generality is concretely fulfilled remains an ideal, not a predetermined or necessitated end.