Peirce’s Theory of Perception:  
Three Problems for the Realist Reading

(3000 words, excluding abstract, footnotes, and bibliography.)

ABSTRACT (150 words): Prominent commentators have held that, though Peirce was in early works a staunch advocate of realism as against nominalism about universals, with the development of his mature theory of perception he committed himself to a form of realism as against idealism about the external world. I expound three claims Peirce makes in offering his mature theory of perception that are difficult for this realist reading to explain: first, his claim that the only non-ego to which the ego is related in perception is the future ego; second, that the reality of the external world means nothing more than our experience of Secondness, projected into the future; third, that our experience is immediately of external objects only because such objects are composite photographs of percepts, and so are mere psychical products. In advance of a satisfying realist explanation (away) of these claims, they call the realist reading into serious question.

§I. The Realist Reading of Peirce on Perception

From early in his career, Charles Sanders Peirce called himself a realist. But while the early Peirce clearly endorsed realism as against nominalism about universals, his position was murkier concerning realism as against idealism about the external world. Indeed, in some of the same early works in which he forcefully defends a “realist conception” of reality, on which “a thing in the general is as real as in the concrete,” he also deflates the thesis that “there are external things which can be known only as exerting a power on our

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1 By realism about the external world, I mean the thesis that there exists a world of material objects that have many of their properties independently of any beliefs or experiences any finite subject(s) have, or would have. By idealism about the external world, I mean the contrary thesis that, though there exist a world of material objects (or, at least, objects we ordinarily talk of as material), those objects do not meet the independence condition just stated. (I shall use “anti-realism” interchangeably with “idealism” in this context.)

Robert Lane argues persuasively that Peirce accepted throughout his career the thesis Lane 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” (2017: 2). But as Lane recognizes (ibid.: 68), this does not settle the question of Peirce’s stance concerning realism about the external world, since that thesis is stronger than basic realism. I am suggesting that, in his early work, though Peirce affirmed basic realism, it is unclear that he similarly endorsed realism about the external world.
sense,” holding that it means only that “there is a general drift in the history of human thought which will lead it to one general agreement” (EP 1: 88–90 [1871]). If Peirce’s early “realism” elevates abstract objects to the degree of reality characteristic of concrete material objects, it equally risks diminishing the degree of reality of the latter, reducing their existence to facts about (actual and possible) observations and thoughts of inquirers.

Noting that Peirce’s early realism is clearly opposed only to nominalism, not to idealism, some prominent commentators have suggested that his later realism is opposed to both, and that its opposition to idealism arises out of developments in his theory of perception. They offer a realist reading of Peirce’s mature theory of perception, on which his theory entails external world realism and shows how such realism may palatably be affirmed.

This realist reading is initially quite plausible. It rests centrally on Peirce’s emphasis, beginning with his 1885 review of Josiah Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, on the category of our consciousness he elsewhere calls Secondness (the

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2 These quotes are from Peirce’s 1871 review of Fraser’s edition of the works of Berkeley, the most famous of these sources. But similar quotes can be found in Peirce’s Fall 1872 drafts of a chapter “On Reality,” where Peirce argues, on the one hand, that nominalism involves a conception of reality that consists in “mere words without meaning,” but on the other hand that it follows from the alternative realist conception that “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 that existence consists in the fact that the observations will be such as will bring about and maintain that opinion” (W 3: 56–57 [1872]). (This passage has the benefit of making clear that Peirce apparently intends to offer an idealist, deflationary reading, not merely of the thesis that there are external things that can be known only as the prior causes of our sensations, but of the more commonsensical thesis that there are external things that are the prior causes of our sensations, full stop.)

