

**Realism, Nominalism, And Consensual Ignorance:
Peirce And Pragmatic Realism
Presidential Address**

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In his comments on the fourth of Peirce's 1898 Cambridge Conferences lectures, Hilary Putnam gives us a penetrating description of the difference between Peirce and his pragmatic brethren James and Dewey on the question of realism. As it is, in broad form, Peirce's realism that interests us here, Putnam's remarks will help us clarify just what Peircean realism amounts to.

... Peirce's views are much more in line with the tradition of metaphysical realism (or as Peirce called it elsewhere, [ed. note] "scholastic realism") than with the pragmatism of James or Dewey. For James and Dewey, there is no such thing as Nature's own language; we make languages, guided by our interests, ideals, and by the particular "problematic situations" (as Dewey would say) that we find ourselves in ... [N]either of them supposed that *that to which inquiry would converge* is independent of *us* ... there is no such thing as discovering Nature's own categories, for James and Dewey. For Peirce, Nature has a set of "joints" which any group of determined inquirers will discover if they pursue their inquiry long enough; ... (RLT: 73)¹

The doctrine that there are "real" objects of knowledge and that such reality is independent of our personal opinions or egotistic whims is what Peirce, then, called "realism." A progressive realism, a realism accounting for continuity, claims that near one end of its spectrum are those real objects we know as trees or rocks, but that in addition there are also real objects near the other end of its spectrum, like "gravity" or "beauty," that do not actually exist. This view makes sense, upon reflection. We all acknowledge that the reals we term "gravity" and "beauty" do function as they do independently of our whims, however much we may disagree about exactly what these terms may mean. But these objects *are there*, in the cosmos, in nature. Most of you, I hope, would allow gravity such a real status, "But," you object, "Beauty? Please! Not another Platonic sentimentalism!" Peirce worked for thirty years, until 1892, in a full-time administration and laboratory position with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, where a large part of his time was taken up measuring variances in the clear real of gravity at various points around the

globe. A most compelling real, gravity. Pendulums were the experimental measuring instruments of record, here. And in a definition of aesthetics he gave a decade after leaving the Survey, thus, likely a definition with some maturity built into it, Peirce clears up the subject as to the reality, the compelling reality, of beauty:

... the question of esthetics is, What is the one quality that is, *in its immediate presence*, [the good, the beautiful, the noble]? Upon this question ethics must depend, just as logic must depend upon ethics. Esthetics, therefore ... appears to be possibly the first indispensable propedeutic to logic, and the logic of esthetics to be a distinct part of the science of logic that ought not to be omitted. [Urban, trans.; note in American Society for Aesthetics 1997 keynote paper]

C.S. Peirce
Collected Papers 2.199²

So, the good, the beautiful, and the noble, as one and *in its immediate presence* at least at *first*, as Peirce called such things in this respect of immediacy, is also a compelling real. Real enough for aesthetics to influence our ethics, and ethics in turn our logic. All three, aesthetics, ethics, and logic, then, are *real objects*, I should think. But neither gravity nor its sometimes metaphysical competitor, beauty, exists in the sense of our being able to hand to someone else some gravity, or some beauty. Whether near or far from our particular vantage point in a progressive realism, all such reals may be known by their experimental consequences.

The doctrine of “nominalism,” that there are no real objects independent of us in either of the senses described above, says that we ascribe names to things like “gravity” not to point out reals, but to give titles to collections of properties. And who is responsible for all this collecting? You and I are. And remember that according to Putnam, if we be Jamesians or Deweyans, as *we* collect *we* make the language used, *we* presume at best a weakened sense of autonomy in our knowledge and dismiss the notion of nature having categories of its own. The self-referentialism possible in *any* pragmatic doctrine triumphs is *we* perform the collecting of properties for our definitions and descriptions in the absence of a critical, Peircean logic of events.

