Peirce’s Early Anti-Realism about the External World
(2997 words, excluding abstract, footnotes, and bibliography.)

ABSTRACT (148 words): I claim that in key early (pre-1880) writings, Peirce rejected realism about the external world. This is a natural interpretation of the pragmatic clarification of reality he endorsed in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” As commentators have noted, however, this interpretation struggles to explain Peirce’s commitment to the realism-friendly “fundamental hypothesis” of the scientific method in “The Fixation of Belief,” which informs his subsequent pragmatic clarification of reality. But I show that in earlier 1870s writings, Peirce endorses a conception of reality that, as he notes, clearly carries the anti-realist consequence that there can be no meaningful explanation of our observations and thoughts in terms of the causal action of external realities upon us. Since Peirce explicitly deploys this conception of reality to obtain a “translation” of the fundamental hypothesis of science consistent with anti-realism, his commitment to the fundamental hypothesis cannot adequately warrant the realist interpretation.

In this paper I examine Charles Sanders Peirce’s attitude in some key early (pre-1880) writings toward this thesis:

Realism about the External World (Realism, for short): There exists a world of material objects that have many of their properties independently of any beliefs or sensory experiences any finite subject or subjects have, or would have.

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1 The restriction to these early writings is motivated, not merely by the difficulty of surveying Peirce’s whole corpus in a paper of this length, but by developments in Peirce’s philosophy in the 1880s, especially his emphasis on the category of Secondness in our perceptual experience and, in turn, in enabling us to think about a real world (see EP I.233 [1885]). This development has sometimes been taken to constitute an endorsement of a direct realism about perception, on which it immediately presents us with mind-independently real external objects (see, e.g., Hookway 2012: §3.5); whether or not this is so, that it is plausible suffices to justify considering only Peirce’s writings that antedate this development here.

2 Late in his career, Peirce begins to use the term “exist” as a technical term: something exists if it not only is real, but further acts on other entities. (So, while universals are real entities, for Peirce, they do not exist in this sense: anything that exists is individual.) In earlier works, however, he uses the word “exist” in its ordinary sense, as I also will in my exposition of him; if I use the word in its technical sense or am drawing on such a use of it by Peirce, I will make this explicit.

3 I use this label broadly to cover any sort of sensory or perceptual experience at all, and so to cover at least three phenomena that would later be distinguished by Peirce: our bare sense impressions; the percepts into which these are synthesized, and the percipuum in which our perceptual judgments flow back into, and so alter the character of, our percepts.

4 I include the restriction to finite subjects to render this thesis independent of the thesis, endorsed by some theists such as Thomas Aquinas, that the world is a creation of God’s, and more specifically that God
Most people prereflectively endorse Realism. They think the material world is, and is as it is, (largely) independently of our experiencing and believing it to be that way. Even if they think that, under ideal conditions, our experiences would veridically represent the external world and produce true beliefs about it, they do not think this fact constitutes the reality of the external world. On the contrary, they think that it is because the external world is real that it can cause veridical experiences and true beliefs concerning it.

It’s natural to interpret Peirce’s famous 1878 paper “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (HMIC) as rejecting Realism, pragmatically explaining things’ reality in terms of our believing in them following sufficient inquiry. But (as I explain in §I) this straightforward reading is complicated by HMIC’s predecessor in the series Illustrations of the Logic of Science, “The Fixation of Belief” (1877), which seems to commit Peirce to Realism. Yet the early Peirce really did reject Realism: I show (in §II) that in an 1871 review, he endorsed an account of reality that explicitly precludes a conception of external objects as prior causes of sensation, and (§III) in drafts of the following year, he used that account of reality to deflate the Realism-friendly claims later presented in “Fixation.” Accordingly (§IV), these early-1870s texts indicate that Peirce opposed Realism in the Illustrations, too.

