

Peircean Realism: A Primer

Bridget Ritz

University of Notre Dame

Abstract:

Within American sociology, some of the most vociferous critiques of realism as a meta-theoretical approach come from scholars working within the tradition of American pragmatism (Reed, 2011; Martin, 2015). These critiques typically target the movement known as critical realism, but neglect the realism at the foundation of pragmatism itself. On the rare occasions when Charles S. Peirce's realism is acknowledged, it tends to be quickly dismissed without much, if any, argumentation (Martin, 2015: 110n27; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 138n181). This is strange, for Peirce's signature contributions to social theory are grounded in realism (Halton, 1986), including his concept of abduction, as this paper will show. Pragmatists interested in arguing against realism yet appropriating abduction need to reckon with Peirce's arguments for realism.

Within American sociology, some of the most vociferous critiques of realism as a meta-theoretical approach come from scholars working within the tradition of American pragmatism (Reed, 2011; Martin, 2015). These critiques typically target the movement known as critical realism, but neglect the realism at the foundation of pragmatism itself. On the rare occasions when Charles S. Peirce's realism is acknowledged, it tends to be quickly dismissed without much, if any, argumentation (Martin, 2015: 110n27; Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 138n181). This is strange, for Peirce's signature contributions to social theory and epistemology, namely, his triadic semeiotics (Halton, 1986) and the concept of abduction, as this paper will show, are grounded in realism. Pragmatists interested in arguing against realism yet appropriating Peirce's contributions need to reckon with his arguments for realism.

Peircean Realism

Peirce articulates realism as the view that there is real "Thirdness," which compels assent to the "Aristotelian" insight that what "exists" does not exhaust what is real.¹ Translated into somewhat more familiar language, Peircean realism is the view that *there is real causation*, and that this implies that *the real is irreducible to the observable*. Realism, for Peirce, is at once a *metaphysics of causation* and an *ontology*; the former implies the latter.

¹ Peirce (*PPM*:190, 1903) writes: "I should call myself an Aristotelian of the scholastic wing, approaching Scotism, but going much further in the direction of scholastic realism. / The doctrine of Aristotle is distinguished from substantially all modern philosophy <except perhaps Schelling's or mine> by its recognition of at least two grades of being. That is, besides *actual, reactive existence*, Aristotle recognizes a germinal being, an *esse in potentia* or as I like to call it an *esse in futuro*." Following recent Peirce scholarship (see, e.g., Lane, 2007n1), references to Peirce's work cited herein are as follows. References to *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking*, ed. P. Turrisi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) are represented by "*PPM*," followed by the page number. References to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931-60) are represented as "*CP*," followed by the volume and paragraph number. References to *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. N. Houser, C. Kloesel, and the Peirce Edition Project, 2 vols. (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992-98) are represented as "*EP*," followed by volume and page number. Reference to *Charles S. Peirce's Letters to Lady Welby*, ed. I.C. Lieb (New Haven: Whitlock's, Inc., 1953) is represented as "*LLB*," followed by the page number.

The Contrary

Peirce's realist metaphysics of causation derives its meaning from the opposite view, which is that *there is no causation*, at all. The denial of real causation is what holds together a raft of modern philosophies of science (including social science), giving them their family resemblance. To sociologists, perhaps the most familiar form of causation-denial is positivism.

For Hume, the grandfather of positivism (with Comte being the father), a "cause" is the subjective impression one gets when observing regularity in sequences of events. *There is nothing more* than that subjective impression.² Hume divests the term "cause" of its intuitive, realist meaning and re-invests it with a different sense. On this new conception, a "cause" is a fiction with which one projects a semblance of order onto the world. But that "order" is only apparent; there really is no order. Accordingly, "causes" are conjured to satisfy explanatory interest; there really is no causation. "Explanations" are functional, perhaps, but the world really is not subject to explanation. Humean positivism denies real causation.

Hume's causation-denial may be clarified when viewed from the angle of philosophical nominalism, which Peirce believed Hume's position embodied.³ Philosophical nominalism is rooted in medieval scholastics' debate over whether there are "real generals." Whereas realists, such as Duns Scotus, argued that there are real generals, nominalists, such as William of Ockham, argued that only particulars are real, and that what we think of as generals are mere names we use, say, for categorization purposes.

² I follow Groff's (e.g., 2016:411-21) interpretation of Hume. But while Groff characterizes Hume as taking a "passivist" position on the metaphysics of causation, I would suggest that, put more exactly, his position denies causation outright.

