

Constitution, Causation, and the Final Opinion: A Puzzle in Peirce's *Illustrations*

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ABSTRACT: In “The Fixation of Belief,” Peirce apparently accepts the *causal claim* that real physical objects cause us to reach an indefeasible “final opinion” concerning them. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” he apparently accepts the *constitutive claim* that for physical objects to be real just is for them to be represented in that opinion. These claims seem inconsistent, since causal claims are explanatory and since equivalent claims cannot explain one another. Against prominent suggestions that Peirce actually rejected the constitutive claim, I argue that he accepted both, reconciling them via a Humean denial that causal claims are genuinely explanatory.

KEYWORDS: Charles Sanders Peirce, final opinion, causation, idealism, realism

This paper addresses an interpretive puzzle concerning Charles Sanders Peirce's two most famous papers, those that begin his series *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*: “The Fixation of Belief” (“Fixation”; 1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (HMIC; 1878). In these essays Peirce seemingly claims that it's because physical objects are real and impact our senses that a *final opinion* concerning them will¹ arise—one all who sufficiently inquire will share and that won't be unsettled by subsequent experience. He apparently accepts *the causal claim*: that real physical objects cause the final opinion concerning them. But Peirce also seemingly claims in these essays that for something to be real *just is* for it to be represented in the final opinion. He apparently accepts *the constitutive claim*: that physical objects' reality is

¹ Peirce later regretted stating pragmatic clarifications in the indicative mood, arguing that the proper clarification of truth appeals to “the predestined result to which sufficient inquiry would ultimately lead,” whether or not it actually will (*EP* 2: 419; 1907). Since this paper focuses on Peirce's early writings, it gives such clarifications in the indicative.

constituted by the final opinion concerning them. Yet if for p to be the case just is for q to be the case, then, plausibly, p cannot genuinely explain q , and so—since causal relations are explanatory—cannot be a cause of q . The causal and constitutive claims seem incompatible.

In response, some prominent commentators deny that Peirce really accepts the constitutive claim. The thesis of this paper is that this response is mistaken, and that Peirce instead reconciled the causal and constitutive claims by endorsing a Humean account on which ascribing a power to an object merely asserts—and doesn't explain—observable regularities in which it figures. Denying that causal relations are genuinely explanatory enabled him to affirm that physical objects are real and cause our observations and opinions concerning them—and yet that all *that* means is that our observations will lead us to settled, shared opinions.

§ 1 states the puzzle in more detail, expounding Peirce's apparent affirmation of the constitutive and causal claims and explaining the tension between them. § 2 treats Peirce's 1871 review of Fraser's edition of Berkeley's works, identifying there Peirce's Humean, regularity theory of causation and suggestive evidence that he accepts the constitutive claim. § 3 discusses 1872 manuscripts in which Peirce clearly affirms the constitutive claim and reinterprets the causal claim (stated almost exactly as in "Fixation") by means of his Humean theory to render it consistent with the constitutive claim. § 4 applies lessons from these earlier writings to the *Illustrations* papers in conclusion.

1. The Puzzle

1.1. *The Constitutive Claim*

In HMIC, Peirce introduces a third grade of clarity necessary to grasp our concepts' meanings fully: we must be able not only to correctly apply a concept in ordinary contexts

(the first grade) and to define it abstractly (the second), but also to specify the practical or sensible effects implicitly predicted in predicating it of objects. Indeed, he maintains: “Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects” (*W* 3: 266; 1878).

Having explained this *pragmatic maxim* or test of clarity, Peirce applies it to the concept of reality. We can apply it in ordinary contexts easily. And Peirce offers abstract definitions of it and of the concept of truth, suggesting that, while figments of imagination have whatever characteristics the imaginer thinks them to have, “we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be” (*W* 3: 271). We can define truth as “belief in the real” (*W* 3: 272): a belief is true iff its object is real and the characters it represents its object as having are ones the object indeed has (cf. *W* 3: 282; 1878).

These abstract definitions, however, don’t enable us to grasp these concepts fully; we must ascertain the sensible effects we predict in deploying them. 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.” Since these beliefs will be beliefs in the real, the harder question is: “how is true belief . . . distinguished from false belief?” (*W* 3: 271–72). What expectations would we have concerning a true belief as against a false one? We’d expect, Peirce replies, convergence of opinion concerning it: that, whatever different opinions inquirers begin with, they will all finally affirm the belief in question. So, the practical effect of something’s being real is that, following sufficient investigation, inquirers will indefeasibly agree concerning it. This “great law” of convergence of opinion, 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” (*W* 3: 273).

These passages suggest that, for Peirce, for an opinion to be true just is for inquirers finally to agree in affirming it, and for something to be real just is for it to be represented in such a final opinion. This is “what we mean” by calling something true or real: it is “embodied” in our concepts <true> and <real>. Peirce confirms this interpretation with his subsequent comments that “reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only since “the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is ... 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” (*W* 3: 274). This latter claim doesn’t contradict Peirce’s abstract definition of the real, as the former claim shows: that the reality of the real depends on its representation in the final opinion doesn’t imply that it depends on what characteristics any *particular* person(s) represent it as having. Still, in asserting the latter claim, Peirce apparently affirms the constitutive claim.