§I. Difficulties about Realism in the Illustrations (1877–78)

In HMIC, Peirce posits a third grade of clarity required to fully grasp our concepts’ meanings: we must be able not only to properly apply the concept in ordinary contexts but also to create the world as being a particular way by knowing it to be that way. This thesis of God’s causal knowledge is difficult to interpret, but I take it that it should not conflict with the thesis of realism about the external world, carefully construed.
and to define it abstractly, but also to specify the practical or sensible effects implicitly predicted in predicking it of objects. Indeed, “our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (EP I.132 [1878]). Having explained this pragmatic test of clarity, Peirce applies it to the concept of \textit{reality}. This concept is easy to apply in ordinary contexts. And Peirce offers abstract definitions both of it and of the related concept of truth: “we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be” (EP I.137).\(^5\) And we can define truth as “belief in the real”: a belief is true when it represents a real object as it really is.\(^6\)

These abstract definitions, however, don’t enable us fully to grasp these concepts; we require pragmatic clarifications of them.\(^7\) Peirce notes: “The only effect which real things have is to cause belief, for all the sensations which they excite emerge into consciousness in the form of beliefs” (EP I.137). The deeper question, then, is “how is

\(^5\) The real is distinguished from figments of the imagination, which depend for their characters on what the imaginer thinks them to be.

\(^6\) As he would say decades later, following Kant: “That truth is the correspondence of a representation with its object is … the nominal definition of it” (EP II.379 [1906]), if \textit{merely} the nominal definition. (The notion of correspondence here justifies my interpreting “belief in the real” to mean not only any belief about a real object, but one that corresponds to it or represents it as it really is.)

\(^7\) Here I disagree with Lane (2017: §2.1), who holds that Peirce offers a pragmatic clarification of reality only, not of truth. But the fact that Peirce glosses true belief as belief in the real shows that he already takes himself to have a satisfactory abstract definition of it, and so in going on to ask what distinguishes true belief he can only be searching for the remaining final grade of clarity concerning it. It is true that Peirce had already suggested in “Fixation” that the scientific method must, given sufficient experience and reasoning, ultimately lead all investigators to “the one true conclusion” (EP I.120 [1877]). But he had not yet suggested that this thesis provides a clarification of the concept of truth itself; as deployed in “Fixation,” it seems to be just a synthetic fact about truth, which concept can be fully explained as correspondence to external reality. The novel aspect of HMIC regarding truth, I claim, is that this convergence of opinion is presented as “what we mean by the truth” (EP I.139 [1878]), according to (an admittedly rather tacit deployment of) the maxim.

Incidentally, further evidence that Peirce thought, at a minimum later in his career, that a pragmatic elucidation of the concept of truth was required is provided, not only by the 1906 passage discussed in the preceding footnote (according to which the idea of correspondence to an object gives us \textit{merely} the nominal definition of truth, seemingly as against some further grade of clarity concerning its meaning), but also by his 1903 Lowell lectures, in which he argues that the correspondence theory is circular. He concludes: “how futile it was to imagine that we were to clear up the idea of \textit{truth} by the more occult idea of \textit{reality}!” (CP 1.578 [1903]; cf. Hookway 1985: 45).
true belief … distinguished from false belief” (ibid.). For Peirce, the practical effect of a belief’s truth is to produce convergence of belief: we would predict that, whatever different opinions inquirers began with, still, following sufficient investigation, they would all finally affirm it. And since the practical effect of something’s being real is to cause belief in itself, we can equally say that the effect of something’s being real is that, following sufficient investigation, inquirers would all come to represent it (as having various properties). Thus this “great law” of convergence of belief, Peirce holds, “is embodied in the conception of truth and reality. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real” (EP I.139). By the pragmatic maxim, our conception of these practical effects of truth and reality is what we mean—all we mean—by these concepts. But this view seems to preclude Realism: in holding that “the reality of that which is real does depend on the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in it” (ibid.), Peirce apparently claims