In the end, then, nominalism says that we ascribe general names to collections of properties that we have assembled for our own purposed, even if of those purposes, perhaps, we are not consciously aware. I am thinking here, for example, of the strains of racism manifested in the environment of my youth: a child can hardly be entirely aware of the nominalistic collection of properties, mostly only *imagined*, used in such situation. In passing we may note that this sort of unconscious nominalism is at root what the relativist *thinks* he exposes when attacking the al-

leged objectivity of science. But science or, better still, pragmatism, the *method* of science, says “So what?”. We do not care, logically, whether someone thinks they are being objective or not: the critical, self-correcting faculty of the method *prevents* us from caring much about such claims. As Peirce described it in a manuscript from 1907,

The method of pragmatism is simply the experimental method, which, (taking the word “experiment” in its widest sense, so as to make it applicable to cases in which the fulfillment of the conditions has to be waited for instead of being artificially produced) is the invariable procedure of all successful science. Thomas Beddoes showed, as early as 1792, that it is the procedure even of mathematics. (Peirce 1907/MS 320: 29)

This method keeps the relativist’s charge about science from sticking: the relativist seeks no difference between the obvious *potential* for prejudice in science, or anywhere else for that matter, and the overall *method* of science itself.

We also recognize here the more general position of relativism, in the sense of all our collections and ascriptions allegedly being of equal worth when seeking knowledge. Postmodern positions, which in their reaction to positivism generally seem to exclaim “Abandon ship!”, are captured here in the sense that pragmatism defends a common ground between positivist and postmodern extremes for rationality and creativity, genuinely *critical*, logically sound creativity. Such is one of the ideas developed in my *Elements of Knowledge: Pragmatism, Logic, and Inquiry*, forthcoming this fall from Vanderbilt University Press.

We note then that two varieties of nominalism emerge: that of the relativistic nominalist, who would say “All forms of beauty or justice are of equal merit,” and that of the *snotty* nominalist, who would say “My form of justice is the only one that counts, and it’s beautiful.” Clearly it is the latter, more aggressive variety that is the logical keystone in this arrangement, for it is the snotty nominalist who will be inevitably called upon to settle the disputes that a weakened relativism could allow, and it is also by opposition the snotty nominalist against whom further calls for relativism will be generated. So it turns out that for present operational purposes these varieties of nominalism may not be worth distinguishing, though surely they logically are.

On the other hand, the realist would say that we acknowledge things like trees and rocks, or “gravity,” or “Justice,” or “beauty,” because they are real objects that are independent of our wishes, that are persistent in reality, and that influence us considerably but which we do not influence by our desires as to what the nature of their properties or characteristics may be. The nominalist, on the other hand, would by default have to say that with such examples we have instances of collected

properties or characteristics of what *we consider* to be trees and rocks, or “gravity” or “justice,” or “beauty,” to which we assign special names. The difference between realistic and nominalistic outlooks is apparent any time we enter into criticism with another person on an important point: if we stay on the level of the point, however poorly understood, realism is our aim. But if we take the matter in a totally individualistic way, so to speak, our nominalistic tendencies will be showing. This potentially humdrum practical observation leaves unattended the question as to whether or not, should such consequences of effects manifest themselves from a complete and utterly fictional construction, we should take it for real. This also leaves unattended the apparent difficulty with the nominalistic position when it is confronted with regularities in experience which clearly exceed what statistical coincidence alone could account for. Evolution, for example, is such a regularity.

You can see that while realism could seem at first acquaintance confusing and fantastical to an ordinary person, nominalism in our conjunct form invites us to make up our reality just as we please, assigning names to collections of properties according to whatever suits our private purposes, even if those purposes are, consciously unknown. The latter, in my mind, is the more fearful of the two, as nominalism has not within it any critical faculty for self-correction, as realism does. So, nominalism turns out to be a rather dangerous doctrine for the acquisition and development of human knowledge, for if I assign the name “Honesty” to properties X, and Y, and Z while you assign the name “Honesty” to properties not-X, and not-Y, and not-Z, we will find ourselves unable to decide which of us has the more accurate understanding of “Honesty” except by means of which of us can summon the greater amount of persuasive force, or military force, or political force, or Gestapo-like force, or something like these. Those nominalisms that tend toward the relativistic, on the other hand, are by internal coherence and agreement, and by their anti-normative stance, repositories of what I call consensual ignorance. All these have agreed that no norms shall be invoked, the result being that without at least a normative *process* or normative *logic*, a *Peircean* logic, ignorance cannot be found out. That is, all relativistic nominalisms agree, consensually, to ignorance. But while norms and ignorance may be kept happily separated on this view, *being wrong* can be normatively pointed out, it is boasted. Strange logic, you’ll agree, having norms and ignorance distanced from one another but still claiming normative authority. But we see that this pointing occurs precisely when these norms are the ones reached consensually.

