

PEIRCE ON
REALISM
AND IDEALISM

ROBERT LANE

"With impressive clarity and careful attention to the manuscripts, Robert Lane shows us how Peirce could consistently endorse both realism and idealism throughout his life. This book elucidates key conceptions and important distinctions at the heart of Peirce's metaphysics. It is essential reading for anyone trying to reconcile the comprehensibility of reality, on the one hand, with its mind-independence, on the other."

Richard Kenneth Atkins, *Boston College*

This book offers a new interpretation of the metaphysics of Charles Peirce (1839–1914), the founder of pragmatism and one of America's greatest philosophers. Robert Lane begins by examining Peirce's basic realism, his belief in a world that is independent of how anyone believes it to be. Lane argues that this realism is the basis for Peirce's account of truth, according to which a true belief is one that would be settled by investigation and that also represents the real world. He then explores Peirce's application of his pragmatic maxim to clarify the idea of reality, his two forms of idealism, and his realism about generality and vagueness. This rich study will provide readers with a clear understanding of Peirce's thoughts on reality and truth and how they intersect, and of his views on the relation between the mind and the external world.

Robert Lane is Professor of Philosophy at the University of West Georgia. He is editor of Peirce submissions for the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* and has published numerous essays on Peirce.

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University of West Georgia



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For
M.D. – borders, always.

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Abbreviations

Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, 8 vols. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, eds. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931–1960. References are in decimal notation by volume and paragraph number. Citations of other collections of Peirce's work employ the abbreviations shown here.

- CD Peirce's contributions to *The Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language*. W. D. Whitney, ed. New York: The Century Co., 1889–1891.
- CN *Contributions to The Nation*, 4 vols. K. Ketner and J. Cook, eds. Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1975–1987. References are by volume and page number.
- EP *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, 2 vols. N. Houser, C. Kloesel, and the Peirce Edition Project, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992–1998. References are by volume and page number.
- HP *Historical Perspectives on Peirce's Philosophy of Science*, 2 vols. C. Eisele, ed. New York: Mouton, 1985. References are by volume and page number.
- ILS *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*. C. de Waal, ed. Chicago: Open Court, 2014.
- LI *The Logic of Interdisciplinarity: The Monist Series*. E. Bisanz, ed. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2009.
- NEM *The New Elements of Mathematics*, 4 vols. C. Eisele, ed. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1976. References are by volume and page number.
- PM *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Writings*. M. Moore, ed. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- R Peirce's manuscripts in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, as cataloged in Robin 1967 and 1971. These

manuscripts are available in a microfilm edition, *The Charles S. Peirce Papers*, produced by Harvard University Library. References are by Robin's manuscript number and, when available, page number.

- RLT *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898*. K. Ketner, ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- SS *Semiotics and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*. C. Hardwick, ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- W *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, 7 vols. M. Fisch, C. Kloesel, E. Moore et al., eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982—. References are by volume and page number.

Frequently cited articles and manuscripts by Peirce are referenced as follows.

- AT "The Architecture of Theories" (1891)
- DC "Design and Chance" (1883–1884)
- FOB "The Fixation of Belief" (1877)
- GAR "A Guess at the Riddle" (1887–1888)
- GVLL "Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic" (1869)
- HTM "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878)
- IP "Issues of Pragmatism" (1905)
- LM "The Law of Mind" (1892)
- LOR "The Logic of Relatives" (1897)
- MAN "Multitude and Number" (R 25, 1897)
- MGE "Man's Glassy Essence" (1892)
- OQ "On Quantity" (R 14, 1896)
- QCCF "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" (1868)
- RL "The Regenerated Logic" (1896)
- RR Review of Josiah Royce, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (1885)
- SCFI "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868)
- WPI "What Pragmatism Is" (1905)

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Introduction: Basic Realism

According to Charles Peirce, “[t]he word ‘reality’ . . . is one of the words of whose meaning it is indispensable [*sic*] to have a perfectly distinct apprehension before drawing any conclusion, or forming any opinion, upon almost any philosophical subject” (R 852: 3 of alternative run of pages, 1911). Most philosophers have not realized this. Although many use the word “reality” and describe things as “real,” they rarely stop to say how they understand those words to be defined. The phrase “independent of the mind” might initially appear to be a promising definition, and it seems to be the one that Michael Loux assumes in his statement of realism: “the world is a mind-independent structure: it consists of objects whose existence, character and relations are fixed independently of what we happen to say, believe, or desire” (2001: 49). But if the real is exactly that which is independent of minds, then minds themselves are not real. Realists about the mind would rightly object that defining “real” in this way begs the question against their view. A definition of “real” as “independent of us” or “independent of humans” would be even more problematic, since a realism that assumed that sort of definition would imply that not just minds, but also artifacts, things made by humans and thus not independent of us, are not real.