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8 A number of commentators have recently suggested that Peirce’s pragmatic clarification of truth is not intended as a definition, but rather as a mere clarification of the links between truth and inquiry (Misak 2004 [1991]: vii–ix; Wiggins 2004: §1; Hookway 2000: §2.6)—and perhaps a defeasible one, at that. Now, if the denial that Peirce is offering a definition of truth is intended merely to point out that Peirce thinks the definition of truth as a correct description of reality satisfies the second grade of his grades of clarity, and so that his pragmatic clarification is not intended as a competitor to that abstract definition but only as an explanation that provides the concept of truth with the third grade of clarity, I agree. But if it is intended to imply that, for all Peirce had to say on the subject, a statement could be such that, no matter how long they inquired concerning it, finite interpreters would never reach a settled consensus in affirming or else denying it, and yet could nevertheless be true, then I disagree. In my view, Peirce holds throughout his career that there cannot be any truth more independent of finite human opinion than the ideal final opinion: see not only his answer to the problem of buried secrets in HMIC (EP I.139–40 [1878]), but also his later insistence in “What Pragmatism Is” that any notion of truth “not definable in terms of doubt and belief in any way” is an entity “of whose existence you can know nothing” (EP II.336 [1905]), as well as his affirmation of “conditional idealism,” on which “truth’s independence of individual opinions is due (so far as there is any ‘truth’) to its being the predestined result to which sufficient inquiry would ultimately lead” (EP II.419 [1907]).
that external objects’ existence and properties depend on the beliefs that we would finally have concerning them.\(^9\)

But matters are more complicated. Peirce’s account of truth and reality in HMIC draws its predecessor “Fixation,” which appears significantly friendlier toward Realism. In “Fixation,” Peirce identifies the proper method of belief-formation as the method of science.\(^10\) Here is its fundamental hypothesis:

There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of reality. (EP I.120).

Here, as in HMIC, Peirce links truth and reality with the final opinion. But the priority relation between them appears to be reversed: neither the reality of objects nor the truth of our conclusions seems grounded in the upshot of inquiry. Rather, Peirce seems to ground convergence of opinion in independently real objects’ causal impact on inquirers in sensation. But if inquirers’ convergence in representing an object depends on the independent reality of that object, then this convergence cannot constitute the reality of the object, as Peirce apparently suggested in HMIC.

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\(^9\) This would not amount, however, to a denial of the thesis Robert Lane (2017: 2) calls basic realism: the thesis that “there is a real world”—that is, “a world that is the way it is regardless of whether you, or I, or anyone else believes that it is that way.” I agree with Lane that Peirce endorses this thesis throughout his career, including in this passage, where he insists that reality is independent of the actual beliefs of any particular person(s). But I think my Realism about the External World more helpfully frames the terms of debate surrounding Peirce’s views about the external world than does Lane’s basic realism (not least since, as Lane recognizes [2017: 68], basic realism is compatible with Berkeleyan idealism; indeed, recognizing this, Lane considers as a separate question from Peirce’s basic realism his stance concerning the external world).

\(^10\) For the aim of inquiry is to fix belief and dispel doubt, but any method that fixes belief on grounds “extraneous to the facts” will not ultimately dispel doubt (EP I.119 [1877]). Only the method of science avoids this problem, since, in following it, “our beliefs may be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (EP I.120).
Did Peirce change his mind? This suggestion cannot account for Peirce’s explicitly drawing on “Fixation” in HMIC. There he initially clarifies an object’s reality in terms not of its representation in true beliefs, but of its causing true beliefs. And in clarifying truth, he reminds us that this concept “appertain[s] exclusively to the scientific method of settling opinion,” so only “the followers of science”—those who accept its fundamental hypothesis—are warranted in predicting that “the processes of investigation … will give one certain solution to every question” (EP I.137–38 [1878]). This suggests that Peirce’s pragmatic clarification of reality in HMIC presupposes commitment to the mind-independent reality of the external world and its action upon the senses—and so to Realism.

Unsurprisingly, prominent commentators take Peirce’s position in “Fixation” to commit him to something like Realism, his argument in HMIC notwithstanding. But this appearance is misleading. In his writings in the early 1870s, Peirce clearly holds that the hypothesis of real objects causing our experiences and beliefs does not constitute a meaningful explanation of the tendency of observation and thinking toward convergence. Rather, he holds this hypothesis means nothing more than this tendency, and so rejects Realism.

