

**PAUL FORSTER, *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism*.  
Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011. 259 pp.**

Anne Dymek

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## Comptes rendus / Reviews

PAUL FORSTER, *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2011. 259pp.

Over the years of his philosophical ambitions, Peirce has expressed time and again some very emotional reactions against nominalism. This is the theme, that Paul Forster's ambitious book *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism* (2011) promises to tackle. In the context of his first chapter entitled "Nominalism as Demonic Doctrine", Forster lists some of Peirce's provocative statements on nominalism, as e.g. "Nominalism is of all the philosophies the most inadequate, and perhaps the most superficial, one is tempted to say the silliest possible" (2). The reader is by now curious to know what exactly made nominalism so dangerous and stirring for Peirce and in which ways Peirce's thought developed accordingly.

Surprisingly, perhaps, since his enterprise seems to depend so heavily upon it, Forster takes the distinction between Peirce's view and nominalism pretty much for granted. Would one not rather expect, only by the book-title, a critical description of the development of Peirce's thought with regard to the nominalistic theme? The "threat" of nominalism is not, I suggest, quite so unvaryingly present to Peirce's philosophy as Forster assumes... Forster's method in much of the book consists on the contrary in a rather ponderous sequence of chapters, some of them pervaded by the dry recurring dialectical structure of the type : "Peirce's Point of View..." – "The Nominalist's Point of View...". Other chapters, however, are almost completely lacking an explicit reference to nominalism. In any case, despite the first chapter, the before-raised theme of the "threat" of nominalism is no longer coherently pursued, and from this point of view, Peirce's provocative statements on nominalism quoted by Forster in the first chapter turn out to be nothing more than an entertaining introductory tool.

The material of the chapters is partly repetitive, which enables each chapter to be more or less free-standing. Indeed, most readers are likely to read particular chapters on themes of interest rather than to work through this book from cover to cover. Nevertheless, Forster urges an intimate link between the more technical and logical part of Peirce's theory of inquiry (that Forster treats in the first 8 chapters) and the more ethical and evolutionary peircian cosmology (illuminated in the last 3 chapters). He argues that both seek "to provide the very thing [...] nominalism threatens : an ultimate, impartial and binding basis for the organization of human life" (12).

In the beginning of the book, Forster explains how Peirce's proposal – to rest the science of inquiry on diagrammatic reasoning – is connected with a view of the science of inquiry as independent and not as part of the natural sciences (as "the nominalists" think it to be). Peirce holds that "mathematical diagrams exemplify properties of signs in a way that abstracts from any consideration of psychological mechanisms" (103) and thinks this proves that there is a fundamental difference between the truths of the science of inquiry and the truths of the natural sciences. Forster here aims to show how far Peirce conceives the science of inquiry as a "secure basis for metaphysical theorizing" (chapter 2, "Logic, Philosophy and the Special Sciences" : 176). In the following chapter ("Continuity and the Problem of Universals"), Forster explains the epistemological significance of Peirce's concept of "true continuity" with regard to the nominalist's metaphysical view that reality contains only individuals. Here, Forster shows how Peirce's mathematical analysis of the concept of continuity principally outlines the argument that no multitude of individual points can form a continuum – and how Peirce, consequently, concludes that knowledge about a continuous series cannot be reduced to a collection of truths about its individuals. For Peirce then, the formal analysis of continuity proves that generals are not a collection of individuals in disguise. Examples like the paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise are illustrative, and convey the relevant ideas of this chapter, and with it the reader becomes more and more convinced of the "peircian" objections against nominalism : since the nominalist insists on a concept of reality comprising discrete individuals, how could he not be committed to the myopic view that "what Achilles cannot accomplish in a series of discrete steps, he cannot accomplish at all?" (47) Thus, a 'true continuum' as Peirce conceives it, does not contain any actual, individual entities, but only unactualized possibilities. Moreover, an actualization of these possibilities, for Peirce, does not consist in waking sleeping entities up, but in 'bringing into existence' an individual entity where none existed before. Peirce sees this logic exemplified and proven by the mathematic experiment of the Dedekind cut, which Forster here outlines more or less pertinently.