1.2. Objection and Reply

This argument that these HMIC passages commit Peirce to the constitutive claim presupposes that concepts’ pragmatic clarifications represent the fullest, most adequate specifications of their meanings. But it’s currently popular to deny that Peirce’s pragmatic clarifications clarify concepts’ *meanings* at all: to deny that they specify application-conditions of the concepts clarified or state analytic connections between the statements being clarified and the statements used to clarify them. The idea is that abstract definitions do this, while pragmatic clarifications merely elucidate statements’ import for inquiry of some weaker sort. Cheryl Misak, for instance, suggests that the pragmatic maxim wasn’t “designed to be a semantic principle about the very meaning of our concepts,” but only to clarify concepts’ “connections with practice,” identifying what inquirers would expect if predications of them

were true (2013: 30–31). Christopher Hookway (2000: § 2.6), Andrew Howat (2005: § II), and David Wiggins (2004: § 1) take similarly minimal views of pragmatic clarifications. But this interpretive trend is misguided. Peirce saw pragmatic clarifications as the most adequate specifications of the application-conditions of the concepts clarified, and the link between their clarified and clarifying claims is indeed analytic. Here are three arguments for this claim.

First and most straightforwardly, throughout his career Peirce held that “The entire meaning of a hypothesis lies in its conditional experiential predictions; if all its predictions are true, the hypothesis is wholly true” (*EP* 2: 96; 1901).² He thus explicitly claims that the hypothesis’s pragmatic clarification, which specifies the experiential effects implicitly predicted in affirming it, fully states its meaning or truth-condition.

Second, Peirce held that “questions which have no conceivable practical bearings” *ipso facto* “mean nothing” (*W* 5: 227; 1885). Claims that cannot be investigated empirically are either “downright absurd” or “meaningless gibberish,—one word being defined by other words, and they by still others, without any real conception ever being reached” (*EP* 2: 338; 1905; cf. *W* 3: 266; 1878). Abstract definitions, then, don’t show that the term defined expresses a real conception: only the pragmatic maxim tests this. Indeed, this point is key to the anti-metaphysical, anti-skeptical utility of pragmatism: it’s only because claims that don’t satisfy the maxim are empty that Peirce can dismiss metaphysical and skeptical hypotheses as meaningless.³ If the pragmatic maxim weren’t a principle about the very meaning of our concepts, this maneuver would be blocked.

² Compare *EP* 2: 332, 340–41, 357 (all 1905), and 402 (1907).

³ At least, Peirce holds that “almost every proposition of ontological metaphysics is either meaningless gibberish” or else “downright absurd” (*EP* 2: 338; 1905). This renders his pragmatism broadly positivistic; yet it’s distinguished from other “prope-positivisms” in that the pragmatist, rather than “merely jeering at metaphysics,” “extracts from it a precious essence”: namely, “scholastic realism” (*EP* 2: 339).

Finally, returning specifically to the pragmatic clarifications of truth and reality, Peirce holds that something that fails to satisfy these clarifications *ipso facto* fails to be true or real. He insists that we should “define the ‘truth’ as” that toward which “belief would tend if it were to tend indefinitely toward absolute fixity”—as the final opinion (*EP* 2: 336; 1905). That’s simply what truth is, “so far as there is any ‘truth’” (*EP* 2: 419; 1907). And so “questions concerning which the pendulum of opinion never would cease to oscillate, however favorable circumstances may be” are “*ipso facto* ... questions to which there is no true answer to be given” (*EP* 2: 358; 1905; cf. *CP*: 5.565; 1901). Indeed, there is no *reality* that serves as such questions’ subject matter, since “while there is a real so far as a question that will get settled goes, there is none for a question that will never be settled; for an unknowable reality is nonsense” (*W* 5: 228; 1885; cf. *CP*: 8.156; c.1900). It is analytic, for Peirce, that the true opinion concerning some question is the final one, and that the reality the question addresses is (*as it is*) represented in that opinion.

Most revealingly with respect to the relationship between the pragmatic and analytic grades of clarity, Peirce argues that while the analytic definition of truth as “the correspondence of a representation with its object” is a perfectly satisfactory “merely ... nominal definition of it,” the pragmatist must explain what this correspondence *consists in*. And the correct explanation is his pragmatic clarification: that “truth can be nothing more nor less than the last result to which the following out of this method”—that is, the right method of thinking—“would ultimately carry us” (i.e., the final opinion), and so consists in the correspondence of thought with “something in the nature of a representation”⁴ (*EP* 2: 379–80; 1906). Thus Peirce’s pragmatic clarifications are necessary to specify adequately what his analytic, “nominal” definitions *mean*, and so to state concepts’ application-

⁴ See footnote 18.

conditions clearly. The objection that the pragmatic clarification of reality doesn't imply the constitutive claim since it pertains to the third grade of clarity, not the second, therefore fails.

1.3. *The Causal Claim*

In "Fixation," Peirce apparently affirms the causal claim. He traces the quest for beliefs that doubt cannot unsettle through a series of belief-formation methods. The first three methods he considers⁵ cannot successfully fix belief, he argues: their adherents will eventually encounter intractable disagreement, recognize their belief to be "determined by any circumstance extraneous to the facts," and consequently "experience a real doubt of it, so that it ceases in some degree at least to be a belief" (*W* 3: 253; 1877). But the *method of science* yields beliefs that won't thus come unsettled. Here's Peirce's statement of 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. (*W* 3: 254).