3 Max Fisch makes this point clearly, arguing that Peirce’s key innovation in his 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism is to offer a theory of perceptual judgment, and that: “It is in this connection that he first makes it quite clear that his realism is now opposed to idealism as well as to nominalism” (Fisch 1986: 195). Similarly, Christopher Hookway (2004: 144) claims that, though the early Peirce “supposed that thinking of reality as the cause of our experiences would drive us towards admitting unknowable things in themselves”—and so, we may infer, refrained from endorsing this essential tenet of external world realism—the theory of perception he adumbrated in his 1885 review of Royce and developed fully in the Harvard Lectures provided a path toward endorsing this realist thesis without opening the door to skepticism.
relation of duality or action/reaction)⁴ and there refers to as “the Outward Clash,” and specifically on the role it plays in enabling objective thought. There Peirce argues that we cannot designate the object of discourse by means of any general description alone, but only by means of an index that immediately directs the attention to the object (EP 1: 226 [1885]). Now such an index is a “true symptom” of its object: it is “something which, without any rational necessitation, is forced by blind fact to correspond to its object” (CP 7.628 [1903]). And so our capacity to represent objects at all hinges on our standing in relations of Secondness or brute reaction toward something beyond us: “this direct consciousness of hitting and of getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real” (EP 1: 233 [1885]). This passage certainly seems to support the realist reading by suggesting that our conception of reality derives from our sense of the causal action of the world of mind-independent physical objects on us in sensation.

The realist reading is further supported by Peirce’s resulting development of, and heightened stress on, his “doctrine of immediate perception.” Peirce had already affirmed this doctrine in early writings, claiming that “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 1: 91 [1871]). But in his discussions of this thesis in works following the Royce review—especially his 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism—Peirce tends to connect the idea to his views about Secondness or the Outward Clash, and so, unsurprisingly, such passages are frequently read as endorsements of external world

⁴ From his earliest publications onward, Peirce held that there are three basic categories on which all our experience and thought are founded: Firstness, the quality of simple feeling (associated with possibility); Secondness, the relation of duality or action and reaction (associated with actuality); and Thirdness, the mediation characteristic of representation (associated with necessity or law).
realism. For instance, in a draft of the second of his Harvard lectures, Peirce defines “the
doctrine of Immediate Perception” as the thesis that “in perception two objects really
do . . . react upon one another” (EP II: 155 [1903]), and endorses it.5 If Secondness is
really operative in perception, we might think, then to say that the object of perception is
the real is to say that, in perception, I am immediately aware of the mind-independent
physical object that causes my perception—and, indeed, am aware of it precisely as that
which causes my perception. And this idea entails realism about the external world.

These appearances notwithstanding, I am unconvinced that Peirce’s mature theory
of perception is most plausibly interpreted along these realist lines. Not that I will argue
for a particular anti-realist interpretation of Peirce’s position here; my goal is more
modest. I aim simply to identify three important textual difficulties for the realist
interpretation: three claims of Peirce’s that are difficult to explain if it is correct. If an
adequate realist explanation of them can be found, then the realist interpretation will be
rendered still more plausible for it; if not, then this should call it into serious question and
motivate the development of anti-realist alternatives. The first difficulty (raised in §II) is
Peirce’s account of the relata of perceptual instances of Secondness. The second (§III) is
his description of just how the “Outward Clash” gives rise to our concept of reality. And
the third (§IV) is the particular explanation he gives of the thesis that our perception is
immediately of external objects.

5 Apparently Peirce did not read this passage as part of his actual second lecture, since at the end of the
manuscript of his fourth lecture, Peirce adds an argument for this thesis without any reference to having
given such an argument before (see EP 2: 525n28). It seems that we lack the final draft of Peirce’s second
lecture (see ibid.: 517n1). As we shall see in §II, Peirce’s treatment of the doctrine of Immediate Perception
in the manuscript of the fourth lecture is importantly different from that in the draft of his second lecture in
ways that call into question the doctrine’s apparent support for realism about the external world.
§II. “A Non-Ego that Is Nothing but the Ego that Is to Be”

