C. S. Peirce and the Nested Continua Model of Religious Interpretation. Gary Slater. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 242 pp. $110.00

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This book, the first by Gary Slater, is a much more ambitious ambitious project than the title would suggest. Slater aims not only to devise a new model for graphing problematic situations with the aid of C. S. Peirce's logic of continuity—and thereby to provide religious communities with a powerful visual tool for overcoming dialogical frustrations—but he also simultaneously constructs the nested continua model (NCM) as a metaphysical hypothesis. Put simply, Slater's innovative work reflects the history of pragmatism, a history in which the question has been asked more than once whether pragmatism is a relatively straightforward tool for simplifying complex questions, eliminating linguistic baggage, and cutting to the heart of a question, or whether it is a new way of doing philosophy in which fallibilism and radical empiricism can facilitate more traditional philosophical tasks. Slater's NCM, like the complex history of American pragmatism, affirms both tasks as legitimate aims. The book accomplishes this most evidently by developing over its entirety a central fallible icon (a simple sparse sequence) that deftly employs logics of generality, of continuity, and of vagueness to graph the relations between particular problems that concrete individuals and religious communities face, as well as the relationships religious communities and the more general metaphysical categories to which all such smaller communities belong. Simultaneously, however, the central argument of the book looks toward graphing, this time with multiple fallible icons and the relations between the work of two well-known theologians, Peter Ochs and Robert Cummings Neville. Ochs's and Neville's projects, though both heavily influenced by Peirce, have seldom been brought into constructive conversation. One of the genuine strengths of both the NCM and Slater's presentation of his subjects is that neither the Nevillian nor Ochsian project is allowed to overshadow and subsume the other. Rather, the NCM encourages readers to imagine each distinctive project as a determination of the other's more general aims.

Given that so much recent philosophy and theology has inveighed against the dangers of colonialism in systematic reflection, the book offers a kind of subtle critique of small-bore, metaphysically adverse theology—not so much by arguing for the legitimacy of metaphysical reflection, but by responsibly erecting a logical scaffolding upon which to construct robust systematic comparisons. In overt defense of his project, Slater cites Neville's own justification of systematic thinking, arguing that "system is the best defense against dogmatism" insofar as systematic thinking aims to examine a problem from as many perspectives as possible so as to ferret out biases and blind spots (14). Thus, the entire book develops Peirce's logic of interpretation, contrasting vague categories with general ones and noting the frequent appropriateness of the former when one aims to compare without vicious reduction. This is the central aim of the NCM: to use visual icons to locate non-reductive interpretive frameworks that might serve as a common language of repair and understanding when religious agents run up against seemingly irreconcilable differences. For this reason, the book will likely be approached by many readers as a contribution to the tradition of postliberalism initiated by George Lindbeck

and Has Frei and later taken up by Peter Ochs in his work on Scriptural Reasoning. However, as a brief overview of the NCM's graphing rules will show, Slater's work has implications far beyond the borders of postliberalism.

The introductory chapter and the bulk of chapter 2 provide the reader, unfamiliar with the world of Peircean theology and philosophy of religion, with helpful context, but the creative core of the text begins in the final section of chapter 2 where the rules are given for drawing graphs and using them to generate reparative abductions. In the context of Peirce's larger corpus (as discussed in chapter 3) the NCM "is a kind of abductive Petri dish" (75) that facilitates the discovery of relevant contexts for comparison and dialogue. The model's rules are straightforward and primarily involve drawing and erasing circles and points upon a continuous plane. But like the rules of any complex game (take chess or baseball as examples), the rules themselves are not the point, but rather the surprisingly complex products that issue from following such relatively economical rules. The actual execution of a particular diagram works to discover the least general norms that two divergent positions or disputants share and to draw these as relevant interpretive frameworks. This straightforward procedure for visually rendering disagreements and shared assumptions has an intuitive appeal that teachers, adept at diagraming historical disputes on a classroom board, are likely to appreciate, but the NCM provides further rules for when to erase irrelevant contexts of interpretation (rendered as circles) and render them as points that await further interpretive frameworks. The NCM has its limits, and Slater is keen to point these out. It is, for instance, ill-equipped to render dynamic processes and change (55). The model is perhaps most useful, however, as a tool that uses visual metaphors for diagnosing problems of colonializing thought, vicious reductionism, and occasions where disputants "talk past" one another. Slater writes:

> A better interpretive framework reflects interpretation back onto whatever collections it contains, making them intelligible, and continues to allow for abductive inquiry to determine its place in relation to other frameworks, other norms. It serves as a basis for further questions/hypotheses, and may be understood as translucent. A worse framework reflects back upon the collection of objects and renders them intelligible, but does not allow for further inquiry—it may be understood as opaque…and as such it often leads to the assumption that all other frameworks, *must be within it*. (55-56)

So, to use the example of Christian supercessionism that Ochs pursues in his work, "Christian salvation history" drawn as a circle around the points of "Christianity" and "Judaism" is an opaque framework of interpretation insofar as it provides interpretive norms that render Judaism intelligible *only* in Christian terms. Following the rules of the NCM, the circle "Christian salvation history" should be erased and redrawn as a point alongside a separate point, "Jewish history," and a more general non-reductive translucent framework of interpretation should be sought and drawn.

Having laid out the rules of the NCM, instructed readers in its application, and situated the NCM amidst Peirce's larger corpus, the book takes a somewhat surprising turn. Instead of using the remaining chapters to offer illustrations of how the NCM might be used—further diagrams are absent—Slater takes up the model as a kind of architecture for rendering the

conscious individual intelligible vis-à-vis much more general metaphysical categories, even as these most general interpretive frameworks are themselves interpreted in terms of conscious individual experience. By rendering the the simple sparse sequence, individual—community—history—time—eternity, as a diagram of concentric circles, Slater offers two complimentary interpretive hypotheses. On the one hand, reading from the inside out, the larger circles render the interior circles intelligible (51), while at the same time, reading from the outside in, they are always interpreted through the smaller circles. Thus, for instance, a community is rendered intelligible through a consideration of its history, even as its history is always interpreted through the particular signs of the community. Not only does this graph of nested continua act as the armature upon which to build a Peircean philosophy of history (chapter 3), but it provides a comparative model for rendering the work of Ochs (chapter 4), Neville (chapter 5), and Peirce (chapters 6 and 7) mutually intelligible. This is not a modest task, and one of the considerable challenges the reader faces is knowing how best to reconcile Slater's grand speculative vision as he weaves together the best of Neville's process-inspired metaphysics and Peirce's categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness with his very precise reading of Ochs' work on Scriptural Reasoning and religious dialogue. The temptation is to read the book primarily as a contribution to Ochsian Scriptural Reasoning and to extract the NCM's diagrammatic rules from the rest of the text. Doing so, however, neglects one of the book's most powerful critiques of Ochs and the historicism of much posliberalism. "Ironically," Slater argues, "to the extent that historicism implies that history is the horizon beyond which nothing more can be said, the practical effect is to *disconnect* historically situated traditions from one another." Ochs, thereby, "implicitly severs an analytical link between a given faith tradition within history and history itself, thus removing from distinct traditions…the vague, yet realcontinuum [sic.] of 'history; from which each has emerged, and with respect to which each is continuous" (130-1). In brief, Slater argues that while the work of Scriptural Reasoning is important and can lead to genuine repair within and reconciliation between communities, such reparative work is too costly if it in turn fractures the larger continua to which all determinate communal histories belong. History must itself be understood as a translucent framework that is rendered intelligible by still vaguer frameworks.

     Chapters 5 through 7 are apt to put off any audience adverse to hypothetical metaphysics, but they are compelling reading to anyone who appreciates bold metaphysical ventures, especially readers accustomed to process thought and other varieties of religious naturalism. At the heart of these chapters lies a bold synthesis of Peirce's categories and Neville's work on *creatio ex nihilo* and *eternity,* wherein Slater suggests that *creatio ex nihilo* and absolute Firstness should be understood as the ungraphable font of qualitative uniqueness and creative emergence that lies at the absolute center of the NCM. At the other extreme, beyond the perimeter of any possible graph, lies the regulative norm that Peirce called "concrete reasonableness." Here Slater suggests that we equate concrete reasonableness with absolute Thirdness, even as he registers Peirce's warning (*A Guess at the Riddle*) that there is no absolute Third by arguing that no ultimate circle may be drawn. This supremely vague context of interpretation resonates with Neville's conception of eternity as the togetherness of the modes of time and the deep continuum of real possibility. Here again Slater offers two defenses of his creative foray into speculative metaphysics. First, he correctly notes that Peirce's *Monist* metaphysical series of essays (1891-1893) was itself an example of fallible, hypothetical

speculative metaphysics, an example that bore considerable fruit throughout the rest of Peirce's career. Slater's second defense, however, requires closer attention as it is related to a particular vision of theology.

