

Abduction and Metaphysical Realism in Peirce

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Abstract:

Peirce changed his description of abduction – the reasoning from consequent to antecedent that presides over the formulation of hypotheses – many times. The reason for these changes is to guarantee to abduction independence from deductive and inductive patterns of reasoning. In 1908 he inserted in his account of abduction a first step which was led by ‘rational instinct’. It is a step in which interpretation of signs and belief are strongly intertwined. Usually this level of our inquiry is not included among the reasoning of logic, but ascribed to ‘pre-theoretical intuitions’. But could Peirce, who had always argued in his anti-cartesian essays against the existence of intuition, now argue in its favour?

Peirce’s late writings show that he regarded ‘rational instinct’ as the richest part of our interpreting reason, and thought that its task was not to intuit but to judge whether our hypothetical solution is admirable (esthetics) and plausible (ethics). What is the guarantee for ‘rational instinct’ and then for abduction?

Peirce’s view is that it relies on a metaphysical scholastic realism à la Duns Scotus. But the acknowledgment of certain epistemological aporias and late mathematical observations on the nature of continuity can also lead to a different kind of metaphysical realism. This latter would suggest that this metaphysical order is composed by singular essences the necessity of which is reckoned a posteriori and per absurdum.