Here, as in HMIC, Peirce links truth and reality with the final opinion. But he suggests a different priority relation between them. He doesn't clarify reality or truth by appeal to the final opinion. Rather, he seemingly explains convergence of opinion by appeal to objects' reality and causal role in sensation. He affirms, not that inquirers' final convergence in representing a physical object *constitutes* its reality, but that their doing so *causally depends on* its reality—the causal claim.

⁵ Namely: (1) the method of *tenacity*: reinforcing beliefs one already accepts; (2) that of *authority*: believing whatever claims authoritative institutions promulgate; and (3) that of *a priori* reasoning.

1.4. *The Tension*

Well, why not? Peirce doesn't contradict himself outright here: he explicitly denies neither the causal claim in HMIC nor the constitutive claim in "Fixation." Moreover, causal dependence and constitutive dependence are different notions of dependence. Why can't physical objects' reality *constitutively* depend on their representation in the final opinion even as their being so represented *causally* depends on their reality? Why can't both claims be true?

This paper will indeed argue that Peirce accepted both and successfully reconciled them. To see why this takes arguing, though, consider an argument for their incompatibility. Begin with Mark Johnston's plausible claim that there cannot be "*explanations* of the form 'A because B' where 'A' and 'B' are equivalent as an a priori and necessary matter" (1993: 95). In such cases, the *explanans* isn't sufficiently independent of the *explanandum* to genuinely explain it.⁶ Now, efficient-causal explanations seem like paradigmatic genuine explanations. But then, if a physical object's reality causes inquirers' representing it in the final opinion, it follows that their representing it cannot wholly constitute its reality (i.e., cannot be *just what it is* for it to be real), since then the two states of affairs would be necessarily, *a priori* equivalent. Given Johnston's claim and the assumption that efficient-causal statements constitute genuine explanations, the causal and constitutive claims are incompatible.

Of course, Peirce simply mightn't have recognized the tension between them. *Ceteris paribus*, though, an interpretation on which he did and attempted to resolve it would be preferable. Might he have changed his mind between "Fixation" and HMIC, endorsing the causal claim and rejecting the constitutive claim in the former but adopting the contrary positions in the latter? That's unlikely, since these articles originated in a single 1872 presentation to a discussion group he hosted with William James, and later Peirce discussed

⁶ Howat (2005: § III) challenges Johnston's claim. Peirce, however, rejects this incompatibility argument on different grounds.

the two as, and combined them into, a single paper (de Waal 2014: 17–19). Moreover, Peirce seemingly affirms the causal claim, too, in HMIC, suggesting that the sensible effects that clarify the concept of reality are real things’ propensities to *cause* belief. So the change-of-mind suggestion cannot resolve the puzzle.

1.5. *A Popular Solution*

If Peirce affirms the causal claim in HMIC, perhaps he doesn’t endorse the constitutive claim there after all. Prominent commentators like Wiggins, Hookway, and Robert Almeder think he doesn’t. Reconciling Peirce’s claims across “Fixation” and HMIC, they suggest, requires interpreting the pragmatic clarification of reality more weakly, reading it as an account only of the concept <reality>’s practical “upshot” (Wiggins 2004: 110), or of “what commitments I incur when I believe” that something is true or real (Hookway 2000: 60),⁷ or of what’s required for external reality to be knowable (Almeder 1975: 14). They read the pragmatic clarification as an account, not of what constitutes objects’ reality, but only of how their reality manifests itself in inquiry.

But this is the wrong way to reconcile the two articles. Already a half-decade before the *Illustrations*, in a review of Fraser’s edition of Berkeley’s collected works, Peirce endorsed a Humean position on which causal powers don’t genuinely explain their effects, and used this to reduce the claim that physical objects exist and cause our observations and opinions concerning them to the claim that, due to our observations, our opinions tend toward convergence. He affirmed, that is, only a minimal interpretation of the causal claim, one that renders it compatible with the constitutive claim he also explicitly affirmed.

⁷ Hookway’s directly discussing <truth>, not <reality> here. But in consequently denying that Peirce is “committed to the claim that there are no lost facts” (2000: 61), he allows that states of affairs can be real without being represented in the final opinion, *pace* the constitutive claim.

2. The Berkeley Review (1871)

2.1. The “Realist Conception”

In this review, Peirce argues that the nominalism–realism debate about universals derives from a deeper disagreement concerning what is “meant by the word *real*” (*W* 2: 467; cf. 471; 1871). The parties don’t disagree about the abstract definition of “the real”: both sides can accept Peirce’s definition of it as “that which is not whatever we happen to think it, but is unaffected by what we may think of it” (*W* 2: 467). They disagree instead about what features real things, so defined, must have.

Nominalists conceive of real things as efficient causes of sensation that exist “out of the mind” (*W* 2: 468). The alternative is the “*realist conception*” of reality (i.e. the conception Peirce’s realist about universals endorses),⁸ on which “human opinion universally tends in the long run to a definite form,” and this “final conclusion” that sufficient experience and thinking inevitably lead to “is the truth” (*W* 2: 468–69). Individual idiosyncrasies may affect when we achieve the final opinion on some question, but not what that opinion will ultimately be. Peirce concludes:

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. (*W* 2: 469).

As in HMIC, so, too, in the Berkeley review, Peirce affirms that something is real iff it will be represented in the final opinion.