³ The following discussion of the realism-nominalism debate is indebted to the histories of the issue given by Boler (1963), Mayorga (2007), Peirce himself (e.g., *CP* 8.11, 1871; *CP* 1.15-26, 1903; *CP* 4.1, 1898; *CP* 2.166-168, 1902), and Abbott (1885:22ff), whose own genealogy Peirce applauded.

The realism-nominalism debate is often illustrated with an example like the following. A realist would argue that Horse is a real class, in the sense that there is something about each of the entities belonging in this group that makes them like each other and sets them apart from other entities. A nominalist would argue that there is nothing real that the entities grouped together as horses share in common, beyond the invented, heuristic category “Horse” that they have been more or less arbitrarily grouped with.

Peirce would not deny the value of such an illustration, but in his view it falls short of clarifying the heart of the issue. To Peirce, the realist-nominalist debate over whether there are real generals is about whether there is real causation. For to think, with the nominalists, that there are only particulars is to preclude the possibility of real *relations* between, or real *continua* that organize, particulars. But, to Peirce, real relations, continua, or, in his most exact and idiosyncratic turn of phrase, “Thirdness,” *are* the stuff of causation.^{4,5} Nominalism denies real causation by definition.

Peirce regarded Humean positivism as essentially nominalist because it presupposes the nominalist view that only particulars are real. Granting that, and granting that all particulars are in principle observable, it would necessarily follow that nothing unobservable is real. This poses a problem for those who would think that, for example, gravity and the forces of isomorphism

⁴ See Peirce’s “Harvard Experiment,” as it is known in the literature, for his argument for the “reality of Thirdness,” a concept which in his view grasps the nettle of the core insight fostered in the scholastic realist tradition (*PPM*:190-93, 1903). Peirce uses a handful of terms to articulate what he is getting at with “Thirdness”: “the category of thought, representation, triadic relation, mediation” (*EP* 2:345, 1905) as well as “continua” (see Lane, 2018:157).

⁵ Peirce tends to explain what he means by “Thirdness” in terms of the relation between what he calls “Third,” “Second,” and “First.” Peirce writes: “The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything else” (*EP* 2:248). Second, to Peirce, “is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other” (*EP* 2:248). Elsewhere, Peirce also writes: “The Third is that which bridges over the chasm between the absolute first and last [or Second -BR], and brings them into relationship” (*EP* 2:249). “The first is agent, the second patient, the third is the action by which the former influences the latter” (*EP* 2:250). “[T]here elements are active in the world, first, chance; second, law, and third, habit-taking” (*EP* 2:277).

are real causes, yet evident only in their effects. The logic of nominalism presupposed by Humean positivism compels denying that such unobservables are real causes, and, accordingly, denying that their so-called effects are of anything real. The problem, Hume would say, is in thinking that there are real causes in the first place – or, in Peircean terms, real relations, continua, Thirdness. Hence, Hume’s solution is to re-define a “cause” as the subjective impression left by one’s observation of regularity, and nothing more. Like its philosophical antecedent, Humean positivism denies real causation by definition.

Reductio ad Absurdum

Denying real causation has radical implications for those who care about science. Science is the pursuit of knowledge of causes to explain what happens and inform prediction about what will likely happen in the world. But if there is no real causation, then there can be no knowledge of causes. And if there can be no knowledge of causes, then there is no basis for explanation or prediction. If there is nothing more than what is observable, then science is fantasy at best, or nonsense.

Now, Peirce thought that denying real causation is absurd.⁶ But not simply because its logic forces re-conceiving science from down-to-earth work to head-in-the-clouds dreaming. Logic Peirce could swallow, even if it tasted ironic.⁷ What Peirce would not accept is self-deception. “Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts” (Peirce, *EP* 1:29). Only if one genuinely doubts real causation does one have grounds for

⁶ Key texts for understanding Peirce’s *reductio ad absurdum* of causation-denial include his (1868) “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (*EP* 1:28-55), his (1877) “Fixation of Belief” (*EP* 1:109-123) and his “Harvard Experiment” in the fourth of his 1903 Harvard Lectures (*PPM*:190-93, 1903).

⁷ “But, above all, let it be considered that what is more wholesome than any particular belief is integrity of belief, and that to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous” (*EP* 1:123.)

denying it. But no one does. Doubt, to Peirce, is the flipside of belief. Just as, in his view, belief is no mere cognitive state, but a way of being, like habit, so too doubt is not merely cognitive, but existential.⁸ We *live* belief in real causation. This is evident upon reflecting how much of what we do is based in implicit prediction, from expecting the sun to rise again each morning to expecting me to complete this sentence. Living on prediction means we just do not doubt real causation. So denying real causation is grounded in fooling oneself “to doubt in philosophy” what is simply not available for doubt, like the heart is not available for conscious control.⁹ By showing the absurdity of causation-denial, Peirce does not *prove* real causation, but what he shows is enough for concluding that the latter is the more reasonable account.