We turn first to Peirce’s clearest argument for the reality of Secondness: that offered in his 1903 Harvard lectures. As noted above, in a draft of his second lecture, Peirce affirms the doctrine of Immediate Perception, or “the fact that in perception two objects really do . . . react upon one another” (EP 2: 155 [1903]). On his critical commonsensist view of perception, if perception causes us to form a perceptual judgment (and future perceptual judgments do not defeat it), then we cannot control whether we affirm the judgment or not, so that it is “perfectly idle”—even “downright nonsense”—to criticize it (ibid.). But what does perception tell us regarding Secondness? Here Peirce is vague. He contends that in cases of perceptual surprise, we have “a double consciousness, on the one hand of an Ego, which is simply the expected idea broken off, on the other hand of the Non-Ego, which is the Strange Intruder” (ibid.: 154). Since this is the content of our perceptual consciousness, he concludes that “perception represents two objects reacting upon one another” (ibid.). But he does not tell us which objects, specifically, these are. We might naturally take one relatum to be a mind-independently real object that causes experience’s failure to match our expectations. But Peirce does not actually say that here: just what the “Non-Ego” is is unspecified.

Peirce may have recognized his unclarity on this point, since in his conclusion to his fourth lecture, he treats again the doctrine of Immediate Perception, developing his argument for it in an unexpected way. Again he says that the reality of Secondness is proven by instances of perceptual surprise, which show the ego to be related to a non-ego. But his explanation of this fact is startling:
The perceptual judgment, then, can only be that it is the non-ego, something over against the ego and bearing it down, [that] is what has surprised him. But if that be so, this direct perception presents an ego to which the smashed expectation belonged, and the non-ego, the sadder and wiser man, to which the new phenomenon belongs.

... So long as you admit that perception really does represent two objects to us, an ego and a non-ego,—a past self that turns out to be a mere self and a self that is to be faithful to the Truth in the future,—as long as you admit that this is represented in the very perceptual fact, that is final. (EP 2: 195 [1903]; emphasis added).

Though we may naturally think of the non-ego in perception as a physical object that serves as its prior efficient cause, here Peirce seems to be conceiving of it as the final cause of experience: the future self, whose thinking is adequate to the surprising percept, represents the telos of the present inquiring self, that toward which it tends in responding to experience.6 Nor is this description of the non-ego confined to this text: in another review of Royce, his 1900 review of The World and the Individual, Peirce explicates a

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6 If this strikes us as a surprising or implausible construal of the causal relations operative in perception, this may be because we, like the adherents of the nominalist conception of reality, tend to think of real causation as efficient and of final causation as metaphorical (at best). And this view, Peirce continues to hold in the 1900s, is a mere philosophical prejudice, one that is inimical to pragmatism: “There is efficient causation and there is final, or ideal, causation. If either of them is to be set down as a metaphor, it is rather the former. Pragmatism is correct doctrine only in so far as it is recognized that material action is the mere husk of ideas” (CP 8.271 [1902]).
view of the aim of inquiry he calls “the opinion of Possible Experience”—clearly intended to represent his own view\(^7\)—on which, he tells us:

> the only object to which inquiry seeks to make our opinion conform is itself something of the nature of thought; namely, it is the predestined ultimate idea, which is independent of what you, I, or any number of men may persist, for however long, in thinking, yet which remains thought, after all. The whole course of life within which the experiential compulsions appear is a purely psychical development. For the gist of the opinion is that the flow of time consists in a continual assimilation into “our” inwardness, the Past, of a non-ego that is nothing but the ego that is to be — the Future. (CP 8.103 [1900]).

If the realist reading of perceptual Secondness were correct, we would expect Peirce to identify one of its relata with a mind-independently existing physical object. Accordingly, if it is to remain viable, adherents of this reading must explain the passages here adduced, showing either that Peirce does not really mean to claim that the sole non-ego involved in such relations—causing our perceptions and to which our perceptual judgments are accountable—is the future self and its final ideas and opinions, or else that this view is somehow compatible with a realist account of perception after all.