In the fourth chapter ("Continuity and Meaning : Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim"), Forster outlines the correlations between the pragmatic maxim

and Peirce's theory of meaning, evoking the dimensions of this correlation regarding the peircian-nominalist debate on the reality of generals. Contrary to the nominalists the reality of continuity (and generals) is for Peirce a necessary condition of cognitive claims. Forster explains that, according to Peirce, 'This diamond is hard' is a proposition that affirms that an individual object has a disposition to resist marking when scratched with a knife under suitable conditions. The cognitive content of this claim does thus not only depend on how the diamond responds to an actual scratch but also on how it would respond over the totality of possible tests. Forster here refers to a few of Peirce's quotations, one of them perfectly summarizing this short chapter in just one point :

the pragmatist maxim says nothing of single experiments or of single experimental phenomena (for what is conditionally true in futuro can hardly be singular), but only speaks of general kinds of experimental phenomena (76).

This approach is then amplified in a particularly profound chapter 5 entitled "Logical Foundations of Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim", where Forster examines the cognitivist *and* epistemological dimensions of the pragmatic maxim. This is, in my view, the most interesting chapter of the book, as Forster here tries to construct an argument for the pragmatic maxim that is able to explain "why Peirce believes the maxim is a principle of inquiry that is binding on his nominalist opponents" (81). First, Forster shows why Peirce's defence of the pragmatic maxim given in 'How to Make our Ideas Clear' failed by Peirce's own principles of inquiry. He then states that his undertaking of a reconstruction of the pragmatic maxim demands first of all "a response to the objection that Peirce's original argument makes illicit appeal to psychological facts" (102) : in particular Forster tries to show that the concepts of habit, cognitive experience and volition are thought and applied by Peirce independently from a psychological framework. Therefore, Forster proposes to ground the pragmatic maxim in the theory of symbols. For Peirce, so Forster, the meaning of a symbol is given by a conditional form of the pragmatic maxim, namely : "If act A were performed under conditions C, result R would occur" (73). This consequently allows Forster to show that there is an "important distinction" between habits in the theory of inquiry and psychological habits. Basing his argument on the concept of indexicality, Forster also demonstrates that Peirce's claims about the volitional character of cognitive experience and cognitive experience itself are to be understood as completely independent from psychological-empirical dimensions of human experience : "In his theory of inquiry", Forster writes, the term 'cognitive experience' is applied to the relation that connects symbols to their objects.

As [Peirce] sees it, this denotative relation is indexical, and his claim that cognitive experience is volitional is derived from his account of how indices work [...]. His account of indices is independent of behavioural psychology (103).

Forster's logical analysis of the pragmatic maxim is, I think, intelligent and perfectly sound. Contrary to the other chapters, Forster here presents more than a picture of Peirce's non-nominalistic or anti-nominalistic thought – he attempts a more creative, autonomous reflection. This chapter seems to me to lie at the heart of Forster's project. May be, I am tempted to say, led the "threat of nominalism" Forster to this creative logical reconstruction of the pragmatic maxim?

Forster dedicates the sixth chapter to the theme of "Experience and its Role in Inquiry". Whilst I find his profound discussion of Peirce's theory of immediate perception in many ways very shrewd, the nominalist's thought is, for my favour, too little discussed here. Most striking is the passage where Forster insists – quite rightly, to my mind – that habits play a significant role within the cognitive elaboration of a percept. Forster writes : "the percept occasions predictions only in so far as it impinges on the habits" (122). But this needs to be understood better. What is it about this role of habits within our cognitive elaborations that actually creates a tension between Peirce and the nominalists? Forster is not very precise in highlighting the nominalist's position here. It is the reader's job to combine and to mentally sum up what Forster intended to show in this chapter – that Peirce has a bilateral conception of human experience, being midway between immediate perception and cognitive-pragmatic habits, always possibly influenced by both sides, whereas a nominalist rather conceives cognitive interpretations as human fabrications projected on to perception.