This doesn’t settle, however, whether Peirce accepted the constitutive claim. For someone might (with Misak 2004/1991: 133) read Peirce as affirming here that the final opinion represents all and only real things (whence no realities are absolutely incognizable),

⁸ This label will appear in scare-quotes because, while this conception is endorsed by Peirce’s realist about universals, it isn’t clear that it’s a realist conception *of reality*. (See footnote 12.)

but not that things' reality is *constituted* by their being so represented.⁹ They could interpret Peirce as rejecting only the nominalist conception's claim that the real cause of sensation is incognizable (because super-sensible), agreeing that it is real constitutively independently of its representation in the final opinion. Indeed, he might think this necessary for it to be capable of causing our sensations and opinions in the first place.

2.2. Peirce's Regularity Theory

But Peirce's subsequent remarks suggest that this interpretation is incorrect. Immediately after concluding that exactly that which will be represented in the final opinion is real, Peirce asks the all-important question for understanding the relationship between the causal and constitutive claims: "What is the POWER of external things, to affect the senses?" (*W* 2: 469). In answer, he endorses a Humean conception of causal powers on which they aren't genuinely explanatory, and so efficient causes of sensations needn't exist constitutively independently of the final opinion:

To say that people sleep after taking opium because it has a soporific *power*, is that to say anything in the world but that people sleep after taking opium because they sleep after taking opium? ... In other words, 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. (*W* 2: 469).

⁹ That's also why Peirce's 1868–69 *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* articles are bypassed here: their central thesis concerning reality entails that the real will be represented in the final opinion, but not that being so represented constitutes its reality. (But see footnote 19.)

On Peirce's (early¹⁰) Humean account, to ascribe a power to an object is simply to affirm that events in which that object figures will exhibit certain regularities. The power doesn't *explain* these regularities; the power-ascription simply *asserts* them.

The constitutive and causal claims seemed incompatible, recall, only given the assumption that causal claims amount to genuine explanations. Since Peirce denies this, he can consistently accept both claims. He can hold that for physical objects to be real just is for them to be represented in the final opinion, while also holding that they cause the sensations that lead to convergence on the final opinion. For he can deny that the latter statement entails that physical objects' reality contributes to *explaining* the final opinion: describing them as its causes, he can say, simply acknowledges beforehand the regular convergences of empirical opinion that constitute them.

Peirce almost says as much here—but not quite. From his Humean account of causation, he concludes not merely that external objects don't genuinely explain convergence on the final opinion, but further that—provided that such objects “can be known only as exerting a power on our sense”—*to assert that there are such things is to assert only that* human thought will eventually converge on a shared final opinion. Granting the proviso, this amounts to the constitutive claim: that for physical objects to be real just is for them to be represented in the final opinion. But some might deny that Peirce accepts the proviso, insisting that, for Peirce, we don't merely know physical objects as (intrinsically unknowable) causes of sense-perception, but know them directly and intrinsically *in* perception. Therefore, the case that Peirce accepts the constitutive claim cannot rest entirely on the Berkeley review:

¹⁰ Later Peirce grounded powers in their manifestations in merely possible experience, too, not just actual experience. Still, his later account remains Humean in stating that power-attributions only *posit*, and don't *explain*, patterns within experience (*EP* 2: 354–57; 1905). Compare his suggestion that efficient causation is a mere “metaphor” (*CP*: 8.272; 1902).

it requires textual evidence that Peirce affirmed this claim without qualification, abandoning the proviso. (§ 3 presents such evidence.)

Still, claims Peirce subsequently makes in the review strongly suggest that he accepts the constitutive claim. For instance, he observes that his “realist conception” of reality “involves ... the phenomenalism of Kant” (*W* 2: 470). Kant’s “Copernican revolution”

was precisely the passage from the nominalistic to the realistic view of reality. It was the essence of his philosophy to regard the real object as determined by the mind. That was nothing else than to consider every conception and intuition which enters necessarily into the experience of an object, and which is not transitory and accidental, as having objective validity. In short, it was to regard the reality as the normal product of mental action, and not as the incognizable cause of it. (*W* 2: 470–71).

Nominalists regard real objects as Kantian things-in-themselves. “Realists” like Peirce regard them as Kantian *appearances*: constitutively dependent on being represented, and yet (empirically) real in being not transitory and accidental, but stably manifested within experience.¹¹ As he argues, the realities our experiences represent are “not ... the unknowable cause of sensation,” but “*noumena*, or intelligible conceptions which are the last products of the mental action which is set in motion by sensation” (*W* 2: 470). Their being thus constitutively depends on the fact that inquirers will finally agree in representing them. On Peirce’s “realist conception” of reality, it is this “consensus or common confession which constitutes reality” (*W* 2: 471). As he’d argued earlier: “The Real thing is the ultimate opinion about it” (*W* 2: 440; 1870). Its reality doesn’t explain but *consists in* its representation in the final opinion.

¹¹ Compare: a “Kantist” who denies “that a thing-in-itself can, however indirectly, be conceived” becomes a pragmatist (*EP* 2: 353–54; 1905).

2.3. *A Countervailing Passage?*

So far, the Berkeley review strongly suggests that Peirce accepts the constitutive claim, *pace* Wiggins, Hookway, and Almeder. And it also shows the assumption that Peirce's affirming the causal claim precludes his affirming the constitutive claim to be mistaken. One final point about the review merits consideration before moving on: a passage that initially appears incompatible with the constitutive claim, but in fact is consistent with it.