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11 This is true, e.g., of Christopher Hookway, Robert Lane, and David Wiggins. On Hookway’s reading, Peirce holds in “Fixation” that the consensus of scientific inquirers “results from the action of external reality upon our senses and thus upon our opinions,” and so his position in pragmatic clarification in HMIC tells us, not what reality is, but only how it “can constrain our opinions in the course of our inquiries” (1985: 44, 50). Lane holds that, for Peirce, a true belief is one on which inquiry would converge because it is one that accurately represents reality: if we adopt the method of science, then a belief we form that accurately represents reality will “also [be] one … brought about as a result of experiential interaction with reality,” and so “one that will be forced upon the minds of those who investigate” (2017: 30). And Wiggins suggests that Peirce’s pragmatic clarifications of truth and reality in HMIC, which seem “inconsistent with that which we read toward the end of ‘The Fixation of Belief,’” must be interpreted as weaker clarifications consistent with the realist stance we find exemplified in “Fixation” (2004: 89, cf. 110).
II. The Berkeley Review (1871)

In his review of Fraser’s edition of Berkeley’s works, Peirce analyzes the dispute between nominalists and realists about universals. He thinks this dispute derives from a deeper disagreement about reality: while both parties endorse Peirce’s abstract definition of “reality,” they disagree about whether reality should be understood as cognition’s source or its product. Nominalists take the former option, conceiving of the real as the mind-independent, super-sensible—and so incognizable (EP I.91)—efficient cause of our sensations. Peirce’s “realist” takes the latter option, endorsing something like his pragmatic clarification of reality. On the realist conception, “human opinion universally tends in the long run to a definite form, which is the truth” (EP I.89)—that “final conclusion” toward which experience and thinking inevitably tend:

This final opinion, then, is independent, not indeed of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual of thought; is quite independent of how you, or I, or any number of men think. Everything, therefore, which will be thought to exist in the final opinion is real, and nothing else. (EP I.89).

This conception might appear consistent with the Realism-friendly interpretation of Peirce’s position in “Fixation”: the final opinion might represent all and only real things, without their reality being constituted by their being so represented. Peirce might disagree with the nominalist conception only in its holding that the real cause of sensation is not itself directly present to the mind—that it is an incognizable cause—not in its holding that the real is an independently existing efficient cause of sensation.13 While

12 “The real is that which is not whatever we happen to think it, but is unaffected by what we may think of it” (EP I.88 [1871]).

13 That Peirce ultimately reconciles the realist and nominalist conceptions of reality, affirming at least the central elements of each, is proposed by Misak (2004 [1991]: 133). Hookway (2012: §1.5) does not explicitly go quite this far, but he does argue that, following his rejection of nominalism, Peirce nevertheless expands his realist conception of reality to show it to be compatible with the interpretation of real entities as mind-independent grounds of sensation that was central to the nominalist picture. (I should
such an interpretation might seem initially plausible, Peirce proceeds explicitly to preclude it.

After concluding that just that which will be thought to exist in the final opinion is real, Peirce finally asks the key question: “What is the power of external things, to affect the senses?” (EP I.89). He has offered an account on which, seemingly, reality can serve only as thinking’s final cause, not its efficient cause: the final opinion is the end to which thought tends, but not the force setting it into motion. An interlocutor might reasonably object that Peirce must supply such an efficient cause to adequately explain the final opinion itself. In answer, Peirce endorses a deflationary account of powers:14

> is the present existence of a power anything in the world but a regularity in future events relating to a certain thing regarded as an element which is to be taken account of beforehand, in the conception of that thing? If not, to assert that there are external things which can be known only as exerting a power on our sense, is nothing different from asserting that there is a general drift in the history of human thought which will lead it to one general agreement, one catholic consent. And any truth more perfect than this destined conclusion, any reality more absolute than what is thought in it, is a fiction of metaphysics. (EP I.89–90).

