Mateusz W. Oleksy: *Realism and Individualism: Charles S. Peirce and the Threat of Modern Nominalism*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (Bochumer Studien zur Philosophie 55), 2015, pp. 350. $165.00 (hb). ISBN 978-90-272-1465-2.

In 1885 C.S. Peirce’s former classmate Francis Ellingwood Abbott wrote: ‘[S]o far was the old battle of Nominalism and Realism from being fought out by the end of the fifteenth century that it is to-day the deep, underlying problem of problems, on the right solution of which depends the life of philosophy itself in the ages to come’. A dominant feature of Peirce’s philosophical thinking was the attempt to negotiate this ‘old battle’. The problem, for Peirce, went significantly beyond the question of the reality of universals and encompassed the tenability of an entire *Weltanschauung* that Peirce labeled ‘modern nominalism’. Peirce saw this worldview as comprised of a constellation of interrelated philosophical movements and commitments dating back to Ockham and undergoing substantial but not complete transformation from the time of Descartes through to the end of the nineteenth century. At the root of these views was a general belief in the primacy of the individual: individuals are fundamentally what exists; truth is the correspondence between the mental acts of an individual mind and actual states of affairs in the world; the individual finite mind is the seat of mental reality; the isolated individual is the autonomous source, vehicle and legislator of empirical knowledge. Although these are not strictly nominalist positions, they all fit neatly within a picture according to which universals—and relations more generally—neither subsist independently of concrete particulars on the side of the world, nor amount to anything more than the product of a certain manner of cognizing the world from a fundamentally private point of view.

Against such dogmas, Peirce took a resolutely realist stance, maintaining—very broadly speaking—that generalities are real and that they are as much a part of the fabric of reality as individual existents. Oleksy’s fine book is an account of Peirce’s resistance to modern nominalism—or ‘individualism’, as Oleksy calls it—and how it informed many of the most important aspects of Peirce’s theorizing. Contrary to what most scholars have so far claimed, Oleksy argues that Peirce’s realism was not uniform throughout his career, but evolved significantly, coming to incorporate many features of his later pragmatism. Oleksy claims, moreover, that the realism/individualism opposition that pervades Peirce’s philosophy may be profitably understood vis-à-vis the social-anthropological background of the purportedly individualist mindset of modern thought. The book thus provides not only a detailed reconstruction of Peirce’s dialogue with nominalist tendencies in the history of philosophy prior to his time, but a diagnosis of the social and political factors that might have led Peirce to such an acute and unique conception of nominalism as a systematic worldview.

Chapter 1 studies the development of Peirce’s ‘scholastic realism’, the view he began to articulate as early as 1868 and which he propounded most explicitly in his well-known 1871 review of Fraser’s *The Works of George Berkeley*. Oleksy analyzes Peirce’s early realist stance from the perspective of the scholastic debate over universals, a topic in which Peirce had thoroughly immersed himself during this time. Chapter 2 scrutinizes nominalism’s ‘modern’ turn, as Peirce conceived it. It weaves together Peirce’s criticisms of various individualist themes in the Cartesian, empiricist, Kantian and instrumentalist traditions in the context of providing a layered exposition of diverse but substantively interrelated aspects of Peirce’s philosophy, including his theory of categories, his views on the logic of relations and his account of the fixation of belief. Chapter 3 argues that Peirce eventually adopted a new strand of realism influenced by the development of his pragmatism. Pragmatism, according to Oleksy, introduced into Peirce’s scholastic realism novel theories of truth, perception, modality, and inquiry, features that were not present in the realism of the ‘Berekely review’ and which lent it unique flavor and new sources of justification. Chapter 4 seeks to unearth the social and anthropological underpinnings of this later ‘pragmatic realism’ with the help of more recent theories of the relations between individual and society promulgated by Hans Blumenberg and Ernest Gellner. This last chapter is intended less as a direct explication of Peirce’s anti-individualism than as a proposal for how to trace out the social-anthropological dimensions of Peirce’s thought.