In the next chapter (Chapter 7, "Inquiry as Self-Corrective"), Forster goes on to show how far, for Peirce, the reality of laws is proven by the three distinct stages of rational inquiry (abduction, deduction, induction). He summarizes that, for Peirce, laws are verifiable by their testable consequences more than on the basis of (finite) evidence available to inquirers. Laws prove their reality via a continuous pattern of actual experimental trials that reach from abduction over deduction to self-corrective induction. Since inquiry is existent in the actual world and since a sufficient number of inquirers have an affinity for the truth Peirce believes that events in the world are governed by rules. However, Forster urges in his conclusion of the seventh chapter that the concept of truth still remains to be discussed since Peirce's account on the meaningfulness and verifiability of a law doesn't imply anything about (its) truth. The eighth chapter then explicitly revives the dialectical Peirce-versus-the-nominalists-structure, being occupied with the theme of "Theories of Truth". Pleasantly, Forster here exceptionally differentiates the nominalists' points of view : he lists four different nominalistic accounts of truth, of which the first is defended by "some nominalists", the next by "some other nominalists", the third by "certain other nominalists", and the fourth by "some nominalists". What for? At least, Forster makes use of one of these different nominalistic theories of truth and goes on examining the apparent similitude between

the nominalistic correspondence theory of truth and Peirce's concept of truth, urging that there is a fundamental difference between them : for Peirce, the nominalists's claim about correspondence between truth on the one hand and a world beyond experience on the other hand is "neither true nor false, but nonsensical" (163), as these nominalists conceive the relation between mind and world as being completely unintelligible. Thus, truth for Peirce is universal and intersubjective. According to Peirce's pragmatic maxim, meaningfulness is dependent on experimental content. The knowledge of an object as it is in itself can, according to Peirce's same maxim, only be attained via a symbol that is yielding reliable predictions about the object's laws over a continuum of conceivable cases. Forster clearly shows that Peirce's theory of truth is intimately linked to his theory of inquiry, which in turn is based on reliable rules of action that only true symbols can convey.

In the following chapter Forster turns to the more metaphysical part of Peirce's philosophy. Chapter 9 ("Order Out of Chaos : Peirce's Evolutionary Cosmology") focuses on the correlation between Peirce's formal theory of continuity and his metaphysical conception of it.

Just as the continuity of the line is prior to the marking of the points it comprises, Peirce thinks the continuity of the universe of being in general (*i.e.* nullity) is prior to the identification of definite qualitative possibilities within it (193).

Forster takes enough time, in this chapter, for an interesting arrangement of Peirce's quotations about his conception of evolutionary cosmology, an arrangement that outlines the complexity of the peircian attempt to show how order can emerge from a state of chaos. Indeed, this chapter provides a very lucid outline of the profound and conflictual correlations between synechism and tychism in Peirce's philosophy. The reader may understand by now in which way Peirce's metaphysical ideas are based on his theory of inquiry (and that of continuity and symbols). Against the nominalist and remaining true to his proper method, Peirce states that continuity must be governing the order of events since nothing else could explain the fact that events unfold in accordance to the predictions of symbols. Thus, the nominalist's denial of continuity as the "sole form under which events can be rendered intelligible" is, for Peirce, tantamount to the denial of an objective basis for knowledge, of the evolution of lawfulness and of the emergence of reasonableness.

The penultimate chapter "A Universe of Chance : Foundations of Peirce's Undeterminism" outlines the significant role of tychism in Peirce's theory. Forster gives a detailed account of Peirce's claim that tychism is a more promising hypothesis than its alternative – necessitarianism – "since it better squares with such prevalent phenomena as growth, variety, lawfulness and consciousness" (230). Tychism acknowledges possibilities as objectively indeterminate features of the universe and therefore conceives the possible as a matter of fact rather

than as being dependent on the state of knowledge. As Forster now implicitly outlines the hermeneutic connectedness between Nullity, Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness on the one hand and synechism and tychism on the other, the reader here gets even an insight into Peirce's phaneroscopy.