On Peirce’s 1871 account, to claim that an object possesses a power is simply to predict that future events concerning that object will exhibit certain regularities. It does not explain these regularities; it is simply another way of asserting them. Accordingly, when

\[\text{\footnotesize{14 Famaously, in HMIC (§III), he would later articulate this deflationary account as a consequence of his pragmatism. (He would later regret grounding powers in only their manifestations in actual experience and not in merely possible experience as well. But he would maintain that we can mean nothing more in asserting the existence of a power—any more than in asserting the existence of any other property—than to assert a general conditional prediction about the character of future possible experience. See “Issues of Pragmaticism,” EP II.354–57: 1905.)}}\]
we assert that there are external things that cause particular sensations,\textsuperscript{15} we are asserting nothing more than a regularity in our sensations and thinking.

This leaves no room for regarding reality as thought’s source, rather than constituted by it. What is true of an object, or what characters it really possesses, depends on how it would be thought to be in the final opinion. And all we can mean in saying that its being that way caused us to adopt that opinion is that that opinion really is the final one concerning it, the one toward which all our sensations and thinking will tend. We cannot meaningfully posit some further fact underlying our sensation and thought that explains that tendency, as Realism-based common sense does.\textsuperscript{16} While Peirce’s realist agrees with the nominalist that sensory appearances are not realities but only signs of them, then, she holds that “the realities which they represent” are not independently existing causes of them, but rather “noumena, or intelligible conceptions which are the last products of the mental action which is set in motion by sensation” (\textit{EP I.90}).\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} One might object to this framing of Peirce’s conclusion, since I leave out one important feature that he attributes to the external objects in this passage: that they \textit{can be known only} as exerting a power on our senses. Perhaps the hypothesis of things-in-themselves affecting the senses reduces to a prediction about the character of our sensations, the objector may reply, but the hypothesis of external objects affecting the senses that can also be cognized (perhaps through being directly perceived) does not so reduce. In fact, however, we shall see in the next section that in some manuscripts of the following year, Peirce generalizes his conclusion in just the way I have in my text.

\textsuperscript{16} Little wonder, then, that Peirce judges that Berkeley’s claim that experiences of reality are distinguished from imaginings merely by their superior vividness and their coherence with one another, which enables past and present experience to serve as a sign of the character of future experience, verges on an endorsement of the realist conception of reality. Indeed, when Peirce goes on to explain how Berkeley falls prey to nominalism, he finds fault only with Berkeley’s insistence that reality must always be \textit{actually} perceived, and his resultant position that the reality of an object is constituted by the divine ideas of it (\textit{EP I.99–100}). His clear suggestion is that, had Berkeley rested content with the thesis that the reality of a thing consists merely with the coherence of our idea of it with experience in general, his account of reality would have fallen under the realist rather than the nominalist camp.

\textsuperscript{17} I should note that two passages in the Berkeley review do seem, at first glance, friendly to Realism about the External World. But they are easily explained. First, Peirce tells us that the realist conception of reality is “highly favorable to external realities,” and indeed that “there are many objects of true science which are external” (\textit{EP I.90}). But here he stipulates a particular definition of “external”: while “‘the real’ means that which is independent of how we may think or feel about it,” the \textit{external} is independent “of how we may
Thus, in the Berkeley review, Peirce endorses an anti-realist interpretation of the thesis that external objects cause sensations and thoughts. But one might naturally conclude that he changed his mind between that review and “Fixation,” which stresses this thesis so heavily. But this conclusion is blocked by some 1872 manuscripts in which, after introducing the fundamental hypothesis of science just as it would appear in “Fixation,” Peirce explicitly reinterprets it along anti-realist lines.

III. Drafts Toward a Logic Book (1872)

Peirce introduced the “fundamental hypothesis” in his May–June 1872 draft of chapter 3 of a proposed logic book, and his statement of it is nearly identical to the version that eventually appears in “Fixation.”