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\(^7\) This claim requires some defense, since Peirce never explicitly endorses the opinion of Possible Experience, and indeed levies a critique of it toward the end of his treatment of it. I think an adequate defense can be given, but I can only sketch its broad strokes here. First, note the Peircean character of the account of the real object of inquiry given in the passage I go on to quote in the text, as well as the consonance of the account of Secondness it gives with that Peirce offers in his own voice in the fourth Harvard lecture. But beyond that, we may note that the core idea of the opinion of Possible Experience is that inquiry is intended to settle doubt on the matter at hand, and that this would be achieved were it able to anticipate the final opinion on that question that would be reached by an indefinite community of inquiry (CP 8.101–2). These are some of Peirce’s most famous commitments. Finally, Peirce only offers two critiques of the opinion of Possible Experience. The first is particular to Berkeley’s own version of it and only motivates him to take up “one of its more modern forms” instead, one with further definite affinities to Peirce’s own thought (CP 8.111). And the second is preceded by his praising Royce for recognizing that “this doctrine of Possible Experience is true as far as it goes” (CP 8.114), and qualifies it only by finding fault with its understanding of time. This qualification may push the doctrine of Possible Experience toward something in the vicinity of Roycean absolute idealism (CP 8.105, 115), but however that may be, it does nothing to qualify the claims at issue in the discussion in the text.
§III. “A Mellonization of the Constraint-Side of Double-Sided Consciousness”

Peirce’s affirmation of perceptual Secondness is, then, not decisive evidence for the realist reading. I shall now argue that this is also true of his claims about the relation between Secondness or the “Outward Clash” and our conception of reality. For in the passages in which Peirce discusses this relation, he does not seem to explain the reality of Secondness or relations of duality in terms of a mind-independently real physical object which figures as one of the relata, but rather to explain the reality of physical objects in terms of our experiences of Secondness.

In his 1885 Royce review, introducing the Outward Clash, Peirce says that “this direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real” (EP I: 233). His claim, apparently, is not that I grasp an object as real and as an underlying ground of my experience of duality, but rather that I grasp an object as real precisely by relating it to my prior experience of duality. He remarks even more clearly elsewhere: “the reality of the external world means nothing except that real experience of duality” in perceptual surprise (CP 5.539 [c. 1902]). This makes Peirce’s emphasis on the Outward Clash seem less supportive of a realist theory of perception and more like an anti-realist interpretation of the reality of the external world.

In a 1904 letter to William James, Peirce explains more thoroughly how the real external world is constituted out of our experience of duality. Our “two-sided consciousness” (or experience of Secondness), Peirce tells us, results from an unconscious operation of “separat[ing] the element under control from the element we

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8 And this experience, we have seen, he seems to explain, in turn, by appeal to a relation between past and possible future states of the subject.
cannot help. We separate the past and the present. The past is the inner world, the present the outer world. . . . This consciousness furnishes all our facts. It is this that makes them facts” (CP 8.282 [1904]). My cognition of the table before me corresponds to a real object in that my consciousness of the table is not subject to my direct voluntary control: I cannot alter my experience of it and beliefs about it at will. Peirce recognizes that this theory of the reality of external objects amounts to a form of idealism: “the true idealism, the pragmatistic idealism, is that reality consists in the future” (CP 8.284). Let us, with Peirce, call *mellonization* the operation of conceiving of a regularity in past experience as repeated indefinitely into the future. Then his pragmatistic idealism holds that: “The conception of the real is derived by a mellonization of the constraint-side of double-sided consciousness” (ibid.). This seems to amount to the claim that what it is for an object of experience to be real is just for the patterns in experience that cause it to figure in our perceptual judgments to extend into the indefinite future, rather than to suddenly stop and lead to perceptual surprise.\(^9\) But this account of reality certainly appears anti-realist. At least, far from constituting clear textual support for the realist reading, Peirce’s explanation of how our concept of reality arises out of our perceptual experience of Secondness is another commitment that reading must accommodate to remain viable.