Slater's final chapter, "The Theological Implications of Nested Continua," is so profoundly indebted to the specialized vocabulary of both Peirce and Neville that readers unfamiliar with the work of either philosopher are well advised to pay careful attention to Slater's extensive footnotes. Two definitions are key. First, he defines theology as "the discipline that draws from that which is determinate to orient attention to that which is ultimate" (177). Second, he offers the following description of willful awareness:

> In the metaphoric imagination of the nested continua graph, one's willful awareness is positioned immediately adjacent to absolute Firstness, as one's most intimate objects of imagination and perception are those most susceptible to ceaseless change, chance disruptions, and convulsions of feeling. At the same time, one's willful awareness necessarily faces away from the center of the graph, something akin to looking away from the fire in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and seeing shadows reflected on the wall. What one perceives is ceaselessly shifting qualities reflected off innumerable existent continua, each with its own irreducible qualitative uniqueness. (188)

It is the combination of this description of willful awareness with the former definition of theology that acts as a second implicit defense of speculative metaphysics. Here Slater asks his readers to draw themselves into the NCM at almost the exact center, directly adjacent to the undrawn point of creative emergence and to consider what the universe of determinate entities might look like from this perspective. Gazing outward, one sees a confusing flux of reflections and qualities, but as one works to make sense of this confusion, one can proceed haphazardly or systematically. Further, as one hypothesizes and draws on more general frameworks to makes sense of local entities, one may do so in a way that renders these frameworks opaque to further interpretation or in a manner that insists that all frameworks are fallible hypotheses that must remain translucent to further frameworks and susceptible to correction from within. Slater's entire project is dedicated to the notion that translucent frameworks are always preferable, as they remain modest and fallible while resisting both misplaced concreteness and reductionism. What Slater is offering is a defense of fallible systematic metaphysics as a supremely responsible activity, so long as it is undertaken with sufficient respect for fallibilism and a commitment to translucency. Further, he is harnessing the power of the NCM as a visual metaphor to defend not only the possibility, but also the necessity of theology as the attempt to render determinate things intelligible. In theological terms, concrete reasonableness and eternity are perhaps best understood as irremediably vague frameworks of intelligibility, though he is careful never to suggest that ultimacy may itself be drawn.

Any reviewer, no matter how fascinated by the text at hand, owes the potential reader of the text in question a few cogent criticisms. The most relevant criticisms of Slater's project, however, all pertain equally to the kind of speculative metaphysics that his text engages and could be applied with equal vigor to the work of both Peirce and Neville, though perhaps not to Ochs. In lieu of a review of such critiques, I offer only two minor criticisms of the text and point

toward a few lines of potential further engagement. The first critique pertains only to an absence. Having presented in detail the rules of the NCM in chapter two, the text never takes up the task of explicitly graphing any of the problems it is designed to clarify. Slater is adept at translating his visual metaphor into words, but some of the text's potential rhetorical power is forfeited by the absence of diagrams after the initial chapters. The second critique points to a particular claim that Slater makes early in the text, writing that "[i]n terms of the markings/circles to be made upon the nested continua model, the reality of all three categories entails that the relative placement of anything to be rendered on the graph reflects an epistemological rather than ontological priority" (64). Slater is scrupulous and never contradicts this claim in any of his graphs or descriptions. However, he assigns determinate though un-drawable loci on the graphable simple sparse sequence both to Firstness and *creatio ex nihilo,* as well as to absolute Thirdness, concrete reasonableness, and eternity. Both of these positions carry more than mere epistemological priority. This is not, I think, a mistake, but rather an unavoidable consequence of thinking iconically about concepts that resist visual modeling.

The simplicity of the NCM will tempt a wide variety of readers who may find themselves making graphs in the margins and erasing circles as they read. However, readers already familiar with postliberalism and naturalist philosophy of religion are likely to see even more possibilities for fruitful engagement. Two such avenues are worth considering in closing. First, Slater's nuanced treatment of Ochs points toward the possibility of reaching back into the roots of postliberalism and its treatment of the later Wittgenstein. There is room here for a potentially fascinating comparison between the NCM and Wittgenstein's notion of "language games." The NCM goes a long way toward offering a different, potentially more fruitful metaphor. Second, while Slater deals admirably with Neville, he only mentions in passing the work of Robert Corrington and his development of "Ecstatic Naturalism." This is not a criticism of the text, but rather an appreciative note written in the hope that Slater might take up Corrington's challenging corpus as an additional working partner. Insofar as Slater's entire text presents the NCM as a fallible hypothesis as well as a strategy for diagraming and working through difficulties, these two additional thinkers might offer valuable opportunities for both corrective feedback and creative expansion of the NCM.