Accepting that there is real causation logically leads to certain results that bear on understanding what science is about. Whereas denying real causation casts the sensibleness of science into doubt, accepting real causation means that science is about figuring out what real causes operate to make what happens happen. Granting that real causes are in themselves unobservable, this implies that science is concerned with more than what is observable. Science rightly begins with observables, but there is a semeiotics to explanation: observables index real causes.¹⁰ Figuring out what those are is the task of science.

The Abduction-Realism Package

⁸ “Belief is not a momentary mode of consciousness; it is a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious.... Doubt is of an altogether contrary genus. It is not a habit, but the privation of a habit” (*EP* 2:336-37).

⁹ “...[N]ot having any doubt, nor believing that anyone else whom I could influence has, it would be the merest babble for me to say more about it. If there be anybody with a living doubt upon the subject, let him consider it” (*EP* 1:120-21.)

¹⁰ Peirce used “semeiotics” instead of “semiotics.” For a key text on Peirce’s semeiotics, see his (c.1894) “What Is a Sign” (*EP* 2: 4-10).

In light of the connection between scientific explanation and realism, the way in which realism grounds abduction can now come into focus. Peirce defines abduction as the mode of logical inference whereby one comes up with a hypothesis that, if true, would explain a surprising or puzzling observation.¹¹ But abduction is only sensible if explanation itself is not nonsense. For the only justification for why abduction should be accepted as a mode of logical inference is that it promises *to explain*.¹² Accepting abduction but denying realism is incoherent.

The Upshot

Peirce does not prove realism, but he shows that denying it is disingenuous, or naïve. Realism, for Peirce, is the view that there is real causation, which implies that reality includes more than observables. Peirce thought that realism is the “fundamental hypothesis” of science (Peirce, *EP* 1:120), for unless there is real causation, science is nonsense. The upshot of his rationale is this: denying realism compels surrendering the project of scientific explanation. Accordingly, whoever thinks there is any sense to scientific explanation, and to abduction as holding explanatory promise, has already bought into realism, whether they realize it or not.¹³

¹¹ For a particularly clear discussion of abduction, see the conclusion of Peirce’s (1903) “Sundry Logical Conceptions” (*EP* 2:287-288).

¹² “Its only justification is that its method is the only way in which there can be any hope of attaining a rational explanation” (*CP* 2.777, 1905, cited in Psillos, 2009:132). This harks back to an earlier statement: “But the only justification of an inference from signs is that the conclusion explains the fact” (*EP* 1:29, 1868).

¹³ Here I loosely paraphrase a comment Peirce made in a letter to a friend: “So if you believe that modern science has made any general discovery at all, you believe that general so discovered to be real, and so you are a *scholastic realist* whether you are aware of it or not” (*LLB*:39, cited in Boler, 1963:31n32).

References

- Abbott, Francis E. 1885. *Scientific Theism*. Third edition. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.
- Boler, John F. 1963. *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism: A Study of Peirce's Relation to John Duns Scotus*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Groff, Ruth. 2016. "On the Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality: Cheryl Frank Memorial Prize Lecutre 2015." *Journal of Critical Realism* 15(4):409-418.
- Halton, Eugene. 1986. *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lane, Robert. 2007. "Peirce's Modal Shift: From Set Theory to Pragmaticism." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45(4):551-576.
- Lane, Robert. 2018. *Peirce on Realism and Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, John Levi. 2011. *The Explanation of Social Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mayorga, Rosa M. 2007. *From Realism to "Realicism": The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1931-60. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, 8 vols. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1953. *Charles S. Peirce's Letters to Lady Welby*, edited by I.C. Lieb. New Haven: Whitlock's, Inc.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1997. *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*, edited by P. Turrisi. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1992-98. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, edited by N. Houser, C. Kloesel, and the Peirce Edition Project, 2 vols. Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- Psillos, Stathis. 2009. "An Explorer Upon Untrodden Ground: Peirce on Abduction." Pp. 117-151 in *Handbook of the History of Logic* (Vol. 10: Inductive Logic), edited by D. Gabbay, S. Hartmann, and J. Woods. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Reed, Isaac. 2011. *Interpretation and Social Knowledge: On the Use of Theory in the Human Sciences*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tavory, Iddo and Stefan Timmermans. 2014. *Abductive Analysis: Theorizing Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.