Which brings to mind the occasion which prompted me to try to turn this little paper from some dry, nominalistic recitation on Peirce’s metaphysics into something with a more pungent, realistic flavor to it. Besides, who wants to sit through another paper on “Why I Like Charlie’s Reals”? The occasion of transformation

was this. In the 14 February 1997 Southwest Edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, page A12, is a review of Leon Gast’s “When We Were Kings,” a film which deals with the epic 1974 Ali-Foreman boxing match in Zaire. At one point, reviewer Joe Morgenstern takes Norman Mailer to task for using a “stupid, racist term” when Mailer “... describes the George Foreman of that time as the essence of ‘negritude.’” Now Norman Mailer, whatever else you may think of him, knows his shop, and so I wondered what other meanings the suspect term might have. Sure enough, two literary types that I know informed me that Mailer, “knowing his shop,” had doubtless used the suspect term in its original literary sense, one associated with the Harlem Renaissance and implying a kind of classicism of stature. Now this incident seems to me to involve a good deal more than just a reviewer’s unfamiliarity with literary definition, a good deal more to include the clash of metaphysics behind the issue of intellectual integrity and the politicization of speech. For it seems to me explicit in this example that the offended party is in the nominalistic mire to the extent that any word beginning with “negr ...” need be inspected no further: its definitional status is pre-determined, and any user of a term beginning with “negr ...” is a stupid racist. This incident also illustrates the disregard of what Peirce described as the fundamental tenets of any ethics of terminology, namely, that the originator(s) of a term have the right to determine how it is to be used, and that all subsequent users have an obligation to account for the original usage. So in this instance Norman Mailer comes out the Peircean realist, and the reviewer comes out the Jamesian, “this is what I am familiar with and from same truth emerges,” nominalist. And when you get right down to the pragmatic difference between Peirce and James in particular, between pragmatism as Peirce’s search for meaning and James’ search for truth, the metaphysical opposition is glaring. Thus, realism provides the conditions for evolutionary knowledge of some Peircean/Popperian sort, for hopefully getting clearer meanings and understandings of reality. When you attempt to turn this doctrine of Peirce’s into a doctrine of truth, as James attempted to do, the experimental well is poisoned and a collapse into a mechanicalistic kind of nominalism is inevitable. We would want a stable meaning of “honesty” in hand, for example, before proceeding to determine whether or not “Stewart is honest” were true.

In Peirce’s sense, reals are not entirely independent of our thought *altogether*, for if they were how could we come to know them? But reals *are* independent of our arbitrary or egotistic thought, which is to say that *we do not make up the objects of our knowledge*, however mundane or sophisticated they may be. On this view we know reals and all else by pragmatic criticism of testable consequences. Let us now look into the general, critical logic of events we know as pragmatism, with its abductive generation of hypotheses, deductive testing of them, and inductive appraisal of the survivors, and how it relies on realism.

For our present purpose it will be necessary to say of any substantive Test, "Here test your explanation or hypothesis against the *reality* the problem calling for solution highlights, for results." Every substantive problem that we notice and attempt to solve by test, then, actually represents a window on reality, and asks two questions of us, namely:

1) "Is the theory or set of fundamental beliefs we are proceeding with in this moment of testing still intact after we have concluded our test?" or "Has the present problem and our attempted solutions to it left our fundamental beliefs or base sense of reality unchanged, or does it invite change in our assumptions about reality?"

2) "Does this proposed, hypothetical solution to our immediate problem explain our immediate problem, or not?"

When the subject of our inquiries is the nature of reality itself, we are dealing with the subject of metaphysics, of course. When the subject is human knowledge itself and the beliefs that enter into it, we are dealing with philosophy of knowledge. Clearly, if our fundamental assumptions about reality, our metaphysics, are of a nominalistic character, our knowledge will follow suit. But let us return to our two questions from above.

There are any number of examples from the histories of various pursuits that illustrate how the question about belief, above, can result in epoch-length changes in one's metaphysics, and how answering the question about explanation, above, can lead directly to such fundamental changes. The rise during the nineteenth century of our modern understanding of infectious disease, which rendered absurd the old and venerated humoral theory of disease, is one such example. The humoral theory, with its technique of bloodletting as a supposed curative measure, simply did not rid people of disease processes. With any patient or immediate problem of disease confronting the humoral (but likely *humorless*) physician, our question as to explanation, above, was answered in the negative. And this led, eventually, to a change in belief about reality and our place in it, as follows. As this illustration shows, we will sustain a bankrupt metaphysics through lots of rough sledding if we have staked a nominalistic claim on it.