\(^9\) We may note that objects satisfying this account will satisfy Peirce’s abstract definition of “real,” since whether such an experiential pattern continues on into the indefinite future does not depend on whether any finite subject(s) believe that it will, or even actually experience it to do so. (If all finite subjects were to cease to exist, it might still be the case that, *had* any inquirers continued to exist and inquire concerning the matter, they *would* have found their resulting experiences to continue to conform to the pattern in question.)
§IV. “A Purely Psychical Product . . . Like Everything of which I Can Take Any Sort of Cognizance”

Recall that Peirce endorsed the “doctrine of immediate perception” well before arriving at his mature theory of perception. This provides some reason for doubt that this doctrine inherently supports realism about the external world.¹⁰ I shall now argue that Peirce’s explanation of the grounds for this doctrine even in later work—specifically, in his 1901 review of Pearson’s Grammar of Science—tends to undermine the realist reading.

In this review Peirce famously claims:

It is the external world that we directly observe. What passes within we only know as it is mirrored in external objects. In a certain sense, there is such a thing as introspection; but it consists in an interpretation of phenomena presenting themselves as external percepts. (EP 2: 62 [1901]).

In his mature theory of perception, Peirce distinguishes sense impressions—primitive, non-representational qualitative data—from percepts, the immediate objects of perception. Peirce sometimes describes these as “images or moving pictures or other exhibitions” (EP 2: 191 [1903]) synthesized from our sense impressions. But elsewhere he suggests that “The percept is the reality” (CP 5.568 [1901]),¹¹ or identifies such physical objects as “a yellow chair with a green cushion” as percepts (CP 7.619 [1903]). These claims do seem to support the realist reading, although they raise the question why

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¹⁰ After all, in 1868, the same year Peirce wrote that, pace philosophical views that argue that knowledge of one’s own mind is the independently available basis for knowledge of the external world, the priority relation is in fact the inverse—“all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts” (EP 1: 30)—he also wrote that “there is nothing absolutely out of the mind, but the first impression of sense is the most external thing in existence” (W 2: 191); his endorsement of the doctrine did not seem then clearly to lead him to embrace realism.

John Boler (2004: 76) also gives voice to doubts about the support the doctrine of immediate perception lends external world realism, suggesting that, while the doctrine is clearly opposed to Lockean representationalism about perception, it appears neutral between realism and idealism.

¹¹ Compare his claim that “the real world is the world of percepts” (EP 2: 223 [1903]).
Peirce would continue to think it suitable to describe percepts as images. (On external world realism, after all, yellow chairs are neither images nor constructions out of images.)

But in the Pearson review, Peirce follows his claim that percepts are external objects with an apparently anti-realist explanation of this claim. He gives an example:

I see an inkstand on the table: that is a percept. Moving my head, I get a different percept of the inkstand. It coalesces with the other. What I call the inkstand is a generalized percept, a quasi-inference from percepts, perhaps I might say a composite photograph of percepts. (*EP* 2: 62 [1901]).

The inkstand, Peirce remarks, is a “psychical product” (ibid.). It is a construction from particular images that force themselves onto the subject’s consciousness, one that posits further “coalescing” percepts or images on further occasions of experimental inquiry. If the inkstand is a real object, then other people will also have percepts of it; moreover, even if no one actually examines it, it will remain true that, had anyone inquired concerning it, they *would* have had further coalescing percepts of it. If these conditions are met, then

its characters are what they are, and persist at every opportunity in revealing themselves, regardless of what you, or I, or any man, or generation of men, may think that they are. That conclusion . . . I briefly express by saying that the inkstand is a *real* thing. Of course, in being real and external, it does not in the

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12 Friedman (1997: 266–67) and Lane (2017: 66) read this claim differently than I go on to do; when Peirce calls an object “psychical,” they take him to mean merely that it is thinkable. But this explanation leaves it entirely unclear what Peirce could mean in calling external objects like the inkstand psychical *products*. My explanation, on the other hand, explains this readily: such objects are composites of mental images or percepts. Thus they reflect the activity of the mind at two stages: first, in the synthesis of sense impressions into percepts, and second, in the projection of further possible percepts that “coalesce” with presently given ones and the combination of these into the “composite photograph” that just is the object.