“To describe the method of scientific investigation” think or feel,” full stop (ibid.). But the independence here, recall, is not of thought in general, but only of how you, or I, or any number of men think—(that is to say, of how any finite person or group of persons actually thinks, but not necessarily of how they would think under ideal conditions. Accordingly, the degree of mind-independence posited by Peirce’s affirmation of the existence of external realities here falls short of that posited by my Realism about the External World.

Secondly, Peirce tells us that the adherent of the realist conception “will maintain a doctrine of immediate perception,” on which “the very same objects which are immediately present in our minds in experience really exist just as they are experienced out of the mind” (EP I.91). But once again, he employs an idiosyncratic definition of “in the mind”: something is in the mind in his sense just if it is “in such relation to the individual mind that that mind cognizes it” (EP I.91). That is to say, it is in a particular mind if it is actually known by that particular mind. But the realist conception of reality can hold that the reality of objects is not constituted by their being actually known by particular finite knowers without this sufficing for Realism about the External World.

18 The structure of the book evolved over the course of the first half of 1872, with the first three chapters eventually being dedicated to covering the material that he would eventually incorporate into “Fixation.” With some adjustments (often only minor ones, though that some pages are absent from the manuscripts makes it impossible to determine this fully), chapter 1 became §III of “Fixation,” chapter 2 became §IV, and—the important point for our purposes here—chapter 3 became §V (MS 187–89; reprinted as W 3: chs. 9–11).

19 Here it is: “This is called the scientific method. Its fundamental hypothesis stated in more familiar language is this. There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses, according to regular laws, and though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet by taking advantage of the laws which subsist we can ascertain by reasoning how the things really are, and any man if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of reality” (W 3: 27 [1872]; emphasis added). I have italicized the only noteworthy difference in this version from the final
(so-defined) is, he states, “the object of this book” (W 3: 28 [1872]). Accordingly, if Peirce’s endorsement of the fundamental hypothesis shows him to endorse Realism, then the view of reality he subsequently affirms to conform to Realism. But it doesn’t: after endorsing the fundamental hypothesis, Peirce proceeds in subsequent drafts to clarify the concept of reality so as to supply an deflationary reinterpretation of this hypothesis.

For reasons of space, I focus my treatment on a single Fall 1872 draft in which Peirce begins by motivating the fundamental hypothesis. We believe, in inquiring, that sufficient inquiry would yield convergence on a final opinion. But how is this possible when different inquirers form beliefs based on different sensations formed from different points of view? The fundamental hypothesis’ conception of external realities explains this: if “observations are the result of the action upon the mind of outward things,” while “their diversity is due to the diversity of our relations to these things,” then it is unsurprising that our observations, while different, are correlated so as to yield a shared final opinion. Peirce remarks: “of the truth of this conception of external realities there can be no doubt” (W 3: 44). Again, this looks like a commitment to Realism. At this point, however, Peirce takes a sharp turn in the opposite direction, claiming that “though the conception [of external realities] involves no error and is convenient for certain purposes, it does not follow that it affords the point of view from which it is proper to look at the matter in order to understand its true philosophy” (W 3: 45). It illegitimately applies a model of causal explanation applying to items within experience to explain

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version in “Fixation”: where in the final version Peirce says that we can reason to how things really are by means of “the laws of perception,” here he alludes only to “the laws which subsist.” But since in this version, too, he speaks of realities affecting our senses “according to regular laws” in the preceding sentence, it is clear that he already had in mind laws of perception, and that the change in the final version is simply for ease of comprehension, not a substantive development of his view.

20 This is MS 200.
experience itself, and it requires a problematic ontological dualism. But if the conception of external realities is a necessary assumption of scientific inquiry and yet is unacceptable as it stands, then we must seek a “solution of these difficulties which without impugning the truth of the belief in an external world will nevertheless elucidate and translate it into terms of other conceptions it did not give rise to” (ibid.). The extraneous conceptions that can translate the conception of external realities as required are provided by what Peirce would call in a subsequent draft an “Idealistic theory of metaphysics” (\(W\,3\): 59 [1872]).