The theory or fundamental set of beliefs or base sense of reality that had sustained the humoral theory as accepted medical wisdom for over 2,000 years was an inaccurate one, of course, saying in effect that disease processes were processes that arose *within* us due to supposed "imbalances" in various bodily fluids. To correct such imbalances, it was believed that various amounts of these fluids needed to be removed, thus restoring their overall balanced state and the state of health it allegedly produced. As we now know, of course, this theory *never solved the problem* that each patient represented. With the arrival of the germ theory of disease and our developing knowledge of microorganisms, their possible means of trans-

mission and their likely actions within the body, we found ourselves equipped with a theory that *could and did solve the problem* of illnesses of microbial derivation. Which is to say, it solved a large *metaphysical* problem, *once and for all*. And with this germ theory, we employ a different set of fundamental beliefs than the humoral theory could allow. With the germ theory, our base sense of reality must take account of *infection*, that is, for the agents of some disease processes arising *outside* of us, invading our physiologies, and causing illness. This puts us in a different status regarding disease, and it requires of us a modified base sense of reality which acknowledges that, in many instances, we are the objects or targets of infection. To return to the older theory, where disease supposedly arose solely from within us because of humoral imbalance, would be absurd and impossible. It would be an interesting exercise, though, to investigate to just what extent the implied logic of modern pathology tilts in fact towards a pre-Pasteurian metaphysics.

Important to note is the fact that every exercise of pragmatic experimentation, however mundane or sophisticated, implies that we have for ourselves a certain base sense of reality, a certain theory about what the world is composed of and how it behaves, a certain set of fundamental beliefs about what we think we know and how we know what we think we know.

In addition to our conscious modifications of our knowledge, many of our basic beliefs are unconsciously inherited. All of us have such sets of acquired and inherited fundamental beliefs, sometimes quite similar to those of others, sometimes not, regardless of who or where we are, and even to the point of our being unaware of them most of the time. Peirce held that, as our intelligence has developed in accordance with a rationally composed reality, our remarkable abilities at guessing can be seen as beneficial evolutionary adaptations.

It is those disturbances in our experience and understanding of reality, those moments when our Fundamental beliefs clearly do not match the reality that these beliefs are about, those times when doubt arises for us about what we think we know that we call "problems." And problems occur, a-plenty. Thus, *our knowledge is fallible; our knowledge is capable of error*. Humoral patients are examples of such disturbances, moments, and times. It is difficult for us to understand why humoralists persisted in their erroneous belief for more than two millennia. After all, their comparison of "knowledge with reality," to abbreviate the matter, never resulted in anything other than an utter failure of what they considered knowledge. Why, in the face of repeated failure, did they persist with such an absurd theory? Surely they considered their knowledge *infallible*, improvable only in details of technique. But that's all any arrangement of consensual ignorance *has* to do! And when such self-satisfied consensual ignorance becomes a manic infatuation with technique for the sake of technique, we achieve what the music historians take Italian vocal polyphony of the late 16th century to have become: mannerism. It all

sounds quite advanced and thoughty, on first hearing, but very soon reveals itself to the critical listener as a technically preoccupied, rigid, mannerism.

In addition to our *assuming* that reality works a certain way, including our unconscious assumptions, every substantive experiment *tests* our understanding of reality. Repeated failures or inadequacies in hypothetical explanations like the humoral theory of disease urge us to look more deeply into our assumptions about reality and adjust those assumptions to better match our experience *of* that reality. The history of the humoral theory discloses that to become thoroughly and egotistically wedded to a particular theory invites warped, nominalistic views of reality and the inadequate and defective knowledge that results from such views. This history also discloses that the biggest and most formidable obstacles to improving human knowledge are not things like present ignorance or present lack of technique, both of which are unavoidable much of the time anyway, but bad ethics of the mind: the uncontrolled ego will choose hypotheses unwisely, nominalistically, and will value the maintaining of such pet theories *more than being critically astute!* The uncontrolled ego, then, invites us to make up our reality *just as we please*. Logic, then, as Peirce insisted, depends on ethics, our ethics of the mind. Our ethics of the mind, in turn, depends on aesthetics, the study of the good, the beautiful, the noble, *as real*. Surely what we deem thus admirable will in large part depend on our metaphysical inclinations, our take on what is real.