Last but not least, Forster reveals the relevance of synechism for Peirce's ethics. The final chapter entitled "From Inquiry to Ethics : the Pursuit of Truth as Moral Ideal" explains the ethical dimensions of Peirce's conception of inquiry; dimensions that clearly contradict the nominalist's view on morality and community. In order to show that Peirce's ethics are clearly at odds with the nominalist's "subjectivity of ends", Forster gives a very illuminating insight in Peirce's conception of the "Ego" as : being constituted by an immanent dyadic and naturally continuous relation with a contrasting "Non-Ego". In other words, cognitive content is for Peirce wholly anchored in the development of an interactive and experimental society, or, as Forster expresses it, "drawn within the world of experience, not between experience and world that lies beyond" (241). Forster here almost succeeds in giving a sort of 'ontological portrait' of Peirce's realistic synechism.

However, in the conclusion of his last chapter, Forster's answers to the threat-of-nominalism-debate seem to me to fall some way short of the heart of the matter; in part, I think, because Forster finally pays insufficient attention to the distinction between metaphysical and epistemological questions of nominalism. In any case, Forster lastly defines Peirce's non-nominalistic stance as the view that

human beings are not cogs in a vast cosmic mechanism, but rather are free, creative agents capable of transforming the world through the active realization of intelligent ideals (245).

To the disappointment of the reader, this simplifying account incites a far more dense discussion of the "nominalistic threat" than Forster provided in this book. The relations between the nominalists' and Peirce's positions on these issues are, I think, a good deal more complex than Forster's discussion indicates. Whereas a generalizing outline of the essence of nominalism might indeed have been adequate in the context of Forster's homonymous article published in 1992 in the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, the reader of the present book might in places miss a more discerning definition of nominalistic positions, but Forster's definition of "the nominalist(s)" unfortunately does not much exceed the generalized "label attached to anyone at odds with what [Peirce] deems to be the correct form of realism" (4). It may be that Forster shifted the emphasis to Peirce's philosophy and left aside a differentiated picture not only of what he vaguely calls "the nominalist", but also of what he names "Peirce's shifting view on nominalism", in order to avoid the worst difficulties that his complex endeavour entails. However, the absolutely missing metalogical discussion of the realism-

nominalism debate as it developed throughout Peirce's work causes discomfort. Nonetheless, this has been a conscious choice by Forster who states in the preface :

My discussion of Peirce's philosophy aspires 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 (x).

To me it seems as if Forster, in his eagerness to give at the same time a profound insight into a broad span of Peirce's work *and* a more specialized account of the "nominalistic threat" to Peirce's thought, was not always sure for whom he was writing. First, Forster was motivated, he says, by "presenting something of the richness of Peirce's thought in a way that is accessible to *the general philosophical reader*" (xi, my emphasis) and therefore, he refrains explicitly from references to the "labyrinthine" debate among other Peirce scholars, aspiring to give an account of Peirce's thought "as he saw it". Despite this, Forster underlines a second target, somewhat setting himself up for a fall : "Throughout, *my concern is with getting Peirce right*" (xi, my emphasis). And at last but not least, Forster chose a title that attracts mainly readers who are already acquainted with Peirce's work, expecting a critique and detailed insight into a special meta-philosophical theme. To me, this book does not keep the promise it suggests. But it gives an interesting and partially very detailed insight into Peirce's thought.

Anne Dymek

Université Paris I - Sorbonne-Panthéon

HENRY JENKINS, SAM FORD, JOSHUA GREEN. ***Spreadable Media. Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture.*** New York : New York University Press (Postmillennial Pop Series), 2013. 352 pp.

Une multiplicité de textes circulant en réseau fait désormais partie de notre quotidien : fragments et conglomérats, *memes*, *retrogames*, artefacts de nature variée. De quelle manière ces textes rejoignent-ils