On this idealistic solution, since the sole aim of inquiry is to settle opinion: “The only thing … which our thought strives to picture or represent is the object of final belief” (\(W\,3\): 46 [1872]). The immediate object of a particular person’s act of thought differs from the real object in two ways—it might represent it falsely (i.e. it might be unsettled by future experience), and it depends on the actual thinking of a particular person—but only in these two ways. For Peirce, then:

I do not say that any thinking process is the reality; but I say that that thought to which we struggle to have our thoughts coincide, is the reality. Therefore when we say that there are external things, and that observations are only the appearances which these things produce upon sense by their relations to us, we have only in an inverted form, asserted the very same fact and no other which we assert when we say that observations inevitably carry us to a predetermined conclusion. Still it may be asked whether there may not be some other reality which is external to us in some other sense besides this. This I think a rather idle question. Because the doctrine of the hypothesis of external realities, is adopted to simplify and make clear certain facts which are as perfectly brought to a unity by this mode of conceiving the reality, as by any other. (\(W\,3\): 47; emphasis added).\(^{21}\)

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\(^{21}\) He reiterates the central claim of this passage, perhaps even more forcefully, in a subsequent draft: All that we can know or conceive of the existence of real things is involved in two premises; first, that investigation will ultimately lead to a settled opinion, and second, that this opinion is entirely determined by the observations. The only thing that we can infer is that the observations have such a character that they are fated to lead ultimately to one conclusion. And therefore the only distinctly conceivable sense in which we can say that the objects of the final opinion exist before that opinion is formed is that existence consists in the fact that the observations will be such as will bring about and maintain that opinion. (\(W\,3\): 56-57; emphasis added).
In Peirce’s view, the only reasonable criterion for the mind-independence of the real is its independence of the actual thoughts of particular persons. But since a thought that would arise from indefinitely prolonged observation and reasoning and not thereafter be unsettled is independent of the idiosyncrasies of any particular person’s actual thinking, it is as mind-independent as we could reasonably insist reality to be. Peirce accordingly reiterates his key claim in the Berkeley review that to say that external things exist and cause our sensations concerning them is to say nothing more than that sufficient observation will lead any observer to share a particular final opinion concerning the question at hand. The reality of the object is the tendency of observations to produce indefeasible belief in it; it is not an independent ground or explanation of that tendency. Far from representing a shift in Peirce’s view toward realism about the external world, then, Peirce takes the “fundamental hypothesis” of the method of science to be acceptable only when reinterpreted according to his anti-realist, pragmatic clarification of reality.

IV. Conclusion: Reassessing the Illustrations

Initially, Peirce seemed to reject Realism in HMIC. But that interpretation appeared dubious in light of HMIC’s reliance on “Fixation,” and especially on the apparently Realist-leaning fundamental hypothesis of the scientific method. It seemingly conceived external realities as mind-independent causes of sensation and thought, and so as constitutively independent of them. We’ve now seen, however, that in earlier 1870s writings, Peirce endorsed a conception of reality that precludes external realities from figuring in a meaningful explanation of our sensation and thought, and indeed his explicitly “translating” the fundamental hypothesis to make it compatible with that anti-
realist conception of reality. This does not conclusively demonstrate that realist
interpreters of Peirce’s position in the Illustrations are mistaken, but it does place the ball
back in their court: they cannot warrant their position adequately simply by appeal to the
obvious realist-friendly features of Peirce’s initial statement of the fundamental
hypothesis, but must supply additional, presently unadduced grounds for it. Meanwhile, it
seems best to take the empiricist criterion of meaning and correlative pragmatic
clarification of reality that Peirce endorsed in HMIC to yield the interpretation of his
account of the scientific method in “Fixation” that “affords the point of view from which
it is proper to look at the matter in order to understand its true philosophy” (W 3: 45
[1872]).
Bibliography

I. Peirce’s Works, Cited by Abbreviation


II. Other Sources, Cited by Name/Year