Happily, Peirce stated and relied upon explicit definitions of “real” and a number of related terms, and in so doing he avoided some of the problems that characterize the views of more recent thinkers, including the problem of inadvertent anti-realism about minds. According to Peirce’s definition of “real,” something is real exactly when it has the properties it has whether or not anyone believes that it has them or otherwise represents it as having them. The earth is real, since its properties, like being a certain size and traveling around the sun at a certain speed, do not depend on anyone thinking that it has them. The earth really does orbit the sun, since it does so whether or not anyone believes that it does. My dog is real, since he weighs seventy-five pounds whether or not I choose to believe what the

veterinarian tells me. Peirce's earliest statement of his definition may have been in a lecture from 1867: "It is important to observe that the essential difference between a reality and a nonreality, is that the former has an existence entirely independent of what you or I or any number of men may think about it" (W 2: 104). He restated the definition repeatedly, in works published during his lifetime, e.g., "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" – "we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be" (5.405, W 3: 271, 1878) – and in manuscripts that remain unpublished, e.g., "*being such as it is, no matter how you, or, I, or any man or definite collection of men may think it to be*" (R 681: 35, 1913). At one time he credited Duns Scotus with the "invention [of] the word *reality*" (4.28, 1893), but later he took a different view:

The word "reality" . . . is used in ordinary parlance in its correct philosophical sense. It is curious that its legal meaning, in which we speak of "real estate," is the earliest, occurring early in the twelfth century. Albertus Magnus, who, as a high ecclesiastic, must have had to do with such matters, imported it into philosophy. But it did not become at all common until Duns Scotus, in the latter part of the thirteenth century[,] began to use it freely. (6.495, ca. 1906)¹

A central thesis of this book is that Peirce held there to be real things and thus that he believed in a real world, a world that is the way it is regardless of whether you, or I, or anyone else believes that it is that way. I will call Peirce's view that there is a real world his *basic realism*. Christopher Hookway (2012: 65–66) uses the phrase "basic realism" in his discussion of Peirce's views about truth and reality, but he does not seem to mean by it quite what I do. The basic realism he describes "leaves open most of the different options that have been discussed by philosophers who have debated realism about mathematical objects, external things, values, causation, and the like," and this much it has in common with the view that I attribute to Peirce. But Hookway also suggests that "we can think of basic realism as a sort of logical doctrine rather than a metaphysical one." The view that I am attributing to Peirce is straightforwardly metaphysical: it is the idea that there are things that have the traits they do whether or not

¹ In R 200 (1908), portions of which are found in the *Collected Papers*, Peirce wrote: "Except in the legal sense, the vernacular word was derived from *realis*, which (except in the legal sense) was a vocable invented by medieval metaphysicians for their own purposes. Especially, it is a prominent word in the works of Duns Scotus, of which I have been an attentive and meditative student" (6.328). For other accounts of the history of "real" and its cognates, see R 641: 7–9, 1909; R 642: 9–12, 1909; R 659: 35, 1910; R 852: 8–9, 1911; R 681: 33–34, 1913; R 930: 22–23, late.

anyone thinks they have them or otherwise represents them as having them.²

Peirce contrasted real things with *figments*, the *fictional*, or, as he sometimes wrote, the *fictive*. Something is a figment exactly when it has the properties it has only because someone thinks of it as having those properties or otherwise represents it as having those properties. “A fiction is something whose character depends on what some mind imagines it to be” (W 3: 49, 1872); “[a] figment is a product of somebody’s imagination; it has such characters as his thought impresses upon it” (5.405, W 3: 271, 1878). Atticus Finch is fictional, since being a lawyer, living in Alabama, being the father of Scout and Jem, etc. are properties that he has only because Harper Lee imagined him to have them in the course of writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*. But it is a real fact about Lee that she imagined Atticus Finch as having those properties; her having done so does not depend on whether anyone believes that she did. To say that something is a figment does not “in the least imply[] that it has been intentionally made up or knowingly fabricated” (R 683: 33, ca. 1913); someone might sincerely believe that there is a monster under the bed when there really isn’t. Peirce’s definitions imply that both the real and the fictional have properties: nothing is real that does not possess traits, and no fictional thing can be imagined without being imagined to be some way or other.