There Peirce claims that the realist conception is "highly favorable to external realities," and indeed that "there are many objects of true science which are external" (*W* 2: 470). This may seem to imply that physical objects exist constitutively independently of their representation in the final opinion. But it doesn't. For here Peirce stipulates a particular definition of "external": while "the real" means that which is independent of how we may think or feel about it," the *external* is independent "of how we may think or feel," period (*W* 2: 470). The word "we" is crucial here; to see this, consider Peirce's clarification of reality once more (setting aside the specifically external for a moment).

The independence of thought (and feeling) that characterizes the real, recall, is independence, "not indeed of thought in general," but only "of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought; ... of how you, or I, or any number of men think" (*W* 2: 469). It's independence of how any limited collection of inquirers thinks at particular times, not necessarily of how such inquirers generally will think following sufficient inquiry. That's why Peirce holds that, though "the reality of that which is real" doesn't depend on "what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it," still it "does depend on the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in it" (*W* 3: 274; 1878). It's constitutively dependent on the fact that, following sufficient investigation, inquirers will ultimately agree in representing it.

Now, on Peirce's definition, external things possess greater independence of inquirers' mental states than internal realities: they are independent, not merely of what particular inquirers think about them, but of what they think *or feel* about *anything*. But since the final opinion is independent of how any number of particular people think or feel about anything, an object's reality can depend on its representation in the final opinion while remaining external, on Peirce's definition. He noted this explicitly elsewhere, remarking that "what I mean by the *external* might vary with how persons of a given general description *would* think under supposable circumstances" (*CP*: 6.327; c.1909; cf. *W* 3: 49; 1872). It might constitutively depend on how inquirers in general will or would think following sufficient inquiry—on its representation in the final opinion. Thus Peirce's affirmation that external realities exist doesn't contradict the constitutive claim.¹²

3. "On Reality" (1872)

The Berkeley review strongly suggests Peirce's commitment to the constitutive claim and shows how he rendered it compatible with the causal claim. Still, he emphasizes the causal

¹² Similar points apply concerning his affirmation that objects we experience "really exist just as they are experienced out of the mind," since, for Peirce, this means only that they are constitutively independent of being "in such relation to the individual mind that that mind cognizes it" (*W* 2: 471). That's consistent with their being constitutively dependent on representation in the final opinion.

Though these passages don't call into question Peirce's affirmation of the constitutive claim, however, they do considerably complicate the issue of his relationship toward *realism*. On its face, the constitutive claim certainly seems importantly idealist or anti-realist in spirit. Yet there are other realist theses that Peirce clearly accepts: *scholastic* realism or realism about universals, for one (*EP* 2: 354; 1905), and what Robert Lane calls *basic realism*—the thesis that there is "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" (Lane 2017: 2)—for another. Even concerning simply the physical world, the passages just considered show that, as Peirce himself defined these theses, he saw himself as a realist about external entities and about objects of experience. So it takes great care to properly distinguish the realistic from the idealistic components in Peirce's account of the physical world, and space constraints do not allow for that careful treatment here: it takes enough space just establishing that he really did accept the constitutive claim! But perhaps Peirce's own view that the constitutive claim represents "an Idealistic theory of metaphysics" (*W* 3: 59; 1872) is a plausible one. In that case, this paper will have shown that, notwithstanding his basic realism and (idiosyncratically-defined) affirmation that real physical objects are external, Peirce nevertheless accepts an interesting form of idealism about, *inter alia*, the physical world (one stronger than other forms of idealism that have plausibly been attributed to him, such as *basic idealism*—see Lane 2017: 59—which states only that anything real is cognizable).

claim in “Fixation” (while explicating the scientific method’s fundamental hypothesis) more strongly than he had in the review. So it would bolster confidence in the view that he accepted the constitutive claim if we could find manuscripts where, after introducing the fundamental hypothesis, Peirce argues that it should be (re-)interpreted to fit that claim. Further, recall that in the review, Peirce’s most explicit near-statement of the constitutive claim contains a proviso, one it’s unclear he accepts. If manuscripts existed where Peirce made this affirmation without any proviso, though, they would show decisively that he accepted the constitutive claim.

Happily, there are manuscripts fitting both desiderata: drafts for a book on logic (never completed). The book’s structure evolved throughout early 1872. Eventually, its first three chapters comprised material later incorporated into “Fixation.”¹³ Peirce introduced the fundamental hypothesis in his May–June 1872 draft of chapter 3 (MS 189), and his statement of it matches that in “Fixation” almost exactly (*W* 3: 27).¹⁴ “To describe the method of scientific investigation” is, he states, “the object of this book” (*W* 3: 28). Accordingly, if Peirce’s endorsement of the fundamental hypothesis led him to abandon (or more explicitly reject) the constitutive claim, then in his autumn drafts of chapter 4, “On Reality,” he should deny that representation in the final opinion constitutes what it is for something to be real. But he doesn’t. Instead, he explicitly endorses an “Idealistic” reinterpretation of the fundamental hypothesis that reduces it to the claim that inquirers’ observations will yield a shared final opinion. Thus Peirce not only thought the constitutive claim compatible with the fundamental hypothesis but, further, positively accepted it.