Oleksy’s work is full of interesting discussions of Peirce’s philosophy and the nominalism/realism debate. I would like to highlight two of his most compelling points, the first concerning how Peirce saw his work on the logic of relations as informing his realism, and the second regarding how Peirce viewed realism paradigmatically as a consequence of the logic of scientific inquiry.

For Peirce, it is fair to say, the nominalism/realism controversy boiled down to a contest concerning the metaphysical status of relations. Peirce held that while all relations are essentially of monadic, dyadic, or triadic structure, certain relations are irreducibly triadic, and the reasons behind this claim shed light on why Peirce felt compelled by the realist side of the debate. On Peirce’s view, a (genuine) triadic relation is comprised of any number of relata and a mediating factor that necessarily implicates the former in relation to a certain concept. Thus, to use one of Oleksy’s examples, the statement ‘A, B, C and D play poker together’ picks out a triadic relation (despite there being four relata), in which each relatum is related to the activity of playing a game through the mediation of their common intention in doing so and by their collectively abiding by a certain set of rules (120). The statement, in other words, picks out (i) a collection of relata, (ii) a relation and (iii) a mediating factor (in this example, a purpose, intention or governing set of rules) that binds the relata *necessarily* to the relation of *playing a game* (and thereby to one another). Thus what indicates that a mediating factor is present in the case of a triadic relation is the impossibility of ‘prescinding’ the connection holding among the relata from the mediating factor that binds them to each other and to the relational concept under which they are subsumed. In the example at hand, we cannot give an account of what is occurring among A, B, C and D that abstracts from their collective intention or their abiding by certain rules and at the same give an account of their playing a game of poker. And the uniquely mediated nature of triadic relations such as this may help us understand why, for Peirce, relations must be real. For if generalities like purposes, intentions, rules, laws, functions, and anything else that necessarily mediates the connection that relata bear to the relation that ties them to each other cannot be prescinded (i.e. logically separated) from the latter connection, then they—the generalities—must in some sense be really constitutive of that connection, and so must in a clear sense be real.

As Oleksy shows, Peirce’s realism not only comes out of his view of the logic of relations, but also—and even more visibly—out of his keen understanding of the logic of scientific inquiry (though of course the two topics are intimately connected). For Peirce, the irreducibility of generality resides in the counterfactual nature of scientific hypotheses, which would be unintelligible and unverifiable were not the possibilities they invoke themselves real. It is also evinced by what Peirce calls the ‘virtual’ character of the content of empirical concepts such as ‘soluble’ and ‘heavy’, concepts which experience shows have an indefinitely determinable range, implying the operation of real generalities which we track and chart in our ongoing experiments. What Peirce called the ‘continuity’ or ‘indefinite determinability’ of meaning therefore testifies to, and goes hand in hand with, what he regarded as the true system of generalities that governs the regularities perceived in experience, and which underwrites their very intelligibility.

These are but two brief indications of the wealth of philosophical issues taken up in Oleksy’s fascinating treatment. The book’s interpretive thesis concerning the development of Peirce’s realism strikes me as well-motivated—and, though novel, not altogether controversial—but its real contribution is as a repository of cogent and well-articulated observations on a host of topics in Peirce’s philosophy. My main qualm with the book is more presentational than substantive. In undertaking his expansive task of reconstructing the content and trajectory of Peirce’s realism from the various strands of his philosophy, both early and late, as well as exposing the theoretical contours of what Peirce perceived—though many of us would not—as a historically pervasive and unified nominalist worldview, Oleksy sometimes gets ensconced in a detailed exposition of Peirce’s philosophy or that of his predecessors that has no obvious bearing on the main thread of the book’s argument. In this sense, the book’s attempt to achieve breadth detracts at times from its ability to retain focus. On the whole, however, Oleksy’s work remains lucid and full of valuable insights. It represents one of the most impressive and ambitious syntheses of Peirce’s thought in recent years.

Zachary Micah Gartenberg

Johns Hopkins University