In our pragmatic testing, then, we acknowledge a fundamental reality as our environment, however vague or even inaccurate our understanding of that reality may be. We seek, by test, to better understand that reality. And when our beliefs are inconsistent or even contradictory with that reality, we modify our beliefs: we improve our knowledge. For we can, with such things as proper information, unencumbered egos, clear-headed reasoning, and, most importantly, a creative approach or, as philosophers as distant as Xenophanes and as close as Peirce and Popper have described it, the willingness to *guess*, improve or change our knowledge. But reality we do not change, nor do we “make it up,” as it were. Peirce so described reality of “the real” in his “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” in vol. 2 of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* for 1868.

The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore *independent of the vagaries of me and you*. Thus, the very origin or the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. (CP 5.311; emphasis added)

Note especially that he doesn't say that the real is entirely independent of our

thought, but that it is independent of the “vagaries” or egotistic whims of us. It is crucial to our understandings here that we acknowledge reality to have a life of its own: it goes right ahead with its activities regardless of our opinions, tastes, or what we think we know about. In his 1877 “The Fixation of Belief,” the first of six papers for the *Popular Science Monthly* entitled “Illustrations of the Logic of Science,” Peirce gave the following summary of these ideas about reality, its autonomy, the method of pragmatism, and the communitarian or public nature of truth and knowledge about reality. In this extended extract, two additional remarks by Peirce from 1903 are included (in brackets).

To satisfy our doubts, therefore, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be determined by nothing human, but by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect. [But which, on the other hand, unceasingly tends to influence thought; or, in other words, by something real.] Some mystics imagine that they have such a method in a private inspiration from on high. But that is only a form of the method of tenacity, in which the conception of truth as something public is not yet developed. Our external permanency would not be external, in our sense, if it was restricted in its influence to one individual. It must be something which affects, or might affect, every man. And, though these affections are necessarily as various as are individual conditions, yet the method must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same. [Or would be the same if inquiry were sufficiently persisted in.] Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language, is this: There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of reality. (CP 5.384)

What sorts of things qualify as such “reals”? What sorts of things maintain an external permanency, influence thought but are independent of egotistic thought, and are the sorts of knowledge-items which continued investigation should bring us all into agreement about? That there is such a real as gravity, however quantified and described, would seem to qualify. Likewise, the heliocentric model of the solar system certainly fits Peirce's prescription for a real object. A stone fits too, as do valid syllogistic forms of argument. That every number has a double and that

this double is divisible by two, Boyle's Law linking the pressure of a gas and its volume, the Law of non-Contradiction, and that Steinway pianos have eighty-eight keys all seem to be real objects. Continued investigation would bring scientifically minded persons, which is to say persons whose egos are controlled, into agreement about these things. These objects influence what we think we know but what we think we know *does not* influence them, and they certainly have a kind of external permanency about them.

But now, would or should we consider beauty such a real object? Should or could Honesty be added to the list? And what about Morality? In such cases as these last three, it may perhaps be advisable to consider our progress toward increasing knowledge of reals, especially the truly elusive ones like "beauty," "Honesty," and "Morality" rather as the pianist Artur Schnabel (1882-1951) saw the experimentalism required of musical artistry. He thought that in music we continue our experiments" ... from seemingly simple and modest aspirations by way of increasing (even frightening) complications ... toward that other shore which, to be sure, can only be sighted but never reached" (Schnabel 1942: 14). Schnabel's shore was the real of artistic perfection, a permanently elusive real but one nevertheless eminently worthy of pursuit, rather like human knowledge.

We come to know reality better by pragmatic or evolutionary means, and we defend against becoming self-centered or nominalistic in our beliefs and knowledge about reality by comparing our beliefs, conclusions and methods with those of others in our investigative community. The important criticisms of our fellow investigators form an environment for our knowledge that will eliminate over time those explanatory hypotheses that turn out to be inconsistent or contradictory with reality, with the real. Our acknowledgment of realism makes pragmatic, evolutionary criticism possible and sustainable. We keep testing our knowledge against the standard of the real, knowing that without this elusive standard our seeming criticisms can range from mere subjective squabbings to relativism and its inevitable consensual ignorance and, should it falter, inevitable acts of outright aggression. And just as a poorly adapted species will, evolutionarily, be eliminated by its environment, so erroneous hypotheses, pragmatically, will be eliminated from our stock of beliefs and knowledge.

Notes

1. *RLT* is Ketner and Putnam 1992.
2. *Collected Papers* (and *CP*) is Hartshorne, Weiss, and Burks 1931 ... 1960.

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