¹³ With adjustments, chapter 1 became § III of “Fixation,” chapter 2 became § IV, and chapter 3 became § V (MS 187–89; *W* 3: chs. 9–11). (MS numbers, unless otherwise noted, correspond to Kloesel’s chronological re-ordering of Peirce’s manuscripts, incorporated in *W*.)

¹⁴ The only noteworthy difference: in the final version Peirce says we can reason to how things really are via “the laws of perception.” In the draft he says “the laws which subsist.” But there, too, he’s just spoken of realities affecting our senses “according to regular laws,” and so clearly means laws of perception.

3.1. Peirce's "Idealistic Theory of Metaphysics"

Let's begin by considering how Peirce explains this reinterpretation in one particularly clear and detailed draft, MS 200. He begins by motivating the fundamental hypothesis. The scientific method's followers believe, he suggests, that, since their sensations will determine their beliefs, sufficient inquiry will produce convergence of opinion. How is this possible when inquirers have different sensations from different points of view? The *conception of external realities* expressed in the fundamental hypothesis purports to explain this: if "observations are the result of the action upon the mind of outward things," then it's unsurprising that, though made from different perspectives, they're correlated so as to yield convergence of opinion. Peirce thinks that "of the truth of this conception of external realities there can be no doubt" (*W* 3: 44).

But then he sharply reverses course, claiming that "though the conception 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 requires an "embarrassing" mind/matter dualism. Further, it takes a model of causal explanation appropriately applied to items we experience and employs it to explain experience itself, which Peirce thinks illegitimate. We need 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" (*W* 3: 45).

On Peirce's solution, inquiry's sole aim is to settle opinion, and thus: "The only thing ... which our thought strives to picture or represent is the object of final belief" (*W* 3: 45). He carefully distinguishes the *act* of thinking and its *object*: "a thought as an operation which takes place in the mind ... or in the brain"—the cognitive act—"and the thought in the

sense of an image, or some kind of representation which the thinking process brings present to us” (*W* 3: 46)—its (immediate) object. The two usually bear different properties: “if I imagine a gray dragon the process of thinking which goes on in my mind is not gray. The dragon which I imagine is gray” (*W* 3: 46). This example shows that thoughts can have *immediate* objects without denoting *real* objects. There are no real dragons. Nevertheless, my imagining of a dragon is object-directed: it brings an image or representation before my mind. Thus Peirce regards thought’s immediate object as a mental entity: something image-like, constituted by its being represented.¹⁵

The crucial question is what relationship thought’s immediate object bears to its *real* object, to which our thought aims to conform. Suppose one is thinking of an island. How is the thought’s immediate object—one’s representation of the island, “the thought which is the product of thinking” (*W* 3: 46)—different from the real island? In only two ways, Peirce answers: first, it may represent the island incompletely or falsely, while the real island cannot be thus defective; and second, it depends on one’s particular act of thinking, while the island, being real, doesn’t. But (abandoning the island example) Peirce notes that these two criteria of reality are satisfied by a special “thought” (i.e., immediate object of thought): namely, “that thought which is the final upshot of the investigation” (*W* 3: 46). First, given Peirce’s pragmatic clarification of truth¹⁶ and rejection of incognizable realities, this “final thought” of the island cannot be false or incomplete. Second, since the final opinion doesn’t change with particular persons’ opinions, this final thought “is quite independent of how any number of men think, and thereby is distinguished from other thoughts as completely as the

¹⁵ Compare his suggestion that thought’s object must be a *feeling* (*W* 3: 39).

¹⁶ Enlisting the pragmatic clarification here isn’t anachronistic: Peirce introduced it (not so-called) in 1868 (*W* 2: 239).

external reality is.” Thus it “conforms entirely to the description which we have given of reality” (*W* 3: 46–47). He concludes:

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.* (*W* 3: 47; emphasis added).

The real object of thought, the external reality we aim to correctly represent, is itself a thought. As Peirce remarked in the Berkeley review: “To make a distinction between the true conception of a thing and the thing itself is ... only to regard one and the same thing from two points of view; for the immediate object of thought in a true judgment”—i.e., in the final opinion—“*is* the reality” (*W* 2: 471), notwithstanding its being “the product of thinking” (*W* 3: 46).¹⁷ Thus he doesn’t regard the conception of external realities as offering a constitutively independent explanation of the final opinion. Instead, he reduces it to a mere assertion that, in virtue of our observations, there *will be* a final opinion. His endorsement of the causal claim embedded in the conception doesn’t tell against his affirming the constitutive claim: rather, the “translation” he thinks necessary to render the conception acceptable presupposes the constitutive claim.

Peirce’s claim here generates a puzzle. The immediate object of thinking, recall, is mental: when one imagines something, one’s mental image is constituted by one’s representing it. But this makes it internal rather than external. So how can Peirce identify external realities with immediate objects of thought without compromising their externality? The answer is that, while he couldn’t identify them with immediate objects of *any particular persons’ thought*, the final opinion is no longer essentially the opinion “of any particular man,

¹⁷ Peirce later reaffirmed that a real object (of perception) is “the immediate object of the destined ultimate opinion” (*CP*: 8.261; 1897; cf. the quotations from a 1907 manuscript, Robin’s MS #322, at Lane 2017: 67–68).

or of any number of men,” since it isn’t altered by any number of people’s disagreeing with it at any particular times (*W* 3: 46; cf. 274; 1878). What, then, can the immediate object of a thought that isn’t essentially any particular persons’ be? I think it’s (a loose description of) *the fact that, following sufficient inquiry, an indefeasible type-identity will obtain between all investigators’ relevant immediate objects of thought:*

Suppose that we were all ... omniscient and knew the full and precise truth about everything. ... The agreement then in the objects of belief would amount to identity. And these objects would not be fictions but realities. ... The very reality would be an object of belief,—a thought. (*W* 3: 57).