(I suspect that Friedman and Lane would reply that this account compromises the object’s character as external. But this is not so on a Peircean construal of the external, on which an object is not merely real but also external just if it has its characters independently “of how we may think or feel,” full stop—and not only, like internal reals, of how we may think or feel about it. Since the inkstand has its characters independently of how any subject(s) *actually* think or feel about it—this is ensured by the condition that, *were* we to inquire concerning it, we *would* perceive it to have those characters—it remains external, on Peirce’s definition, even though it is a “purely psychical product” in the sense I suggest.)
least cease to be a purely psychical product, a generalized percept, like everything of which I can take any sort of cognizance. (ibid.).

The real inkstand is a *composite photograph* of possible percepts of it. The real inkstand is a *composite photograph* of possible percepts of it.\(^{13}\) We arrive at it by something like inference from our percepts, but this is not because percepts are mental items entirely distinct from it, but rather because they are its *parts*. If each percept of the inkstand is “an image or moving picture or other exhibition” of it (*EP* 2: 191 [1903]), it is not an independent object existing prior to, and efficiently causing, all these images, but is simply the *conjunction* or *set* of all of them. This would make sense of why Peirce, while denying that percepts represent objects beyond themselves, continues to describe them as images. It would also enable Peirce to maintain the doctrine of immediate perception: if each percept or image of the inkstand is a part of it, and if the inkstand is simply the sum of these phenomenal parts, then it is true that the percept does not represent an object beyond itself, but rather in perceiving the percept we directly perceive

\(^{13}\) Hookway (2012: ch. 7) has perceptively noted that, on Peirce’s view, all concepts are composite photographs of qualitative consciousness. But he does not note that Peirce follows this thought through to its logical implication by adopting a theory of objects, too, as such composite photographs.
the external object itself. But this way of maintaining the doctrine of immediate
perception seems to undermine—not to support—realism about the external world.14

In the Pearson review, then, we find a third aspect of Peirce’s mature theory of
perception that is difficult to explain on the realist reading. Not only does he hold that the
only non-ego to which the ego is related in perception is the future ego, as well as that
our sense of reality derives from our feelings of duality in perceptual experience (and
thus, apparently, from qualities internal to consciousness); he further holds that the
explanation of the fact that perception is immediately of external objects centers on the
fact that such objects are composites of mental images, and so remain “purely psychical
product[s].” Perhaps realist interpreters can find convincing ways of dismissing the
passages asserting these claims as outliers or of somehow reinterpreting these claims in
ways consistent with realism. In advance of such arguments, however, it seems to me that
these aspects of Peirce’s theory of perception suffice to call the realist reading into
serious question.

14 Indeed, Peirce puts the conception of reality at work here even more starkly in the next paragraph of the
Pearson review. Criticizing Pearson’s argument that natural law manifests the activity of the mind and so
cannot be real, Peirce argues that this inference manifests a confused conception of reality: Pearson “has
not thoroughly assimilated the truth that everything we can in any way take cognizance of is purely mental”
(EP 2: 63 [1901]). On the definition of reality Peirce employed throughout his career (deployed in the
discussion of the inkstand example), something’s being real does not require that it have its characters
independently of all representation—indeed, not only does it not require this, but it also does not permit
this, since we cannot have any conception of an object as it is independently of representation, sans
phrase—but only independently of its being actually represented as being that way by any particular person
or persons. The question of reality, then, is whether an object, “purely mental” though it must be, is of
human origin or not. Or, as Peirce puts it at the end of the paragraph:
If [Pearson] had thoroughly accepted the truth that all realities, as well as all figments, are alike of
purely mental composition, he would have seen that the question was, not whether natural law is
of an intellectual nature or not, but whether it is of the number of those intellectual objects that are
destined ultimately to be exploded from the spectacle of our universe, or whether, as far as we can
judge, it has the stuff to stand its ground in spite of all attacks. In other words, is there anything
that is really and truly a law of nature, or all pretended laws of nature figments[?] (ibid.).
Peirce’s “direct realism” about perception, then, like his realism about universals and laws, would seem to
rest on an anti-realist conception of reality, one that entails that “all realities . . . are alike of purely mental
composition.” It is hard to see how the realist reading can accommodate this.
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