Peirce also distinguished between that which is independent of what anyone thinks *about it* – the real – and that which is independent of what anyone thinks *about anything at all*. The latter is, in his terminology, the *external*, that which is external to the mind (i.e., not within my mind or your mind or anyone else’s mind) and so upon which “thinking has no effect” (5.384, W 3: 253, 1877). “That is external to the mind, which is what it is, whatever our thoughts may be on any subject” (7.339, W 3: 29, 1872). The earth is, in addition to being real, external, since it has the traits it has regardless of what anyone thinks, either about it or about anything else whatsoever. Peirce’s distinction between the real and the external is crucial for a correct understanding of his views, but unfortunately even scholars of his work are sometimes not careful to keep them distinct. For example, after noting Peirce’s

² Almeder (1980) attributes to Peirce what he calls “epistemological realism,” by which he seems to mean the view that there is a world of external objects of which we are capable of having knowledge. As we will see, what I call Peirce’s basic realism is consistent with the belief in both real external and real internal things and events. The question whether we can represent and thereby have knowledge of real things is covered by Peirce’s pragmatic clarification of the idea of reality, on which see Chapter 2. T. L. Short rightly suggests that it would be a mistake to use “scientific realism” as the name of what I am calling Peirce’s basic realism and prefers instead simply “realism” (2007a: 199).

verbal definition of “real,” Hookway parses that definition as “independence of thought” and “independent of what any individual thinks” (2000: 46–47), which is what Peirce meant by “external.” He then uses “mind-independent” in a way that leaves unclear whether he means the real or the external (ibid.: 76–79). In considering the sense in which truth might be “objective” on Peirce’s account, Cheryl Misak correctly attributes to him the view that “believing a hypothesis to be true does not make it true,” which implies that what the hypothesis says is either really true or really false. But she then restates this “objectivity requirement” as “whether a thing is real cannot be a matter of what someone thinks,” thus inadvertently limiting the real to the external (1991/2004: 130), and she subsequently misstates his definition of “real” as “that which is independent of whatever ‘you, I, or any number of men’ think” rather than as what is independent of what anyone thinks about it (ibid.: 131).

On Peirce’s view, the real is not exhausted by the external. Some real things are *internal*, items within, states of, or facts about the mind of someone or other. “Thus an emotion of the mind is real, in the sense that it exists in the mind whether we are distinctly conscious of it or not. But it is not external because[,] although it does not depend upon what we think about it, it does depend upon the state of our thoughts” – that is, the state of *someone’s* thoughts – “about something” (7.339, W 3: 29–30, 1872).³ Whether I am angry at a given time depends on the state of my mind at that time, since being angry is, at least in part, a matter of one’s mind being in a specific state. But whether I am angry does not depend on whether I or anyone else *believes* that I am angry, and as Peirce noted, anger can “exist[] in the mind,” even if the angry person is not fully aware, and thus does not believe, that she is angry.⁴

³ Here “exists in the mind” means “is in the mind.” Peirce eventually began to use “exist” and its cognates to express a more specific idea, one that I will address in Chapter 5. On one occasion, he contrasted the external with the mental, implying that the mental is coextensive with the internal (6.327, 1908). He wrote several definitions of “external” for the *Century Dictionary*, one of which includes the following: “in *metaph.*, forming part of or pertaining to the world of things or phenomena in space, considered as outside of the perceiving mind” (CD 2094). And of the several definitions of “internal” he provided, one reads: “Inner; pertaining to the mind, or to the relations of the mind to itself. [In this sense the word *interior* is preferable]” (CD 3149). For other examples of Peirce’s use of the external/internal distinction, see 5.405, W 3: 271, 1878; 4.157, ca. 1897; 5.45, EP 2: 151, 1903; 8.284, 1904; 5.474, 1907; 5.487, EP 2: 412–413, 1907; 5.493, 1907; 1.321, ca. 1910. Peirce used “internal world” and “external world” frequently, both early (e.g., 5.244, W 2: 206, 1868; 5.265–266, W 2: 213, 1868) and late (e.g., 1.37, W 8: 78, ca. 1890; 8.144, EP 2: 62, 1901; 7.369, 1902; 5.539, ca. 1902; 6.96, 1903; 8.284, 1904; 1.321, EP 2: 369, 1905; 6.325, 329, 1908).

⁴ Almeder seems to overlook the fact that Peirce recognized both external and internal reals when he writes that “[t]he difference between a fiction and an external fact (real fact) is that the former, and not the latter, is subject to control by our will” (1980: 168). But there are internal facts – facts about