Following sufficient inquiry, inquirers’ immediate objects of thought wouldn’t be *numerically* identical: they might still exist at different times. (As Peirce remarks, their minds would remain distinct, since “while one of us was attending particularly to one thing another might be attending to another”: *W* 3: 57.) But they would be (and always remain) *type-identical*: they’d have exactly the same intrinsic properties. Now the fact that this indefeasible type-identity will obtain between the relevant representations of all who sufficiently inquire doesn’t depend on any particular representations belonging to particular persons. Hence, “the immediate object of the final opinion” (so to speak) satisfies the requirement that the real “is not *per se* an immediate object of my thought,” or yours, or any particular persons’ (*W* 3: 54). That’s how it can be “distinguished from other thoughts as completely as the external reality is” while nevertheless being a thought.

Mightn’t there be realities *more* external to the mind than the immediate object of the final opinion—realities constitutively independent of the final opinion? Peirce initially dismisses this as “a rather idle question,” since his interpretation of external realities explains everything they were introduced to explain (*W* 3: 47; cf. 57). Still, for completeness’ sake, he undertakes “to show that it can mean nothing at all to say that any other reality than this

exists” (*W* 3: 47). Here MS 200 breaks off, but in his final three drafts of chapter 4 (MS 203–5), he returns to this point. Not only does he repeatedly reiterate his claim from MS 200 that, while the conception of external realities as causes of our sensations initially seemed to explain the strange fact that different subjects’ sensations align so as to lead their beliefs to converge with one another, actually in endorsing this conception “we have not ... stated any additional fact to explain what we found strange but have only stated the strange fact in a more familiar way” (*W* 3: 58; cf. 49). He goes further in offering an argument that this is the only meaningful interpretation of which the conception admits.

He reintroduces the nominalist and “realist” conceptions of reality, considering the possibility of reconciling them by affirming “that entirely independent of all thought there exist such things as we shall think in the final opinion,” which affect our senses so as to produce convergence on accurate representations of them—but explicitly rejects this possibility, remarking that “the idealists have shown that ... there is a complete vacuity of meaning in saying that independent of all thought there exist such things as we shall think in the final opinion” (*W* 3: 56).¹⁸ That’s because:

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. (*W* 3: 56–57).

¹⁸ Some take Peirce’s remarks that everything real exists “in thought,” or is of “the nature of a representation,” or is “psychical,” to mean only that it’s thinkable (e.g., Lane 2017: 65). But sometimes he clearly means something stronger: that the reality of everything real is constituted by facts about the representations inquirers will or would have. The passages quoted in this paragraph show this. Here, for instance, if “independent of all thought” meant *unthinkable*, the idealists’ contention wouldn’t require extensive support: Peirce could just note that the embedded claim posits *unthinkable things we shall think*. That he bothers defending their contention—and does so by holding that the only facts “in thought” concern inquirers’ observations and opinions, and explicitly reducing the existence of objects represented in the final opinion to such facts—indicates that sometimes, such remarks signal Peirce’s support for the constitutive claim. And compare other passages where Peirce juxtaposes such remarks to stronger claims than that everything real is cognizable: that “the first impression of sense is the most external thing in existence” (*W* 2: 191; 1868); or that “the only object to which inquiry seeks to make our opinion conform” is *an idea*—“the predestined ultimate idea” (*CP*: 8.103; 1900); or that “all realities, as well as all figments, are alike of purely mental composition” (*EP* 2: 63; 1901).

Beyond this claim, “there is no additional fact which we can infer from these facts. For these embrace everything which takes place in thought, and as to anything out of thought we can know nothing” (*W* 3: 61)—and, further (as the preceding quote indicates), *conceive* nothing.

Thus the only meaningful sense in which we can suppose real things to exist is one on which their reality is constituted by the facts just stated. In other words:

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: 57).

For Peirce, the being of the external realities that cause inquirers’ aligned observations and convergence of opinion is *constituted by* their observations’ yielding convergence of opinion. It isn’t an independent explanation of this phenomenon.

The translation of the conception of external realities (that underlies the fundamental hypothesis in “Fixation”) that Peirce thinks necessary to render it acceptable is thus provided by what he calls an “Idealistic theory of metaphysics,” on which “observation and reasoning are perpetually leading us towards certain opinions and ... the fact of such a perceptual tendency is otherwise expressed by saying that the objects of those final opinions have a real existence” (*W* 3: 59). Far from precluding the constitutive claim, it entails it. Accordingly, Peirce’s stress on the fundamental hypothesis doesn’t indicate that he rejected the constitutive claim. Nor does the proviso that accompanied his clearest near-statement of the claim in the Berkeley review, since his statements of the claim in these manuscripts don’t include this proviso. The appearances that Peirce accepted the constitutive claim are genuine: he did think that the reality of real things (including physical objects) is constituted by their representation in the final opinion.

3.2. *Forces—and Realities—as Regularities*

Before concluding, let's briefly consider Peirce's account in these manuscripts of the relationship between the causal and constitutive claims. He maintains there, recall, that, realities' existence before the final opinion is formed can consist only in the fact that inquirers' observations will yield that opinion. This assertion is reminiscent of his Humean conception of causal powers from the Berkeley review—on which to say that an object has a causal power is just to posit a regularity in experience as one to be taken account of beforehand—and his near-endorsement of the constitutive claim on its basis. It's unsurprising, then, that in fleshing out this assertion, he appeals to his Humean conception once again.

It initially seems odd, Peirce admits, to identify a real entity with the immediate object of the final opinion, since “the belief is future and may even not ever be attained, while the reality actually exists.” But physicists should recognize that it's unproblematic to hold “that the existence of a present reality is in one sense made by a contingent event” (*W* 3: 59), given the manner of existence of physical forces—to which, he insists, we can assimilate that of physical objects:

At first sight it seems no doubt a paradoxical statement that, “The object of final belief which exists only in consequence of the belief, should itself produce the belief”; but there have been a great many instances in which we have adopted a conception of existence similar to this. The object of the belief exists it is true, only because the belief exists; but this is not the same as to say that it begins to exist first when the belief begins to exist. ... The same is true in regard to the existence of any other force. It exists only by virtue of a condition, that something will happen under certain circumstances; but we do not conceive it as first beginning to exist when those circumstances arise; on the contrary, it will exist though the circumstances should never happen to arise. And now, what is matter itself? The physicist is perfectly accustomed to conceive of it as merely the centre of the forces. It ... follows that matter itself only exists in this way. ... There is nothing extraordinary therefore in saying that the existence of external realities depends upon the fact, that opinion will finally settle in the belief in them. And yet that these realities existed before the belief took rise, and were even the cause of that belief, just as the force of

gravity is the cause of the falling of the inkstand—although the force of gravity consists merely in the fact that the inkstand and other objects will fall. (*W* 3: 30–31).

Peirce’s Humean conception shows itself again: a causal power is merely the fact of an experiential regularity, not a constitutively independent entity capable of explaining that regularity. But since material objects are mere bundles of powers—for them, to be is to act, as Aristotle remarked—their existence, too, consists merely in, and doesn’t explain, the (possible) future regularity that inquirers will finally agree in representing them.¹⁹ Still, there’s nothing wrong with saying that they exist before that agreement and cause it to obtain, since causes needn’t genuinely explain their effects. But this is only acceptable because to affirm their present existence is merely to assert beforehand that that regularity will or would obtain. Again, Peirce’s Humean justification of the causal claim doesn’t contradict but presupposes the constitutive claim.

Peirce’s “Idealistic theory of metaphysics” thus extends physicists’ conception of the reality of physical forces “to all real existence.” Forces’ “existence depends on their manifestations or rather on their manifestability.” And Peirce’s Idealistic theory will similarly “hold these two facts to be identical, namely that” real things “exist and that sufficient investigation would lead to a settled belief in them” (*W* 3: 59). It takes even physical objects’ reality to be constituted by their representation in the final opinion.

4. Conclusion: Reassessing the *Illustrations*

This evidence from Peirce’s early-1870s writings is dispositive for resolving the puzzle in the *Illustrations* on which this paper has centered. It shows, first, that Peirce’s endorsement of the causal claim (that physical objects’ reality and action on the senses cause the final opinion

¹⁹ Thus Peirce’s “theory of reality ... makes all reality something which is constituted by an event indefinitely future,” namely, “the agreement that the whole community would eventually come to” (*W* 2: 252; 1869).

concerning them) provides no evidence that he rejects the constitutive claim (that for even physical objects to be real just is for them to be represented in the final opinion). On Peirce's Humean account of causation, causal power-ascriptions only assert—and don't genuinely explain—regularities in experience; therefore, causes needn't be constitutively independent of their effects. And they aren't, in the relationship between physical objects and the final opinion: Peirce explicitly construes the fundamental hypothesis as “only another form of stating the fact that a fate leads every investigator to a predestined conclusion,” not an independent explanation of this fact (*W* 3: 49; 1872).

Not only does the fundamental hypothesis not conflict with the constitutive claim, then, Peirce accepted it only on an “Idealistic” interpretation that entails the constitutive claim. We see this in the *Illustrations*, too: Peirce's pragmatic clarification of reality represents his fullest, most adequate statement of what his affirmation in “Fixation” of real physical objects *means*. And his explicit answer is that, though physical objects' reality doesn't depend on what particular inquirers think, it does constitutively depend on “the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in” them (*W* 3: 274; 1878). Thus the paper's examination of Peirce's writings before the *Illustrations*, while dispelling the appearance that Peirce's endorsement of the fundamental hypothesis prevents his endorsing the constitutive claim, has not only left intact but decisively supported the initial suggestion that his pragmatic clarification of reality entails the latter. Accordingly, it justifies reading Peirce as affirming not only the causal claim, but also the constitutive claim throughout his early works, including his famous papers from the *Illustrations*.²⁰

²⁰ Thanks to Cheryl Misak, David James Barnett, Gurpreet Rattan, an audience at the American Philosophical Association's Central Division (especially Aaron Wilson and the commentator, Josh Gert), and several anonymous referees for helpful comments on versions of this paper.

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